

Sight loss and the city: Podcast transcript

This is a special podcast about sight loss and the city. Produced by Sustrans in association with the Open City podcast.

Introduction

Before we start, I want you to consider a street journey that you make regularly with ease. Think about the crossings you make and the objects you pass. But how would your experience of this journey be different with a limited or absent sense of sight? That's what we'll think about today.

My name is Lucy Atkinson. I work in collaborative design at Sustrans London. A charity that works with communities on walking and cycling projects. As Open City listeners, I think most of you probably want our public spaces to be accessible and welcoming for people. Especially those who are systemically marginalised. But time and time again on projects, we at Sustrans hear from those who live with experience of visual impairment, that places are designed in ways that do not consider their needs and which make those regular journeys really difficult. As designers and engagement specialists, we learn so much from conversations that we have with visually impaired people on our projects, through street audits, interviews and community engagement sessions. But all too often, these insights aren't shared beyond the project team. We wanted to change that!

So with funding from the Healthy Streets Officers programme, supported by Transport for London, we explored sight loss and way-finding in a borough with a notoriously changing town centre. We teamed up with sight loss charity Croydon Vision, a thriving community network of hundreds of blind and partially sighted people and their families in South London. In autumn 2021, we sat down with members of the network for a series of discussions. They shared their stories of sight loss and the way urban design impacts their journeys. From surface treatments to bins on the pavement. The audio was then turned into the piece you're about to hear [read] by participatory artists Becky Darlington and Andy Field of Haus Projects. We know that with so many competing needs, there can never be a perfect public realm for everyone. But we also know that there is a lot we can do to include a wider range of voices in conversations about our city's spaces, and design with empathy and care.

We're really happy to be able to share this with you on the Open City Podcast. Thank you to Merlin and the rest of the Open City team for their support and of course to the interviewees for sharing their experiences. Enjoy.

Meeting members of Croydon Vision

[First voice]

I wasn't born blind. But I went blind in 2000, or I lost the majority of my vision in January 2019. I noticed that my vision was deteriorating because I suffer with a condition called Behçet's syndrome which is an autoimmune disease. But you know, you make the most of what you have. When life serves you lemons, you make lemonade. Or you make yourself orange juice and let people work out how you made it.

[Second voice]

I live in Croydon. I've lived here for 25 years now. Originally from Birmingham. Gosh, I went into a Birmingham accent then! [Laughter] I see myself as being very blessed actually because I'm in my sixties now. I started to lose my sight in my late twenties and it's been a very slow... You know because other people have the same condition as myself which is called RP, which is a hereditary condition. My mum has it also but she is totally blind now. She lives in the Caribbean. I used to work in travel, which I enjoyed immensely. I have travelled well, I used to specialise in the Caribbean. The company I worked for specialised in the Caribbean so that enabled me to get to the Caribbean quite a lot. I used to travel a lot throughout London.

Anyone who knows me, I'm all over the place. I'm in east London, I'm in north London, I'm in south, I'm in west. Something going on, Maxine will be there, if it's interesting to me. And most times, I could try quite happily to go around by myself.

[Third voice]

Originally, I'm from Mauritius but my husband's British so I'm now currently living in Croydon. I'm glad to be in Croydon because I am visually impaired and I need a magnifier to use in my daily life if I have to read something. And Croydon Vision happened to be walking distance from my house, so I like Croydon for that reason.

[Fourth voice]

I started losing my sight aged about 30. So up until that point, I was a fully qualified chartered building surveyor, which had taken me almost nine years to qualify for, including university. And I was in my dream job and I was driving everywhere. I'd been driving for 10 years, got in the car, just drove everywhere. Did everything, went everywhere. Had a wonderful life basically. And then this started happening to me. I had to stop driving, stop reading, stop playing in my orchestra and basically my life sort of ground to a halt. But I basically carried on because you do.

But in the meanwhile, I've been using assistive technology, which is immensely helpful on iPhones and Android phones, which can help us get around and help with our daily living basically. And of course, this stuff didn't exist 20 years ago when this was happening to me and I do wonder, if this technology today had been around then, whether I would have actually been able to carry on with my career as it was.

Talking about living and moving with sight loss

[First voice]

I've lived in Croydon for about 32 years and when I nearly lost my sight, I didn't really go out. I stayed in. I would say that I was scared to go out, in that you've got so many obstacles to get over. You're not too sure how the general public are going to perceive you or how they're going to receive you. Now, I realise I've only lost my vision, I haven't lost my capability or my abilities that I had before. So it's all about adapting.

To begin with, I was quite embarrassed about using the white cane because everybody knows you have a disability, it's something that's obvious. I could stand

on a street corner wearing my sunglasses and people think I'm just looking cool. But as soon as you pull out your white cane, then everyone knows you have a disability and you're not wearing the glasses because you're cool, you're wearing them to shield your eyes.

[Fourth voice]

As you get older your eyesight will start to fail, it's just old age. Probably most people over 80, most people over 70 will have some level of hearing loss or sight loss. We're not talking about a minority group, we're going to be talking about a bigger and bigger group as we all get older.

[Second voice]

I could walk from my house straight down to Purley Tesco. It's about a 20/25 minute walk but I don't mind that because it's a straight road. I know where my hazards are and I know where the fencing is. If I'm outside of that now, going into a new area, I approach cautiously, very cautiously.

[First voice]

I always take the same route to work because I know where most of the things are - most of the trip hazards. Many obstacles that you come across like missing pavement slabs, those metal things they have to tie your bike up to on the pavement, I find them a bit of a trip hazard. Because if the cane doesn't pick it up, it's just about negotiating your way around obstacles.

[Second voice]

Going around Croydon now? Oh gosh, yeah! That's been a bit of a nightmare. I don't go into the Whitgift Centre if I can help it because there's lots of those pillars and things, you know those white pillars I'm talking about? They're all over the place. The glass doors – hmm they're a joke. Because sometimes I'm trying to find the door and I'm thinking "ok, here we go". But then other times, I'll stop and I will see where people are going in and out from, so that will make me realise where the doorway is. I know they want to display their things and make things bright but the glass doors, I find them very dangerous.

[Fourth voice]

What there is also on the high streets and roads and pavements at the moment, is a lot more furniture. There are more chairs outside restaurants and stuff since the pandemic. Trying to get people outside and when things blow over they're just kind of lying around.

[Second voice]

The hazards, the scaffolding I mean, I've walked into that numerous times which is highly embarrassing.

[Fifth voice]

But sometimes it's just the little things that are the biggest obstacle. I know I heard somebody else saying about potholes or pavements where there's not a clear delineation between the end of the pavement and the kerb. And I have fallen into the road a couple of times, which isn't very pleasant. But also things like people's gardens with just an overgrown branch hanging over, which I don't see coming until it's actually hit me in the eye. I've actually ended up in hospital a couple of times with really injured eyes just from somebody's overhanging branches. But probably my main bugbear is black bins because I have tunnel vision, so I have a very restricted view of the world around me. So often if I'm concentrating on not falling off the edge of the pavement or going around a lamppost, I don't see that there's a black bin on the other side of me which I then career into.

[Second voice]

My getting around is getting a bit harder. Croydon, they've done a fantastic job of widening the pavements, that's been really good. But I don't know what they've put on the pavement itself. I don't know what colour they're using or what they're using, white paving stones(?) but the glare from it when the sun reflects, or even if it rains, it's just awful. You know you're on the pavement but I feel a little bit uncomfortable because I can't actually see what's what, because the sun is reflecting so much off the paving stones.

[First voice]

In total, I would say there's about ten roads that I have to cross to get to work. All varying degrees of difficulty. It can be a one-way street and so you're just listening out for traffic coming one way. I try to avoid junctions because then you've got traffic

coming in four directions and so that can be a bit confusing. So I will walk down from the junction, it may take me an extra five minutes but at least I'm still alive!

[Sixth voice]

I also don't like when cycle trails painted on the pavement suddenly switch sides or suddenly stop, or suddenly they start and so you never know where you're meant to be as a pedestrian. I think that often the pedestrians are forgotten about. I think a lot of people who build the built environment only think about people in cars or people maybe on a bicycle. But they never really think that people are actually going to walk. You have all these sorts of parks with big retail shops – where are the pedestrians meant to go? There's always bits that miss. You have maybe where the blue badge disabled people park, then you have the pedestrians. Then suddenly there's a petrol station and where do the pedestrians go? So there's always little gaps here and there. It's like it's not thought through from A to Z.

[Third voice]

What's tricky is some of the time when you're at the bus stop and lots of busses are coming and sometimes, at some bus stops, they don't stop and unless you put your hand out.

[Sixth voice]

It's a big problem in London when there's a lot of busses at the same stop. Even if you have the app, they're all there. And it's actually quite hard to know which one is which because they come quick, they go quick, and it's not easy.

[Fourth voice]

In the same way that the bus tells us where it's stopping (so we have the audio description on the bus), it would be helpful as a blind person, or a visually impaired person, to have some way at the bus stop of knowing what bus is coming. Because otherwise I have to stop every bus that comes and then, because I'm in a chair as well, I have to go to the front of the bus and ask the driver what bus it is. By which time he's lowered the ramp and then I have to say 'actually no, I don't want you'.

[Sixth voice]

I think what would be really nice for me as a blind person, is just to be able to open my front door and go where I want to go. Whether it's just walking or hopping in a car or a vehicle and it would take me and I wouldn't need my eyes (so to speak) to get there safely. So whether it's having an electronic guide dog that would walk next to me, or a drone, or a mobile phone that has electronic eyes that would spot if there's a low branch, a bin, a pothole, a bicycle, a car coming, or if it's safe for me to walk. And that would take me there, it would sort of help me get the right bus, help me on the right train.

[Fourth voice]

What I really want - and I don't think it's out there yet – is a joined up app which gives all the travel. I mean you can plan a journey and it says 'you can get a bus to here and you get off here' and 'you get on at another bus stop and you get off at this station' and 'you change at this station to get another train to there'. But what you don't know is how to get to that next platform, or where the bus stop is. It's that level of detail, it's the joining up of the services. It's the bits in between which I think are still missing.

[Fifth voice]

With our population getting older and older, it's going to be vital that we are more user friendly than we are at the moment. I would really like every senior politician, the mayor and his top officials, to spend a day as a disabled person. Trying to go from A to B in London with a blindfold on. Or trying to navigate the tube system in a wheelchair. Because I think, unless they have some lived experience of what it's like to be a disabled person, then they are not qualified to make the decisions that they make over what provision is made for the disabled in our community. I think whether it's town planning or transport, any big public project, it should be mandatory that there's a sensory impairment team who advises on how it's going to work.

[Sixth voice]

I think that architects and people who are actually in that profession should have training themselves as well. They should be made aware, as part of their professionalism, to actually understand or have some kind of insight into the needs of people who are disabled. It should be there from when they are at university and they're learning how to become an architect. As we were saying, also consult the local people who are disabled but at the right time, not once all the plans are all done and nearly agreed.

[Fifth voice]

Because by that stage it's too late. If there's any adaptations, they become an expense, rather than if it had been actually planned that way. Sometimes adaptations can be helpful to everyone. It was put in place because it might help someone with a visual impairment but actually it makes everybody's life easier.

[Sixth voice]

I think that planners of the urban environment should consider the whole population. You are planning a town for everybody, so you have to think of children, disabled people, older people, young people, able people. And it is your vision that everybody has the right to move around, to live in their environment and to enjoy it.

[End]