

Additional costs of living for people who are sight impaired

Research Findings

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Research to establish how much more it costs, as a minimum, to live with sight loss was carried out for Thomas Pocklington Trust by researchers at Loughborough University and University Campus Suffolk.

This study estimated the additional expenses of someone who is eligible for certification as sight impaired with some useable sight. It covered extra spending needs for life inside and outside the home.

Summary findings

- Being sight impaired can make it more expensive to reach a minimum acceptable living standard compared to someone without that impairment.
- The budget for a working age person living alone who is sight impaired but with some usable sight is a quarter more than for someone with full sight: £50 extra on top of a standard minimum budget of £199 a week.
- Additional costs include buying technological equipment, hiring a regular cleaner and additional expenses for travel, social activities, household goods and health care.
- The most obvious costs involve paying for sight related items such as assistive computer software, a video magnifier and glasses.
- However, most additional costs are concerned with how people who are sight impaired live. They include paying for domestic help, for social activities and for travel. Spending on these items help people who are sight impaired to participate in society and maintain independence.
- Personal Independence Payments are based narrowly on what people can and cannot do, rather than the wider context of how people who are sight impaired live. As a result, there is a risk that people with significant additional costs will not be eligible.

The research

This research uses an approach called the Minimum Income Standard, and extends it to the situation of people who are eligible to be certified as sight impaired. The Minimum Income Standard is the amount that a household needs to cover its expenses so that people can reach an acceptable standard of living and participate in society. This is about more than mere survival. However, it is focussed on

meeting basic physical and social needs so excludes things that might be considered 'nice to have' but are not essential. It is based on discussions among members of the public, deciding what items are essential in a household budget. These items are costed, taking into account how long they last, to produce weekly budgets.

For this research, groups of visually impaired people discussed in detail which additional items would be needed for someone of working age living on their own who is certified sight impaired and has some useable sight, compared to a fully sighted single person. It is recognised that this research does not cover people who are severely sight impaired with no useable sight, but their needs are likely to be different and would require a separate study.

Additional costs and why they were considered important

Technology and communication

People who are sight impaired need various technological items with higher specifications than fully sighted people, such as larger computer screens, and televisions with talking menus and other additional features. They need higher grade mobile phones to provide extra accessibility features and apps. They also require specialised items such as a video magnifier, assistive computer software and training in its use.

The research groups agreed that such technology is important to sight impaired people, to enable communication, facilitate access to written materials, and make the best use of the sight that they have, as expressed by one research participant:

“The more independence you have with aids or talking facilities or large print or font sizes or whatever, the more we feel normal. That is hugely important.”

While some technology items only involve one-off purchases, having a more expensive mobile phone can add significantly to regular monthly costs.

Domestic help every two weeks for two hours

Groups agreed that someone who is sight impaired could do some cleaning, but having regular help to give the home a 'good once over' or to deal with particular jobs in the home would be beneficial. They noted that maintaining the presentation of the home is important for 'self-esteem'.

Additional travel costs

People who are sight impaired can require additional taxi journeys for some medical appointments where eye drops are administered and to allow for times when a condition fluctuates making it harder to use the bus. Not having the money to pay for this can cause difficulties, as a group participant explained:

“When I came out of the hospital I literally can't see a thing and it is actually dangerous, and I walk back from town and I was lucky to be alive. The next time I had to save up to get a taxi.”

Groups also identified the additional cost of train trips further afield to attend hospital appointments and allow involvement in Visual Impairment networks and events. On the other hand, people who are certified as sight impaired save on off-peak bus travel using a concessionary pass, although some unavoidable peak-time journeys have to be paid for.

Additional costs of social activities and going on holiday

People who are sight impaired have similar social needs to anyone else, with in many cases the same costs. However, additional costs arise where they choose to treat a friend who accompanies them in activities or visiting unfamiliar places that may otherwise be difficult. The research groups stressed the importance of being able to reciprocate by paying for a ticket, a drink or a meal for a friend rather than feeling over-reliant on the goodwill of others, as one participant explained:

“I always feel obliged if I ask someone to come with me to give them something in return because I feel like I'm really needy.”

Such a cost can also occur when being accompanied on holiday.

Another way in which a holiday could be more expensive is as a result of going to a (specialist) hotel rather than self-catering accommodation – which is considered an adequate minimum for fully sighted people, but which could be more difficult for someone who is sight impaired.

Additional costs of household goods

An important area of extra household spending is the requirement for more and brighter lighting throughout the home. Groups explained how lighting would have to be focussed on certain areas and adjustable to allow for fluctuating eye conditions. Changes were also made to the type of floor covering (replacing carpets with laminate) and sofa material (leather rather than fabric) and a few kitchen and bathroom items for safety or maintenance reasons. Also, paying for someone to help with home maintenance adds a small amount.

Additional health care costs

An increased number of prescriptions a year are required to allow for eye drops that a fully sighted person would not need. Groups also increased the budget for the cost of glasses, as people who are sight impaired may have to pay for more expensive glasses, require different types and have to change them more frequently.

Electricity

A small weekly addition to the budget takes account of higher electricity bills to cover the cost of running additional lighting which can be required for longer periods and appliances.

As shown in the list below, half of all additional costs of being sight impaired come from the domestic help and technological items, with the rest spread across a range of categories.

Minimum weekly budget for a single working age person who is sight impaired (excluding rent)

Standard budget for a fully sighted person: £198.60.

Additions for a someone who is sight impaired:

Domestic help: £12.50

Technology: £12.39

Social activities and holiday: £8.98
Travel: £6.50
Household goods and services: £5.01
Other (healthcare, electricity, miscellaneous): £5.11

Total additions: £50.49

Total weekly budget: £249.09

Conclusions and policy implications

This research clearly shows how living with partial sight can bring additional costs in reaching a minimum acceptable standard of living. It demonstrates the wide range of costs that people face across different areas of life, and shows how these costs are justified by reasoned arguments by people who experience sight impairment.

The size of these costs vary greatly for different items. The largest expenses overall come from things people have to pay for regularly, like a cleaner, extra travel or a mobile phone contract, rather than one-off purchases when these are costed over a period of time.

This means that the biggest costs come not from buying specialist equipment that directly relates to sight loss. They occur as a result of how people who are sight impaired lead their lives.

These wider additional costs of living are not well recognised by the benefits system. Many people who are sight impaired are unlikely to have the characteristics to be awarded sufficient points under the Personal Independence Payments (PIPs) system to create an entitlement, even though they face the additional costs identified in this study. Evidence such as has been collected in the present study could help in future to adapt such a list to ensure that it more fairly reflects areas where costs occur.

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The status of this research

The research reported here is independent research commissioned by Thomas Pocklington Trust. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Thomas Pocklington Trust.

The research was undertaken to trial an established methodology that defines Minimum Income Standards (MIS) for certain population groups. It applied the methodology to people of working age who are eligible for certification as sight impaired or who are Deaf and use British Sign Language. The findings estimated additional costs of living and defined a Minimum Income Standard for each population group.

In this publication, the terms 'visually impaired people', 'blind and partially sighted people' and 'people with sight loss' all refer to people who are either eligible to be certified as sight impaired (partially sighted) or severely sight impaired (blind).

How to obtain further information

The full research report also includes budgets for people who are Deaf. It sets out the method in more detail, and describes how groups discussed additional needs and the rationales given for including items in the budgets.

The report:

'Disability and minimum living standards: The additional costs of living for people who are sight impaired and people who are Deaf'

There is a separate Research Findings on the additional costs for people who are Deaf.

Both can be obtained from www.crsp.ac.uk/news