Ofcom Draft Annual Plan 2010-11 Consultation Response from Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)

About RNIB

As the largest organisation of blind and partially sighted people in the UK, RNIB is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

We are a membership organisation with over 10,000 members who are blind, partially sighted or the friends and family of people with sight loss. 80 per cent of our Trustees and Assembly Members are blind or partially sighted. We encourage members to be involved in our work and regularly consult with them on policy and their ideas for change.

As an organisation of blind and partially sighted people, we advocate for the rights of people with sight loss in each of the UK's countries. During the next five years we want to tackle the isolation of sight loss by focusing on three clear priorities. These are stopping people losing their sight unnecessarily, supporting blind and partially sighted people to live independent lives and creating a society that is inclusive of blind and partially sighted people.

We also provide expert knowledge to business and the public sector through consultancy on improving the accessibility of the built environment, technology, products and services.

Numbers of Blind and Partially Sighted People in the UK

Research completed by Access Economics and Epivision estimates that there were a total of 1.8 million people with partial sight and blindness in the UK adult population in 2008.

The research predicts that by 2050 the numbers of people with partial sight and blindness in the UK will double (115 per cent increase over 2010), to nearly 4 million people.[1]

1) What are your views on Ofcom's proposed work programme for 2010/11?

1.1. TV Access services

RNIB acknowledge the Ofcom review of the Access Services Code during 2009 and within it to the level of audio description that channels have to provide. We look forward to the published statement on the outcome of this review as soon as possible in 2010, as the annual plan refers to, so that any positive changes can be implemented and enjoyed by blind and partially sighted people sooner rather than later.

1.2. section 10 duty

We acknowledge the reference *to "Easily-usable apparatus",* A1.25 of the draft plan, and Ofcoms section 10 duty to promote the development and availability of easy-to-use consumer equipment.

RNIB is aware that blind and partially sighted peoples needs are not currently being met by mobile phone manufacturers and networks nor by TV and radio equipment suppliers.

Whilst we appreciate that there are no powers attached to the section 10 duty, we do hope that as the plan states Ofcom "will continue to use our influence and work with a range of organisations to promote usability and accessibility". Ofcom has in the past recognised that its duty can only affect improved usability

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[1] RNIB research briefing (June 2009). Future sight loss UK: a study on the prevalence and cost of sight loss. Royal National Institute of Blind People. The prevalence of partial sight and blindness in 2008, and prevalence projections to 2050, were estimated using prevalence rates derived from the literature and population estimates calculated by Access Economics. The full research comprises 2 reports: Future Sight Loss UK (1): Economic impact of partial sight and blindness in the UK adult population. Report by Access Economics Pty Limited and Future Sight Loss UK (2): An epidemiological and economic model for sight loss in the decade 2010 to 2020. Report by Darwin Minassian and Angela Reidy, EpiVision.
These reports can be found on
http://www.vision2020uk.org.uk/ukvisionstrategy/page.asp?section=74

of consumer equipment to a limited extend, because it is not accompanied by powers.

In addition, it is widely recognised that the UK does not have the powers to mandate features of manufactured goods because that would go against internal market rules. Instead it is argued that the powers to mandate features of manufactured goods are a matter for European legislation. Vertical EU legislation addresses accessibility in a patchy manner, leaving many gaps where there is no legislative lever to ensure the delivery of accessible products. There is a place for developing industry best practice guidance and standards, but it is widely recognised that the development of voluntary industry standards has not been conducive to a substantial increase in accessible products on the market. RNIB therefore urges Ofcom, as part of its section 10 influencing work, to support European horizontal anti-discrimination legislation on access to goods and services, as part of its European work. In particular, Ofcom should urge decision-makers to keep the design and manufacture of goods within the scope of the proposal for a Council Directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation Equal Treatment Directive, as this is the only way to guarantee effective equal access to goods for disabled people.

2) What are your views on Ofcom's proposed priorities for 2010/11?

Of the nine priorities proposed by Ofcom in the draft plan the 'Consumer and Citizen' priority to "*encourage consumers to take up and use broadband by supporting the Digital Participation Consortium"* is key to the inclusion of blind and partially sighted people in accessing the internet.

Although the plan does refer to disabled people in terms of encouraging and developing their digital participation, disabled people are not expressly referred to in the statistics relating to take up[2]; as older people and households with low incomes are acknowledged as specific groups with lower take up of broadband services.

[2] Ofcom Draft Annual Plan 2010-11, sections 4.17 - 4.23

As the draft annual plan acknowledges various media and communications services have become an integral part of everyday life and as society becomes increasingly reliant on digital technology, take-up of these services and knowledge of their use is increasingly a prerequisite to effective participation in society and in the economy[3].

In terms of Internet take-up, disabled people, including those with a visual impairment, are disproportionately under-represented when compared with the general population, as detailed in the following table.

Fig.1. Table of UK population home access to broadband[4]

	Broadband Access at Home
People with visual impairments	42%[5]
People with a hearing impairment	32%[6]
People with a mobility impairment	36% [7]
General Population	**70%[8]**

According to The Family Resources Survey[9] there are up to 10 million disabled people in the UK and millions of other individuals

[3] Ofcom Draft Annual Plan 2010-11, section 4.19
[4] Consumer Expert Group report into the use of the Internet by disabled people: barriers and solutions http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/CEGreport-internet-and-disabled-access2009.pdf
[5] Ofcom's Consumer Experience report 2008 http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/tce/ce08/
[6] Ofcom's Consumer Experience report 2008 http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/tce/ce08/
[7] Ofcom's Consumer Experience report 2008 http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/tce/ce08/
[8] Accessing the Internet at Home – A Quantative and Qualitative Study Among People without Internet at Home, Ipsos Mori http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/telecoms/reports/bbresearch/bbathome.pdf
[9] Family Resources Survey 2003/4 London: Analytical Services Division, Department for Work and Pensions 2005

who are affected by mild cognitive, sensory, and physical impairments. The Disability Rights Commission[10] states that of the 10 million disabled people in the UK, 4.6 million are over State Pension Age and 700,000 are children. Only 50% of disabled people of working age are in work compared to 81% of non-disabled people of working age[11].

The Consumer Expert Group (CEG) was asked in the Digital Britain Report to report on the specific issues facing disabled people using the Internet. The report produced[12] should be used to inform the work that is undertaken by Ofcoms leadership of the Consortium for the Promotion of Digital Participation. We hope that this will also feed into the National Plan for Digital Participation that will be published in early spring 2010 and that in addition to plans for a social marketing programme aimed at the general population, there will be targeted activity to include disabled people.

We attach, annex 1, to this submission a RNIB Discussion paper: 'Barriers to using the internet for blind and partially sighted people'. This paper highlights the key issues faced by blind and partially sighted people when accessing the internet that we would hope will inform future work.

[10] Now the Equality and Human Rights Commission
[11] Disability Rights Commission http://83.137.212.42/sitearchive/DRC/Newsroom/key_drc_facts_and_glossary/number_of_disabled_people_in.html
[12] Consumer Expert Group report into the use of the Internet by disabled people: barriers and solutions http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/CEGreport-internet-and-disabled-access2009.pdf

Annex 1

RNIB Discussion paper: barriers to using the internet for blind and partially sighted people: key issues

(Leen Petré and Steve Griffiths, RNIB, July 2009)

1. Cost of access equipment and software

The main two types of access technology used by blind and partially sighted users are screen readers and magnifiers.
The cost is a barrier for many blind and partially sighted people and there is no statutory provision to cover the costs other than for people in work and certain people who are studying.
Screen magnifiers cost from £275 upwards, but the most commonly used, the basic Zoomtext package, costs £375, more than the cost of purchasing a computer nowadays.
Commercial screen readers cost at least £550 (Window-Eyes), but some are considerably more with the basic package from Jaws selling at £659. Upgrades are extra, of the order of £125 per two years, which is why lots of people don't upgrade often.[13] This results in out of date access technology being used by people, thereby making it impossible for them to use the latest windows applications. Though examples illustrate the impact: 1) Only the latest versions of access technology will support the latest versions of Ms Word. 2) Internet Explorer 8 is now automatically downloaded to your computer system (unless you as user explicitly turn these downloads off), but Explorer 8 can not be used with older versions of screen readers.

[13] There are cheaper access technology options, some are free, but these are newer products which aren't so well known, and most are from smaller developers which can have "issues" with marketing, support and training.

2. Badly-written web sites

If people who created web sites did it the way they're supposed to, a lot of problems would go away. But while people insist on creating pages including graphics with no alternative text labels, buttons with what looks like a word on them but is in fact a graphic, use a large font size and/or colour to signify a heading rather than the <heading> tag, and so on, screen readers just can't extract the necessary information to pass to the user about the page layout.

3. The nature of the web, part one: lots of scope for bad design

Linked to the above is the desire by web designers to make pages "look cool", and that often means that pages that are supposed to be visually stimulating pages in fact just don't render well or at all if you have anything but the latest technology. These rendering problems impact the ability of access technology to process them correctly.
Many designers assume that a page that looks good in his/her own computer will work for anyone and will generate the same user experience for anyone. Unfortunately one of groups they are most likely not to think of are people using access technology.

4. The nature of the web, part two: rapidly changing technology

The web is a set of technologies that's evolving very fast and in multiple directions. Access technology manufacturers are small and can't hope to keep up with it all. It means that it is very difficult for a small organisation build their software so it deals with all different options that are around.
For example, Web 2.0, the second generation of web design and web development, is constantly evolving. When an access technology company develops a new product, it is difficult to test with all these web applications, and therefore they can not guarantee the user that the access technology will work with all websites and all website applications.

5. The standard method of interacting with the web is via a mouse

Web pages are created by mouse users for mouse users. Blind and partially sighted people using access technology like screen readers are navigating a web page with the keyboard. This is a different kettle of fish compared to mouse use, and even a well written page can be difficult or time-consuming to get around with the keyboard. In addition information may be given in tables or other layouts which, while theoretically accessible, are difficult to use because they impart information visually.
The difference in navigation method is illustrated by the fact that there are separate training manuals to teach blind and partially sighted people the new Windows operating systems from a non-visual perspective, because way you use a system non-visually is very different from how you use it if you see the screen and use a mouse.

6. Lack of knowledge and training about access technology

Lots of access technology users don't know their access technology very well. They, like other computer users, do not study the intricate details but they just want it to work. They, like other computer users, will find that it using a PC is not that simple. But I the difference between what they want and what they get is far greater than for other computer users. While a sighted computer user can just about fight their way through many pages, an access technology user is often left bewildered, confused and frustrated.
To become a confident access technology user, most blind and partially sighted people will need training. Depending on their technical aptitude, for some people this training will only take a few hours, for others this will require a few weeks. First-time magnification users have to learn a different way of using computer, and many first-time screen reader user have to move away from using a mouse and screen and have to learn how to navigate using keyboard and sound output.
Like with all other software, new versions of access technology come out to keep up with the general computer software, and access technology users might need new training for new access technology versions coming out.

In addition, over time for a lot of people their eyesight changes, resulting in the need for new technology, for example a partially sighted person might have to move from using magnification to using speech and keyboard.
Training on these technologies is typically provided as part of access to work adjustments, but there is no statutory provision for the majority of blind and partially sighted people who are over the age of 65, for example.

Case study: Discussion with blind computer user

(Interview conducted and written up by Anna Jones, August 2009)

1. Background

Trevor who is in his 60's lost his sight approximately 6 years ago. He had never used a computer until two years ago.

2. Motivation and experiences around getting started

Trevor wanted to start to use a PC as he felt that he was missing out on being able to access information that others that he knew were able to access. He also wanted to start to use email as a communication tool as reading the printed word himself was no longer a possibility.

None of the major high street PC providers were able to assist him in purchasing a package that suited his needs. His experiences with one of the largest UK retailers was that they had no idea about magnification or speech software that could assist those with sight loss, or where he could purchase it.

Trevor was attending Braille classes at his local college and his tutor gave him information about classes for basic computer skills for blind and partially sighted people. On enrolling and attending these classes the tutor was able to advise him on what type of PC to purchase and where and how get the necessary access technology.

3. Cost Equipment / Software

Trevor purchased a computer from a main stream supplier and initially, due to cost, used a free downloadable speech package - Thunder. This was not the easiest package to use and it soon became apparent that he needed to outlay an additional £800 for JAWS speech technology package.

This was a costly additional requirement for him to spend when he was still at an early stage in PC use and not yet fully proficient or sure that PC use "is for me".

4. Training and Knowledge of Access technology

Trevor attended the training provided by his local college. This was sufficient to enable him to start using a PC but was incredibly frustrating at times as the class consisted of a 8:1 pupil to teacher ratio, students were of differing abilities and often using out of date / faulty equipment and software packages.

The other major issue was that some students were using magnification software whilst others were training on speech packages, all those with sight loss were trained in one group regardless of access software needs. Trevor recalls how often he was wearing headphones to enable him to hear his speech software, in a busy classroom scenario, whilst the teacher was giving instructions for the next step which he was then unable to hear.
He also recalls becoming exasperated at not knowing if commands given were for those who were using magnification software or himself using speech.

The knowledge and advice that Trevor has gained on access technology and its use came from his tutor offering private 1:1 lessons to him once the introductory course had finished. Without these lessons he believes he would not be as proficient as he now is.

He is also now a member of an on-line support network for blind and partially sighted PC users, who trouble shoot for each other and offer advice and support. This resource is invaluable to Trevor

but without initial in depth PC training he wouldn’t be able to access it, an irony he believes.

5. Using the Web

Trevor now uses many websites and accesses the information that he requires with ease from some and with great difficulty from others.

There are some websites that he has given up on using as they are inherently difficult to access with his speech software package.

As more everyday information tasks are able to be completed on-line, such as booking doctors appointments and ordering prescriptions Trevor feels that greater significance needs to be out on web site design. One of his greatest passions, as a retired bookmaker, is horse racing. The website of the one of the major publications titles, that supports this industry, is inaccessible to him.

6. Other comments

Access to the internet via a home PC has enabled Trevor to join a social network site of other blind and partially sighted people, from all over the world. He believes that this website, and the friends he has met via it, have been a lifeline at times to him and offered great support and advice when he has needed it. Not only on PC issues but other hurdles he has faced in dealing with acquired sight loss.

It has also enabled him to access information that all other online UK residents can access, enabling equality for him in reading materials online and not having to rely on others to read to him.