

# Sea-ing Sense Project

Accessing the natural environment safely for people with visual impairments

## Practical Guidance for making green and blue spaces more accessible - Information for walk and workshop leaders

Although many people are interested in wildlife, people with Visual Impairments (VI) often feel excluded from fully enjoying outdoor wild spaces and experiencing contact with nature because of certain barriers including:

- Lack of knowledge/information on facilities of sites and accessibility
- No appropriate transport to visit sites
- Lack of facilities on sites (e/g toilets, accessible footpaths).
- Public events and activities in parks and countryside were not suitable
- Not having friends/family for support to share their interest in the environment
- Lack of confidence in their ability to visit sites safely and meet new people

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*Publicly owned parks and green spaces are there for all sectors of the community to enjoy and yet for people with sight loss there are significant social, physical, and economic barriers that prevent their access and enjoyment.*

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## 1 Supported walks for Visually Impaired people

In order to 'open up' green centres or outdoor wild nature walks to blind and partially sighted people and to encourage groups to visit, making contact with local VIP organisations (charities and social groups) is really useful – go and talk to them about what your site has to offer.

Involve local blind and partially sighted people and ask them about visiting or where they would like to go, and what they would need to be in place – be open to criticism and listen to suggestions

At your organisation, find committed people – staff and volunteers- who are practical in approach and who are enthusiastic about being inclusive.

Arrange a Sighted Guide in the Natural Environment Training Session for staff and volunteers.

Take a look at your site brochure or leaflet – how accessible is it ? could a separate version of it be made with large print, for example?

Identify a short circular walk that you think is wheelchair-accessible and invite a VIP to come along and test it for you – you may need to cut back overhanging branches and clear the path of debris, for example.

With volunteers, practice making audio descriptions of the terrain, trees, ponds, vistas, wildlife and flora along the way.

Give people warning of tripping hazards, surface changes, gates, puddles.

Have a leader at the front and a person to bring up the rear so individuals don't get left behind where they cannot hear. Stop every now and again to bring everyone together.

In a group setting, make sure people can hear you – encourage those with poor hearing to walk near to you or move to be near them if you stop to describe something.

Touch and smell are senses that can enhance the walk experience so describe and offer leaves, flowers, stones, fossils and other things for people to handle and smell.

If you plan to take photos get permission from all participants.

## 2 Nature Workshops for Visually Impaired people

Firstly, an understanding of sight loss conditions is essential.

Groups of people with sight loss will have a wide range of seeing ability - examples include from no useful sight (only seeing shades of grey), to having some peripheral vision (e.g. Macular Degeneration), or sight limited to a small central area (e.g. Glaucoma) or sight only in one eye.

Ideally, arrange a Sighted Guide in the Natural Environment Training Session for staff and volunteers.

Choice of venues is important, with good facilities and plenty of space for those using white canes and guide dogs. Ideally on ground floor. Use lifts where available – and Blind people will need audio guidance as to where steps and stairs are.

Arrange seating so you can get nearer to people to demonstrate or pass things around. Anticipate the need to leave a chair-free space for a wheelchair user.

Place people so the window is behind them, so the light is not in their eyes.

Introduce yourself and any other helpers or staff in the room and check that all can hear you.

Give people housekeeping information about where toilets are and means of escape.

Tell people what you are going to do at the start and throughout the session and repeat when you get to each activity, i.e. now I am going to pass round a fossil....or play some music etc.

Use multi-sensory methods – things to pass around to touch and feel, Play sounds such as bird song, poetry, music, offer (pleasant!) things to smell and even things to taste such as sips of flavoured drinks or special biscuits or sweets relevant to the occasion (always popular!) Check no-one has any allergies.

If you pass round pictures make sure they are a good size and contrast so those with some sight can see them.

# Information for organisations planning to apply for funding for a walking project for VIPs

## 1 Carry out Local Research

- Demographics/stats to demonstrate need
- Consider scope and size of project- one group or more
- workshops and walks? How many/ how often?
- ID Local nature reserve(s) walk sites/ centres and check facilities – ask people where they would like to go
- Make contact with potential walk leaders- you may know someone
- ID Local support organisations
- Find and talk to relevant Volunteer groups about sighted guide training – this is necessary
- Consultation- you will need to evidence that people want to do this
- Stress potential benefits for all involved –e.g. making sites more accessible, welcoming more visitors, updating / improving literature and site information, using audio options, disability awareness, training for staff and volunteers, new promo opportunities, wider benefits to families etc.

## 2 Identifying the people to take on the walks

- Contact local support groups – meet and discuss what you are planning
- Survey – ages, mobility, if they are interested etc.
- Explain clearly how the walks would work from arrival to completion
- Determine numbers so know size of walking group(s) – max 12 any more would be too big
- Will need a person to lead and a person at the back of the group plus supporters/ volunteers if a person needs one-to-one

## 3 Programming and planning walks and workshops

- Discuss with the sites/centres in advance what you are wanting – multi sensory experiences, audio descriptions of wildlife and surrounds
- Smells, tastes, sounds as well as sights
- Pre-walk Site visit – Identify the venue for workshops/ lunches / refreshments/ toilets (space should be provided free but may need to negotiate?)
- If bringing in or using site catering, where to purchase lunches locally etc. and average costs per head

- Travel arrangements
- Accessibility and safety of the identified walk
- How walk leaders can make themselves heard by all
- How to record – pictures, feedback, videos, sounds etc- Get permissions from participants to use the above

#### **4 Working with volunteers**

- Make contact with existing volunteers at centres and see if they would be interested in supporting walkers who are visually impaired. They should have proper training if going to do this.
- If so GFI can arrange and provide specialist Sighted Guide training for them – includes disability awareness
- This training can also be offered to family members of blind people

#### **5 Working out estimates of cost**

- Make contract with the centres you are using if they are to lead walks – also may do a short talk or workshop as well – two separate sessions? – ideally under 10 K so you do not need to go out to tender
- Treat as a pilot project- hopefully will lead to more
- Cost for a Project coordinator part time salary
- Project management costs
- Office overheads – insurance etc
- Recruitment costs – staff and volunteers
- Volunteer expenses
- Sighted Guide training costs
- Transport and travel – if included
- Refreshments and Lunches- if included
- Equipment – might need to provide a wheelchair, walker, umbrellas, loudspeaker, blankets, wet proofs, guider arm bands etc.

#### **6 Contacting potential funders**

- Find potential funders
- Others ? locally for sponsorship for lunches or transport contributions?
- Eligibility check- do you meet their criteria?
- Their expectations/ reporting/evaluation etc
- Update policies and procedures in readiness- Equal Ops, Safeguarding etc

## 7 Start drafting funding application

May need to apply with an expression of interest first

## 8 Source letters of support

- From centre / nature reserve
- From local support organisations

## 9 Finalise funding application

- Include detailed project plan **with lead in time**

## 10 Prepare the ground- you might be successful!

- What to do first! – recruitment planned
- Press release
- Social media

## 11 Once funding agreed:-

- Let everyone know – plus media
- Appoint project coordinator asap and train/induct
- Meet with Centre to determine potential safe walk route(s) and timetable
- Set and agree dates and prepare literature/letters/ adverts- once funding agreed
- Confirm participants /contact details– **keep data safe re GDPR**
- Audit of participants, their levels of sight, mobility, guide dogs and hearing levels too, if they would have carers walking with them...also dietary needs- for Health and Safety. This will determine how many sighted guiders you might need.
- Prepare and deliver guider training for volunteers
- Meet with Centre walk leader and train/cover sight loss awareness.

## Other ideas to add to enhance future walk experiences

With permission, take voice recordings during the activities and conversations with participants.

Also take photographs for use in promotion and communication with participants who may like copies – always ask for their permission.

Introducing subject areas that are often inaccessible to blind or partially sighted people such as:

- different bird calls and songs in different seasons and being able to identify birds from their song
- trees by being able to feel their bark and the leaves of different species
- Other flora and fauna- including the feel of lichen, fungus, herbs and flowers, and information about animals and insects and their sounds

And take with you:-

- Take a small container to capture an insect so that it can be passed round for listening to its sound or for close-up viewing
- Take magnifiers to pass round for all to use
- Take black paper to hold behind a leaf or flower so it shows up for those with partial sight

Consider offering tours that are at different speeds - some of the younger and more physically able participants may be motivated to extend their experiences with a faster, more challenging outdoor experience.

Offer hands-on workshops to complement the walks including tasting exercises, for example, Herb sessions – the smell, texture, taste and feel of herbs

The reading of nature poetry and playing suitable music can also be used as interpretive tools and extra layers of experience in workshop settings.