



27 January 2021

**To the Joint Committee on Vaccination & Immunisation:**

We are writing as charities providing services and support to the two million people with sight loss across the UK, including the 350,000 people who are registered blind or partially sighted.

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges for everyone, but people who are visually impaired have experienced unique challenges that have wide-reaching impacts on their independence and everyday life.

These challenges include:

**Social distancing:** many people with a visual impairment find it hard to know if they are keeping 2 metres social distance around them. This has had a significant impact on confidence and independence with 84% of respondents to a Guide Dogs and Nottingham University research report stating they were less mobile in lockdown.

**Sighted guiding and navigation:** many people rely on a guide to navigate - linking arms with another person to find the way. Where their guide is not a member of their household, this means of leaving the house has in effect been taken away from many blind and partially sighted people. According to 2015 research from RNIB, 41% of blind or partially sighted people live alone meaning support to get out and about is crucial to the mental health and wellbeing of people with sight loss.

Some essential guiding services have remained available during the pandemic such as at train stations or medical appointments. This means that people with a visual impairment have been in closer proximity to a larger number of people than those with full sight simply in order to make essential journeys. As lockdown eases, it is critical that people who are visually impaired and in need of frequent guiding are not effectively excluded from this because they are not able to receive the support they need.

**Touch navigation:** people with sight loss are more likely to use touch to navigate - for example running their hands along walls or railings, which has created a particular area of concern during the pandemic due to the risk of contracting the virus from surfaces.

We are writing to urge the JCVI to take full account of these impacts on people with sight loss and visual impairment when considering its recommendations for the second phase of the Covid-19 vaccination programme.

**We ask that the JCVI includes all adults with sight loss and visual impairment as a priority cohort when the vaccination programmes reaches its second phase.**



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See differently



The majority of people with sight loss and visual impairment will have been offered their vaccine due to the age profile of this group within the vaccination programme's first phases. However, for the approximately 200,000 blind and partially sighted adults not in the initial age or clinically vulnerable cohorts we believe it is essential they are offered the vaccination as soon as possible when the programme reaches the wider population in its second phase.

We understand that some social distancing restrictions and guidance will remain in place for people who have received the vaccination - however, receiving the vaccine will be a critical and empowering step in life returning to some normality for people with sight loss, enabling people to regain importance independence in their everyday lives. It will be a critical step in helping people regain confidence across a wide range of everyday experiences and daily life.

We understand and appreciate the complex work undertaken by the JCVI in its work. We know the committee will draw on all available evidence and data to underpin its recommendations, but we also believe the lived experience of people with sight loss and visual impairment during the pandemic should also be taken into account.

If we can assist the committee in providing further information in this area please do not hesitate to contact us on the details below.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Charles Colquhoun".

**Charles Colquhoun, Chief Executive Officer, Thomas Pocklington Trust**

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Matt Stringer".

**Matt Stringer, Chief Executive, RNIB**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Wright".

**Tom Wright, Chief Executive Officer, Guide Dogs**



CC:

Rt. Hon Matt Hancock MP, Secretary of State for Health & Social Care  
Justin Tomlinson MP, Minister for Disabled People, Health & Work  
Nadhim Zahawi MP, Minister for Vaccine Deployment

**Please reply to:**

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