Adapting your home: Vision and hearing impairment or loss

Disclaimer

This factsheet is for advice and guidance only. It is not intended to replace advice from a medical professional. Please ensure you follow manufacturer's instructions for use and that you carry out appropriate risk assessments.

Visual impairment or loss (sight)

Our ability to see can be reduced as we grow older, but there are also conditions which affect sight which are not linked to ageing. Living Made Easy's factsheet 'Choosing equipment for communication and vision' provides information on some equipment to assist people with a visual impairment or who are blind.

Nationally, support is provided by the **Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)**, the **Royal Society for Blind Children** and **Sense** who support deafblind people. Local organisations will offer community support and help for those needing support to access education up to the age of 25. Information on how to access this support is available on your **Local Authority website**. Condition-specific charities offer advice and information on how to manage. For example, **Retina UK** supports those with Retinitis Pigmentosa. Opticians and NHS professionals can also provide information and support. RNIB also provide a **sightline directory** whereby users can search for a list of services and organisations that help blind or partially sighted people in the UK.

The cause of sight loss will influence the visual area affected or the level of vision differently, so please be aware that some suggestions made in this fact sheet will not be appropriate for all people.

Light and lighting

How much light and how strong the light is will affect how much people are able to see. It is not possible to prescribe an ideal light level, as this will depend on the condition affecting eyesight, the task or activity, and the level of natural light available.

There are different types of lighting available. For example, fluorescent lights provide lighting over a large area. Downlighters illuminate a defined area. Daylight bulbs or lights may provide a better light source than LED light bulbs. Where lighting is needed for a specific task or activity, such as meal preparation in the kitchen or personal care in the bathroom, lighting a specific area may assist. In the kitchen, this could be by spotlights or lights installed below wall units. Some bathroom cabinets and mirrors now have lights installed which illuminate the wash basin.

Natural light or sunlight is often enough for some people to complete activities, but depending on the time of day or year, the light may be too bright. Closing curtains or blinds may assist.

People who find natural light difficult to cope with may prefer to apply anti-glare film on their windows to reduce glare. Non-glare lights and light bulbs are available and the **Macular Society** advise using light shades and a number of lights around a room rather than a single central light. Uplighters, **dimmer switches** and round paper shades will also reduce the amount or level of direct light.

The surfaces that light shines on to may increase glare. Matt surfaces (including paint on walls) reflect less light, and so carefully selected paint finishes, fixtures and fittings can reduce the amount of glare. Bathrooms often have white suites and use bright downlighters. For some, this may create too much glare for comfort.

Installing low level LED light strips or **motion sensor lights** may help with navigating between rooms at night for those with low vision, as this reduces the need to locate light switches.

Bathroom lighting (as well as extractor fans and showers) may have a white pull cord. These can be difficult to locate against a light background. Adding a larger, contrasting light pull and running the cord through an 'eye' (to reduce the amount of swing) will help with locating the pull cord. Alternatively, installing bathroom switches outside of the bathroom means contrasting wall mounted switches can be used.

Colour and highlights

Using contrasting colours on doorways, light switches and sockets can help those with low vision to find them. The colours used do not necessarily have to be strong contrasts (yellow and black or red and white for example) but using two different shades of the same colour can provide enough contrast to highlight an area or feature in a room. Painting skirting boards or door frames a different colour to the wall helps to define the size of a room and make the exit points stand out.

Contrasting colours and highlights in flooring can also highlight the changes between rooms and in floor levels such as internal steps or stairs. Colour used on the edge (or nosing) of a step highlight where the step is, and can be used indoors and outside. It is recommended that rugs are not used to provide contrast, as these can be moved and can cause trips and falls, especially for those with poor balance.

Door furniture (handles and locks) which contrast with the door colour can help identify them, as will installing a contrasting stair rail (bannister) and grab rails if these are needed.

In the bathroom, tiles of a contrasting colour can be used to highlight the shower area, hand basin and toilet.

Surface finishes

If a home is open plan, it may be difficult to identify different areas if you are blind or have a visual impairment. Different colours and floor coverings can help with this. For example, walking from a carpeted area to a wood or laminate floor would indicate to the user that they are in a different area by both the texture felt underfoot and by the sound of their footsteps.

Safety in the home

Hard-wired smoke and carbon monoxide detectors remove the need for batteries to be replaced. Alarms with a voice message and siren functions are also available. Your **local Fire and Rescue Service** are able to offer a free home assessment to advise you on the options available and how these can be funded. Further reading: **Smoke Alarms by the UK Fire Service**.

To help prevent baths and sinks overflowing, **water sensors with audible alarms** can be installed.

Intercom systems can be linked to televisions, computers, tablets etc. and if necessary, integrated systems will allow operators to remotely open the entry door. Some **doorbell systems** can be operated by a smart phone app which can also be used remotely when away from a property.

White goods

Talking white goods such as washing machines or microwaves remove the need to use buttons to operate them. Some washing machine models can be voice controlled via a smartphone app.

Heating and lighting

Thermostats with a voice control function can assist in setting temperatures or heating programmes. A thermostat that detects or monitors light levels, including daylight and artificial light, can also help to manage electricity consumption.

RNIB provide advice regarding **Accessible In-Home Displays** that link with your energy smart meter, have large, tactile buttons, high-contrast displays and text-to-speech functions to help you manage your energy usage.

Digital technology

Managing sight loss in the home may not require large scale changes and digital technology. **Smartphones and apps** for example, can provide mainstream options to help reduce the impact of sight loss.

RNIB have produced a **beginner's guide to using mobiles and smart phones**. In addition to smart phones, there are various 'smart speakers' on the market which will listen to voice commands and can make shopping lists, control the environment at home and are particularly useful for people with a visual impairment.

Garden and access

Ensuring that the entrance to your home is well-lit will help with access. Lighting along pathways and at the door can be activated by **motion sensors** or when light levels are low. Strong light, including sunlight, may cast shadows which make identifying steps or the edge of a path difficult. Colour or contrast can be used to highlight the edge of paths and steps.

Mobility canes

There are a variety of canes available that help support people who are visually impaired to move around safely. **Sense** provides further information and advice regarding the different types of mobility cane available and how to use them.

Long canes

Long canes are designed to help blind and partially sighted individuals navigate their surroundings safely. Warning: For safety reasons, RNIB recommends you seek an assessment and training from a qualified mobility instructor before purchasing a cane. You can contact your local Social Services team for assistance with this. Long canes should only be used by people who have received appropriate training from a specialist qualified professional, in order to attain a high level of safe and independent travel. RNIB also provide a **sightline directory** whereby users can search for a list of organisations that offer training and support with this.

Hearing impairment or loss (deafness)

The degree of hearing loss and how it affects people is different. It may be that only certain tones or noise levels can be heard, or there may be total hearing loss. This means that someone may be unable to manage with any background noise, or they can tolerate low background noise levels. Finding what works may be a case of trial and error, but hearing loss does not always mean cutting out all background noise.

Adapting a home to compensate for hearing loss may just involve simple changes or the introduction of assistive technology (devices or systems that support a person to maintain or improve their independence, safety and well-being). Reducing the noise from outside the home will assist those who are unable to hear when there is a level of background noise, for example.

Windows and doors

Triple glazed windows can help keep the warmth in the home and reduce any noise from outside of the property. Selecting curtains with a heavy weight fabric will further help to reduce noise levels when they are drawn closed. However, opening windows and doors during warmer weather will increase the levels of external noise coming in.

Reducing noise from other rooms (such as televisions and music) can be achieved by ensuring that doors are well-fitting and are kept shut.

Floor surfaces

Wooden or hardfloor surfaces can generate noise when people walk on them with their shoes on. Installing carpets reduces the level of noise. Alternatively, a simpler option may be to ask everyone to remove their shoes or use slippers when indoors. Please note this may not remove the increased level of airborne noise if hard floor surfaces are used, as other sounds will also be magnified. Unlike rooms with carpet, where sounds are 'muffled'). If your bathroom has a tiled and hard floor covering for example, the sound generated in the bathroom will be very different to other rooms in the home.

If you prefer to use hard floor surfacing, then adding rugs and soft furnishings to a room will reduce the amount of noise which is reflected back; but be aware that rugs may be a trip hazard.

Alerting devices

You can be alerted to when there's a visitor at the door, when your telephone is ringing or if there is a hazard, such as smoke or fire for example, through a range of **alerting devices**.

As with any device or app, it is important to check that equipment is compatible to your home set-up/device. In some cases, you may need to purchase an adapter.

Doorbells

Knowing when someone is visiting can be difficult if you cannot hear a ‘standard’ doorbell. It is possible to have a ‘hard-wired’ system installed which will let you know when someone is at your door, but most doorbells (with the exception of the kits that flash the household lighting) are now wireless and require little installation. This can be a more cost-effective option.

Mobile doorbells are available which can have a range up to 150m. They can have a unit you carry with you, or that plugs into an electric socket close by. It is possible to select the alert chime and/or volume on some devices. Some also include a flashing light as well as a chime alert.

For those who cannot hear a chime alert, there are both **flashing and vibrating doorbell systems** available.

Smart doorbells use apps to link with your smartphone and often include a video link as well as an alert. These use an internet connection and can provide an alert even when you are away from your home. Alerts on some smartphones can be linked to fitness devices, which provides the option of a vibration alert without you needing to have direct contact with your phone.

Telephones and accessories

If possible, mute the TV or radio or move to a quieter space when making or receiving a call. If you have a landline, it may be worth placing this in a quieter area of your home, away from everyday sounds such as the television, radio, washing machine and tumble drier.

If you are unable to hear your phone ringing, a model with a **flashing ringer** to alert you of incoming calls may help. Alternatively, add-on ringer alerts are available which either flash or vibrate. Some models have a charging cradle which senses incoming calls or texts and will light up to alert. Many phones are compatible with hearing aids.

Some alert systems can be linked to a number of different units such as doorbells and baby monitors, reducing the need for multiple devices.

Some telephones allow you to adjust the call volume. If this does not allow you to hear the person you are speaking to, an amplifier can be attached during the call to increase the volume (this may have to be removed to allow the handset to be replaced). One advantage of this device is that it is easily portable and can be taken to other locations such as workplaces. For corded phones, an **in-line amplifier** can be used to increase volume. An alternative to an amplifier is the use of a hands-free phone

If you wear hearing aids, the ‘T’ setting may be compatible with an amplifier, but this is not always the case. Many phones are available from the high street which have a ‘Telecoil’ setting, but there are also devices available with additional features or are compatible with multiple alarm options.

If you use a mobile phone and find that you get interference, a neck loop should reduce this problem. BT has a **guide** to help you to communicate with specialist products and services.

Baby monitors

Baby monitors may have lights which indicate noise or movement, and models are available which have a vibrating pad to ensure you wake up if your child is crying in the night.

Alarm clocks

You may choose to use your mobile phone as a vibrating alarm under your pillow, but there are clocks on the market which have louder than standard alarm tones, or which have vibrating pads which can be placed under your pillow. Fitness devices can have a vibrating alarm set, and some smartphone apps use Bluetooth to link with a vibrating pad. Vibrating pads will need to be recharged. RNID has information on **alarm clocks and multi-alerting systems**.

Daylight or sunrise alarm clocks may be an alternative way to wake up. These gradually increase light levels in the bedroom (simulating sunrise) and for some, are effective alarm clocks. This may be useful in family homes, or when staying in hotels, where a loud alarm could wake up other residents.

Smoke and carbon monoxide detectors

Smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are recommended for all homes, but not all the units on the market are loud enough to be audible for those with hearing loss.

Systems are available which provide different methods of alert, which include a vibration pad for use under a pillow and/or a pager.

Your **local Fire and Rescue Service** are able to offer a free home assessment to advise you on what options are available and how these can be funded.

If you wear hearing aids, you may be able to hear smoke or CO2 alerts during the day, but the sound level may not be loud enough if you are not wearing them if you are asleep.

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Television and music

Positioning your TV in a place where light cannot create glare will assist you in seeing the screen and/or view the subtitles clearly.

If you use headphones, increase the volume gradually until you find a level you can comfortably hear at. Please note that excessive volume can cause hearing loss. RNID (2024) advise that you take regular breaks of at least five minutes every hour to give your ears a rest'

Home/domestic loop systems allow those using hearing aids to use the 'T' setting to increase clarity and volume.

Headphone jacks on TVs can allow you to plug in and pair up wireless headphones, media streamers, and Bluetooth systems.

Funding the provision of equipment

Grants and local authority provision

There are a few options available for funding of equipment and minor adaptations, and these can vary across the UK. We can provide an overview of the options available, but it is worthwhile checking what arrangements are in place locally.

Under the **Care Act 2014** in England, if you are assessed as requiring a minor home adaptation or preventative intervention, **anything costing under £1,000** would be free of charge to you via your **local authority**.

Health and social care assessment (also known as a needs assessment)

In order to qualify for grants and local authority provision, you will need to have a needs assessment. This which will determine whether you have eligible needs for care and support with daily living (such as bathing or toileting) due to age, disability or a long-term health condition. You can get a needs assessment via your **local authority's social services department**. You can either apply yourself, or someone else can apply on your behalf, with your permission (such as a friend, relative or health professional). You can also get a referral from your GP.

In Scotland, local authorities make their own arrangements for provision of minor adaptations and details can be accessed via your local council website.

Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

If the equipment or adaptation required costs **more that £1000**, you may be eligible to apply for a **Disabled Facility Grant** to pay for home adaptations. This depends on if the work is 'reasonable and practicable' and 'necessary to meet the needs' of a person with a disability. Adaptions can include extensions and structural work to accommodate fixed hoists, stairlifts, downstairs bathrooms, shower units etc. You can apply for a grant of up to £30,000 in England, up to £36,000 in Wales and up to £25,000 in Northern Ireland. Conditions for DFGs will vary according to the country in which you live.

To apply for a DFG for housing adaptations, your needs will be assessed by an occupational therapist. They usually come to your home to assess your needs, and this can include a joint assessment together with you and any carer you may have. They can also do assessments over the phone. They will then contact the relevant council departments with any necessary evidence that they have gathered, that the work proposed is appropriate and meets all the requirements for funding.

Age UK has a factsheet ('**Factsheet 41. How to get care and support**') explaining more about the DFG process.

Disability Rights UK also has some very comprehensive online information about Disabled Facilities Grants and other housing grants.

Please note that you may not receive any grant if you start work on your property before the council approves your application.

Private purchase

If you are self-funding and need advice before you buy, contact your local disabled/independent living centre where you can have the opportunity to try out a range of equipment. There are several of these around the country where you can go for impartial advice. Your local authority will be able to supply information about where your nearest centre is located. Some retailers have showrooms which have areas set up, so you can try out items of equipment to see if they will suit you before you commit to making a purchase.

Also consider if you can afford a service contract for more complex items of equipment. These may seem expensive at first, but in the long run, call out fees or replacements may prove to be costly. Some items such as hoists and slings need to be 'LOLER' compliant (**Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations 1998**). This is because they are used to move people mechanically, and these checks are a legal requirement every six months. Others with moving parts or electrics will have a service schedule recommended by the manufacturer, which is included in the instruction manual.

Before purchasing, look for a sales company that belongs to a trade association, such as the **British Healthcare Trades Association (BHTA)**. The BHTA aims to improve standards in the provision of healthcare and assistive technology. BHTA members have signed up to a **Code of Practice** which aims to ensure that members provide products and services that are professional, ethical, and trustworthy.

Some suppliers will fit equipment, but some are sold as 'supply only'. Finding a tradesman to fit items may not be easy. There may be a local arrangement for fitting small items such as a care and repair service, Home Improvement Agency or there may be a list of 'trusted traders' provided. Websites such as **Checkatrade** provide feedback from previous customers which may help you find reputable tradespeople. **Trading Standards** may also be able to advise if there are concerns about a company you are considering using.

VAT exempt purchases

If you have a diagnosed long-term health condition, you may be able to claim VAT relief when purchasing equipment. Ask the supplying company or check their website for further information. More information is available on the **GOV.UK website**.

Equipment suppliers may have the VAT exemption form on their website, or you can download a general form from **HM Revenue and Customs** before you make your purchase. You will need to fill in a form for each supplier you use, but you will only need to do this for the first purchase with them.

Further sources of information and advice about funding

The **Money Helper** website provides government backed, free, impartial guidance about funding for adaptations.

Age UK has provided a factsheet setting out the help you can get from your local authority if you need the provision of disability equipment and home adaptations.

Charitable funding

If you do not have the funds to buy equipment it may be possible to request support from a charity. They will usually have criteria which they will apply, and most will not consider equipment which should be provided by the NHS or social services.

Some charities will only consider requests which are supported by an involved professional, usually an occupational therapist, physiotherapist or a nurse. This may require them to be present during the assessment for an item of equipment. This is to ensure that the equipment is appropriate and will not have an impact on planned treatment or rehabilitation programmes.

Equipment is not always purchased outright and gifted to you. Some items are provided on loan, either for a specified length of time, or to be returned when no longer needed or appropriate for use.

A number of charity websites that offer funding are listed here:

- **Turn2Us** - A national charity that helps people in financial hardship gain access to welfare benefits, charitable grants and support services.
- **Scope** - A disability equality charity in England and Wales.
- **Sense** - A charity supporting people who are deafblind or who have complex disabilities.
- **Friends of the Elderly** - A charity who run a Grant Giving Programme for older people in financial need.
- **RNIB** - Grants if you have sight loss and are on a low income.
- **RNID** - Advice on disability benefits and grants if you're deaf or have hearing loss.

Prescriptions

Following an assessment, some local authorities will issue you with a prescription for the equipment that you need. This can be taken to a local retailer (usually a pharmacy or independent equipment retailer), and you can collect the equipment and begin to use it immediately. There is usually the option to have the equipment delivered to your home if you have difficulty accessing your local retailers.

Please note that equipment from social services is provided for use at your home address and should not be used elsewhere as:

1. It is assessed as suitable for use in your home and selected to work within your existing environment and current equipment.
2. They will not be able to respond to breakdowns or repairs.

However, if you are permanently moving home into the area of another local authority, you can take the equipment with you if you still need to use it and it is the most cost-effective solution. You will need to discuss this with the service that issued the equipment to you.

Equipment hire

If your need is short-term, it may be cost-effective to hire equipment.

Mobility Hire is a national source for mobility and assistive equipment on hire or purchase. They offer short- or long-term rental solutions to meet most requirements, with equipment ranging from bathroom aids to wheelchairs.

If the equipment is required for a holiday, it is advisable to look for a supplier near to your destination as they will be able to respond to any issues such as a breakdown/breakage.

Community equipment store loan

Small daily living equipment or aids like raised toilet seats, shower chairs or bath lifts can be available via the NHS from a nurse, occupational therapist or physiotherapist or via social services at your local authority.

Loans can either be short-term to assist after an operation or illness, or longer-term to promote independence or support caregiving. Long-term loans are usually the responsibility of social services (either adult social care or children's services) and will be provided following an assessment by an occupational therapist. Straightforward items, such as raised toilet seats or bath seats and boards can be provided by an occupational therapy assistant or functional assessor. Arrangements vary across the UK, and you may find that local arrangements allow different services to provide equipment on behalf of each other.

Also, equipment may be offered as an alternative to an adaptation. An occupational therapist will explain why they are making this suggestion.

Disability Living Allowance/Personal Independence Payments/Attendance Allowance

Disability Living Allowance (DLA), Personal Independence Payments (PIP) and Attendance Allowance are benefits available for those who need support with activities of daily living. More information is available from **the government** and **Citizens Advice** who have specific advice for each home nation, enabling you to check your eligibility if you are not already claiming one of these benefits.

Further advice from us

For clear, practical advice and information on **products and suppliers of daily living equipment**, please have a look at our **Living Made Easy** website which is the largest aids to daily living database in Europe.

You can also contact us by email at **lme-enquiries@shaw-trust.org.uk**. To help us give you a concise and informative reply, please provide us with as much detail as possible, including information on the difficulties you are having and any solutions you have considered, such as equipment ideas.

AskSARA

If you would like help choosing equipment for everyday living, you could try our free online self-assessment tool, AskSARA.

AskSARA is an award-winning online self-help guide providing expert advice and information on products and equipment for older and disabled people. The tool will ask you questions about yourself and your environment and then offer relevant advice, product suggestions and supplier details. AskSARA is licensed for use through local authorities, and you can check if your local authority provides access to AskSARA here: **https://asksara.livingmadeeasy.org.uk/about-ask-sara**.

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