



healthwatch
Dudley

Listening to the experiences of people living with sight loss.

November 2025



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Beacon

Since 1875 Beacon has supported people living with sight loss. They support people living with conditions including Cataracts, Macular Degeneration, Diabetic Retinopathy, Tunnel Vision and Glaucoma.

They help with low vision, wellbeing, digital skills and employment, to simply being there to provide advice. They focus on ensuring members get the most out of life.

Beacon offer a range of services including Information, Advice and Guidance, access to low vision aids and adaptations, Day centre provision, community based sports and social activities, befriending services, Talking news service, Employment, skills and learning services, Digital and tech support, a CQC regulated care service and a transport team.



What we did

Beacon invited Healthwatch Dudley to capture feedback from people living with sight loss who live or access services at Beacon.

We were not commissioned to complete this piece of work, however we wanted to listen to the experiences of people who don't often have their voices heard, including carers and the people they care for.

We met with Beacon staff to plan the project and explore how we could work together. Our aim was to better understand the experiences of accessing health and social care for people living with sight loss.

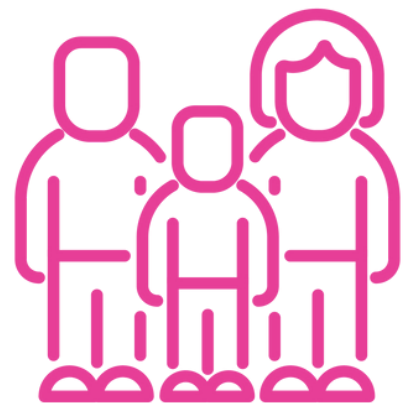
We set out to explore:

- Peoples experiences of accessing health and social care services.
- Areas for improvement within these services.
- People's experiences of Beacon.

We heard from 21 people in two focus groups.

However, despite providing alternative options to feedback, we did not receive any survey responses. We remain committed to listening to the experience of people living with sight loss, their families, and carers, and we encourage anyone with feedback on health and social care services to contact us directly.

We attempted to gather a broad range of feedback by conducting two focus groups and providing two online surveys: one for people accessing Beacon services and one for their friends and family. The project was promoted via Beacon's Talking News, and survey links were shared by Beacon staff.



GP Access

People shared mixed experiences of accessing GP services, with some people sharing high satisfaction and flexibility from their practice.

“I have moved from a Sandwell GP practice to a Dudley one and the service I’ve got there has been absolutely fantastic. If they can’t help me over the phone, they’ll book me an appointment with the appropriate person.”



GP Access

However, some people had concerns about the difficulty of getting a face to face appointment, with some people feeling that practices have not reverted to the services offered before the COVID-19 pandemic.

“If you called them up it was like COVID was still on. I could never get a face-to-face to see a doctor. It was all over telephone and if you needed to see them it was 2-3 weeks wait for an appointment.”

We heard of a lack of flexibility when booking appointments. People expressed a desire to have more choice in who they saw for their appointment.

“If I want to see a particular GP I have to book at least three weeks in advance, like I need to plan to be ill.”



GP Access

One participant told us that they would like it to be easier to book longer appointments to discuss multiple issues or complex health conditions.

“When I go to an appointment they say ‘one appointment, one problem’. I find it difficult to request a longer appointment.”

Managing and attending appointments can present additional challenges for people who are living with sight loss. Attending multiple appointments can exacerbate these difficulties, particularly if the patient needs to arrange for someone to support them.



GP Access

“I had an appointment booked for steroid injections recently and they cancelled it and texted me with a new date. I had to call my GP surgery to check the dates, as I was unsure if I needed to attend or not. I had to swap everything around as I need someone to come with me to appointments. When I called the GP I had to wait 26 minutes before they answered.”

These experiences highlight the need for accessibility to be at the forefront of communication with patients and service users



Accessible information



A major theme highlighted was the failure of services to provide critical information in formats that are accessible to people living with sight loss, despite the Accessible Information Standard.

"I'm visually impaired, and I say to the GP 'don't send me anything on the portal because I can't access it.' I need it in large print. I still get things sent to me on the portal."

This presents an issue with confidentiality and dignity as people told us they have to ask carers or family members to read confidential information for them.

"Anything private I have to ask my carers or family to read for me."

Accessible information

People shared how they are aware of the Accessible Information Standard, and were frustrated that this standard often is not met.

"If you want your information in Braille or on blue paper, they should provide it under the Accessible Information Standard."

Accessible Information Standard

The accessible information standard sets out how NHS and publicly funded adult social care services should ensure disabled people and people with impairments or sensory loss:

- can access and understand information about NHS and adult social care services
- receive the communication support they need to use those services

All organisations that provide publicly funded NHS care or adult social care must have regard to this standard.

Social Care

"I have been waiting over a month for someone to assess me for a stair lift."



People reported mixed experiences with social care assessments. Some people said they received helpful, practical advice and specialised equipment (such as tactile markers for household appliances).

"I had a visit yesterday from Wolverhampton Social Care because of my sight loss for an assessment. They showed me how to make a cup of tea their way which was quite good. They have put things on my microwave so I can feel with my finger and know if I am putting it on for two or four minutes."

However, several people reported significant delays in accessing services, such as waiting a month or more for assessments or equipment.

"I have waited five years to get a social worker to get funding for activities. I moved to Beacon from Sandwell and have been told there is a long wait."

Social Care

"I have been waiting over a month for someone to assess me for a stair lift."

"I am waiting for a Carers Assessment, I have contacted Brett Young and they've said they don't know how long it will be."

People understand that there are issues surrounding funding, however they are frustrated at the difference in provision between areas. They also expressed frustration with not being told clearly whether they can access support.

"Services keep saying everything is because of Covid, they need to stop hiding behind it and explain what is happening."



Care and understanding

"The member of staff kept checking her watch."



Experiences with NHS staff at hospital appointments sometimes revealed a lack of time and understanding for people with disabilities, which resulted in traumatic experiences or failed procedures.

"It feels like some NHS staff haven't been taught how to give people with disabilities more time."

"My brother went for a scan and he was very nervous. He wouldn't go down there and they couldn't do the scan. He was then referred to have the scan under general anaesthetic, which was traumatic for him and the family."

If we were just given the time in the first appointment, we could have calmed him down and got it done."

Care and understanding

Displaying patience and compassion can go a long way in making people feel respected and can improve care.

“There are things that can be changed to make it a better experience for everybody, just be understanding people’s needs.”

“I live in Sandwell. I chose to go to New Cross Hospital.
The staff are great.”



Beacon

"We come from West Bromwich to Beacon because we think it's a cracking place."



"I can't thank Beacon enough for what they have done for me."

People who attend or live at Beacon gave overwhelmingly positive feedback on the service. The centre was described as inclusive and supportive.

"My eyesight went within six weeks. I have a new lease of life since moving here. It has been life changing and has opened up a whole new world for me."

Participants highlighted the importance of Beacon for socialising, saying they enjoy hearing other people's voices and taking part in activities such as quizzes, games and chair exercises.

Beacon

“I’ve been coming to Beacon for a long, long time. I can hear people’s voices. It’s lovely to hear other people’s voices.”

For some, Beacon has been “life-changing” providing them with independence (such as learning to cook again), a sense of community and improving their wellbeing, with one person saying living at Beacon is “like living with one big family”.

“Beacon is inclusive, you’re accepted for who you are and everyone is equal.”



Beacon

"If you are living as a couple, your support is only 15 minutes each."



People provided feedback on the cost to access some of the services at Beacon, highlighting financial barriers to accessing support.

"I pay £125 wellbeing charge to live here. This includes 30mins of support a week, but not everyone gets this support. If you need someone to get something for you, like go to the shop, there is an additional charge of £20."*

**In response to this comment Beacon said "Payment for live-in services is paid to Bromford the Housing scheme not Beacon so it is not in relation to the care service."*

Beacon

One person expressed frustration with the residential care provided.

“Care is supposed to be 24/7 but I have pressed the buzzers and the carers haven’t come out to me.”

“Carers can read letters for you but can’t help with forms. I shouldn’t have to call for outside help.”



Recommendations

The recommendations from this report primarily relate to services other than Beacon. We focus on overarching issues faced by people who are living with sight loss based on the conversations we had.



Accessible communication

- Provide all patient communication, including appointment letters and clinical updates, in the requested format.
- Train staff to adhere to Accessible Information Standard, the importance of accessible information and different formats of communication including: large print, Braille and screen reader friendly.



Disability awareness

- Ensure all patient-facing NHS staff receive disability awareness training to ensure they understand the communication and time needs of people with sight loss.

Recommendations



Appointment scheduling

- Allow patients to book longer appointments if needed.
- Recognise the benefit of booking longer appointments to discuss more than one issue for people who have additional barriers to attending multiple appointments.



Support with forms

- Support people living with sight loss to complete forms, where alternative formats are not possible.



Listen to service users

- Beacon should continue to offer a range of activities and consult with attendees about what they would like to get involved in.
- Ensure cost of services are clear and not prohibitive to those that require support.

Response from Beacon

Beacon responded to the comments and recommendations in this report.

Cost of services

Where possible we always try to keep the cost of services to a minimum, we have a dedicated team that applies for grants which helps to support our programs and keep activities affordable for people – a lot of which are free or a very minimal charge. We have had feedback that we are cheaper than a lot of other providers because of this. We also support our members to get social assessments to help with this and encourage the use of direct payments.

We have a 1-1 service that is charged for, this was set up to help people access healthcare such as hospital appointments, GP, dentist etc and travel factors and staff time have to be factored in here.

24/7 care

Buzzer calls are monitored and all calls that come through are responded to by the care team and actioned appropriately.

Completing forms

Care staff wouldn't necessarily have the time to form fill, especially long forms but our wellbeing team can support with this.

Response from Beacon

“We are always working with different providers to gather information and insight from visually impaired people's perspective to help improve services and access and raise awareness of sight loss. An example of this we were recently commissioned by the Black Country Integrated Care Board to deliver Sight Loss Awareness training to all GP practice managers within Dudley, Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Walsall.

We encourage the respondents who said they are waiting for assessments to reach out to members of staff so we can support them.

–Becky Green, Head of Health and Wellbeing, Beacon

Thank you

Thank you to Beacon for inviting us to speak to and hear from people who are living with sight loss and their loved ones.

We want to thank the people who candidly shared their experiences with us.





**Committed
to quality**

Healthwatch Dudley is committed to providing a quality service, from how we collect data, to the information we provide. Every three years we perform an in-depth audit, in conjunction with Healthwatch England, to ensure we meet this high standard.

**If you would like this report in
another language or format
please contact us.**

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