

A decorative graphic consisting of a thick, curved line that starts on the left side, curves upwards and then downwards, and ends on the right side. The line is split into two colors: a teal color on the left and a darker blue color on the right.

Sight loss event report

November 2022

Summary

Background

There is a lot of digital technology available to support people in their day to day living. Technology benefits different people in different ways and can be challenging to navigate too. People have told us that technology is sometimes difficult to access, and without it, it can be difficult to access certain information or events. We joined forces with Wandsworth Council, AGE UK Wandsworth and Katherine Low Settlement to bring people together for this event to discuss technology. This event focussed specifically on technology for people who are blind or visually impaired.

What we did

We invited Wandsworth residents with visual impairments or blindness to come to our event at the Age UK Wandsworth's Gwynneth Morgan Centre. The event took place in November 2022. We ran the event together with AGE UK Wandsworth, Katherine Low Settlement and Wandsworth Council. 18 people attended the event. The organisations in attendance talked through what support they provide with technology for people with sight loss.

What we were told and recommendations

We got feedback from attendees through feedback forms as well as through having conversations with attendees and organisations throughout the day. Our general work getting to know people affected by blindness or sight loss and our

experiences of organising the event also provided us with feedback that leads us to conclude that there are a few things that could be further developed in Wandsworth for people with sight loss.

Summary of recommendations

- Clear and accessible communication and information provision about what services are available to visually impaired people.
- Opportunities for visually impaired people to network and share experiences, and for organisations that provide support to connect and share information.
- Forum for people with sight loss to be involved in decision making about a range of issues e.g. transport, housing, decisions in health and social care.
- Seeking solutions to resolve issues with transport and community connectedness.

Introduction

Background

In 2021 we started making connections with community groups for people with sight loss in Wandsworth. We found that there was a need to better understand what support services are available in Wandsworth. To begin to do this we launched a survey to collect views from people about their experiences.

We talked to people with various conditions that had led to different types of sight loss at different points in their lives. A lot of the people we spoke to have a range of other health and social care needs that needed to be addressed alongside their sight loss.

One of our recommendations following this research was to explore ways to reduce loneliness and isolation for people with sight loss. Looking at ways to increase access to support and opportunities to have social contact, it was apparent that understanding barriers to accessing technology and digital support would be key in achieving this. We also heard from people that we spoke to that it was difficult to know what support and organisations are available to help and it was difficult to keep informed about technology available. This research inspired our sight loss event in 2022.

You can find out more about our previous work on the topic of sight loss [here](#).

Our sight loss event

Following our previous research, we wanted to focus on barriers to technology. There is a lot of digital technology that could help support people in their day to day living, but it can also bring some challenges. How it works for different people varies so much for lots of reasons. People have told us that in some ways technology can be a barrier and that they want to keep up with the different things out there. Wandsworth Council have a strategy to help more people make use of technology, so we joined forces with them, AGE UK Wandsworth and Katherine Low Settlement to bring people together to discuss the topic. Ability Net and the RNIB also took part in the event and spoke about the support that they offer. This event focussed on technology for people who are blind or visually impaired.

Who we heard from

Members of the sensory team at Wandsworth Council came to talk to us about what technology is available for free to residents in Wandsworth. The team are specialists in visual impairment so worked together to think about what tech would be most relevant at our event.

- The first demonstration was the Care Phone which makes it easy for people to contact the people they want to in a way that is less complicated than many smartphones.
- Attendants passed around different models of the voice activated device Alexa which can support people with

many of their daily activities from setting alarms and making calls to controlling lights and writing shopping lists.

- We looked at a smart watch with an intelligent GPS tracker to provide support if the user goes into an area that they are not familiar with.
- Finally, we learnt about a wearable falls detector which if the wearer falls a monitoring service can send support to.

The sensory impairment team also talked through the ways that they can help people to figure out what kind of support they can receive based on individual needs.

The other organisations that we heard from on the day included:

- Chris Andrew from **Katherine Low Settlement** talked about how **everyone's experiences and needs with technology are different.** Chris runs two groups for people over 50 based on digital skills. One group focuses on catering for absolute beginners and the other is for people who have a bit more experience. Some of the people in Chris's group have sensory impairments related to age. Chris has supported them with touchscreen skills and using audio description apps like Google Lens which reads printed text aloud. As well as the groups Chris offers one to ones to introduce individuals to the digital world. She shared the example of helping someone to find out more about BBC iPlayer, BBC Sounds and neighbourhood community apps like Nextdoor. **Chris emphasised the importance of working together and sharing skills when building effective digital inclusion.**

- Alex Barker from national charity **Ability Net** spoke about the organisation and how it collaborates with volunteers to give impartial advice about tech, supporting people to understand everything from funding for technology to working around scams via a free advice line. Alex talked about how **technology is a part of everyday life and Ability Net can help make technology easier for people who struggle with it.**
- Davinder Kullar from the **RNIB** spoke about how the organization can provide advice on assistive technology via their free helpline, emphasizing that **people of any age can benefit from technology.**

What we heard from the attendees

During the event we listened to what the attendees were saying about technology and accessing health and social support in Wandsworth. Most of the people who attended the event had questions about the services and organisations they had learnt about. Some of the topics that came up often were:

Accessible information – Attendees highlighted that more health and social services need to be working towards having information that is accessible for blind and visually impaired people E.G. accessible website design.

Appointment delays – Some people who attended the event raised issues with delays and cancellations with appointments crucial to their eye health.

Technology – Many participants had ideas about what areas in their life which could benefit from the use of technology, but

tended not to know how to find out more or how to access this technology.

Feedback about the event

This was our first event like this, and we encouraged feedback so that we could learn more about they found the event useful as well ask asking a few questions about digital technology.

Ten people filled out our feedback form. Three said the event was excellent and six said that the event was good.

- Everyone said that they gained some knowledge at the event.
- There were a range of things that people mentioned having learnt about. Most people said they left the event with **more knowledge** about the technology available to them and how to access it.

When asked about what the most interesting or useful aspect of the event was, the people that filled out the feedback form gave a range of responses.

- Four people focussed on the connective and social aspect of the event saying that it was encouraging and that they appreciated the **opportunity to network with other blind and partially sighted people as well as organisations that work to support them.**
- Five people said that the most interesting thing was **learning about the resources and the technology** that was available to them.

- Thinking about how this event might impact what people do afterwards, **three people said that they would pursue bringing new technology into their everyday lives.**
- Two people said that they wanted to engage with organisations that they had learned about at the event.

Talking about how the event was organised people said:

- A lot of people mentioned that the sound quality was poor and that hearing the speakers when they were talking was an issue.
- One person said that the booking process was awkward for them.
- Two people said that they would have preferred if there had been more opportunities to interact with the technology, for example, 5 minutes to try out a piece of technology.
- One person suggested that it would be an innovative idea to **have more space for people who experience blindness or visual impairment to share their personal preferences and what technology works for them with the group so that people can learn from each other.**
- Three people said that **similar events should happen regularly** to keep the blind and visually impaired community in Wandsworth informed and remind people about services they can contact for support.

Conclusions and recommendations

Our work speaking to people affected by sight loss and our experiences of organising the event have led us to conclude that the following could be further developed in Wandsworth.

- **Communication and information provision** – There is a need for a one stop shop where people can go to get information about what is available and who can support them. It is crucial that this information is accessible to people with a range of needs. Information sources need to be more widely known.
- **Networking of organisations that can support people** – There could be somewhere where organisations can share what they are doing and collaborate and provide information.
- **Forum for people with sight loss to be involved in decision making** – A forum to enable blind and visually impaired service users to have a voice in decisions in the borough about a range of issues e.g., transport, housing, decisions in health and social care.
- **Spaces for blind and visually impaired people to network** – It would be good for there to be networking options and forums for people to have conversations, share experiences and find out information. A lot of the attendees valued the opportunity to get together at our event. Isolation and loneliness were commonly experienced by people who

completed our survey. This indicates a gap in the borough. There seemed to be a variation in provision of these kind of opportunities in Wandsworth compared to other boroughs. An annual event or quarterly event could be beneficial to help tackle isolation and empower people with information and support.

- **Resolving issues with transport and community connectedness** – There appear to be specific barriers for people around transport and community connectedness. A number of people from organisations raised the question of whether there should be transport available, indicating that people did not think that current general transport options are adequate for people to access events like ours. This raises the question for us whether transport availability or support with transport is adequate for people to live independently.

Thank you to all the individuals and organizations that have taken part in our work about sight loss and those who attended the sight loss event in November 2022. Your insights and experiences have been of huge value to this report and our recommendations.

Organisations involved with the event:

Ability Net

Telephone (open 9–5 Monday – Friday): 0800 048 7642

Email: enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk

Age UK Wandsworth

Telephone: 020 8877 8940

Email: info@ageukwandsworth.org.uk

Healthwatch Wandsworth

Telephone (10am – 4pm Monday to Friday): 020 8516 7767

Email (for general enquiries): enquiries@healthwatchwandsworth.co.uk

Email (for information about local health and social care services): information@healthwatchwandsworth.co.uk

Website: <https://www.healthwatchwandsworth.co.uk/>

Katherine Low Settlement

Telephone: 020 7223 2845

Email: info@klsettlement.org.uk

Website: <https://www.klsettlement.org.uk/>

Address (open on weekdays from 9.00am–4.30pm): Katherine Low Settlement, 108 Battersea High St, London SW11 3HP

RNIB

Helpline: 0303 123 9999

Website : <https://www.rnib.org.uk/>

Wandsworth Sight Loss Team can be contacted via

Wandsworth Adult social care telephone number: 020 8871 7707

SMS Phone (for deaf or hard of hearing only): 07940 775107

Email: accessteam@wandsworth.gov.uk