

Welcome to our Winter edition of In Touch. 2024 has been a year of change for us, with the decision to relocate our services and to sell our current premises. As a charity, please be assured that there will be no change to the service we provide and most importantly continued access to personalised support for everyone.



Our commitment to providing more activities for children and young people has come to fruition this year, with a regular group for children at Kids Kingdom now established, as well as bowling, horse riding and a trip to the Pantomime. We also have some one-off activities for younger adults taking place.

Laura, pictured left riding Ginny, a beautiful white and black horse with a long mane, was one of those who took part in our adult horseriding session through Belfairs Woods in early Autumn.

We are grateful to everyone who has supported us over the last year by raising awareness, volunteering for us or even donating to us. It is sometimes the kind words from a family member, thanking us for making a difference to their loved one, that makes staff and volunteers feel appreciated.

In this issue we get to know and hear from some local inspirational blind people – Penny, Lee and Jill. Their determination to make a difference, not take no for an answer, give back to their community and help make the lives of other blind and partially sighted people better is something we could all aspire to.

Team Talk

Written by Catherine Hodgson, Fundraising & Comms. Manager

2024 has flown by, with hundreds of new people contacting us for support, as well as continued work with people already known to us. We do pride ourselves on providing a very personal service tailored to an individual's needs. Please call us to book an appointment.

Our tech team seem to be the most popular, with appointments to troubleshoot mobiles, laptops and tablets every week, ensuring people living with sight loss are getting the most from their technology.



Claire and Coralie, whom many of you will have spoken to or met at our Centre, are pictured left with our most popular items of equipment, including a task light and large print diaries. If any of our readers or listeners would like to place an order for 2025 calendars and diaries please do call us as soon as possible. And don't forget our form filling service – we can help ensure you are getting the benefits you may be entitled to.

Dean continues to lead our Talk and Support service, making regular wellbeing calls to over 80 local people. He is supported by a fantastic team of volunteers who all give up their time to chat.

At this time of year, we are also encouraging people to chat to Dean about energy saving initiatives and signing up to the Priority Services Register. With colder weather on the horizon, it's a good time to make sure you are doing everything you can to keep you safe in your home and to ensure your household bills are as low as possible.

We have a packed activity schedule over the Christmas period, with a Christmas party, a pizza night for our working age group and the local Panto starring Rylan at the Cliffs Pavilion for children and their families.



Community Engagement Officer Georgie is as busy as ever with monthly coffee mornings, Fun Fridays, line dancing, talking book club and fortnightly choir. In fact, our choir recently performed for a local care home. The residents were treated to a full medley of popular songs from the Insight Singers. The audience were encouraged to join in, with one commenting that

the performance was better than a West End show – praise indeed! The photo above shows our choir seated, holding large print yellow song sheets, singing their hearts out.

Weekly bowling at CJs in Hockley has grown in size, with around 20 people meeting up every Thursday during term time. We now have bowlers ranging from 21 to 91, and people joining us from as far as London on the train. They are such a fun and welcoming group, with their own Christmas lunch planned and regular social meet ups arranged during the school holidays. Please call Anne Morris on **01702 34 21 31** if you are interested in joining.

Our Eye Clinic Liaison Officer Tracey continues to support patients at Southend Hospital's Eye Clinic. She has been busy offering training and sight loss awareness tips for different wards at the hospital, including the Stroke Team and the new cohort of doctors. The low vision clinic is now on a Friday (it was previously held on a Monday) and Tracey is on hand for advice and support during these sessions.

As always, please call our office to book an appointment or for more information on any of the services we and other local organisations offer – we are here to help.

Winter Wellbeing

Written by Catherine Hodgson, Fundraising & Comms. Manager

With the shortest day fast approaching, this time of year can be challenging for those living with sight loss. Here are a few practical tips for people with visual impairments to stay safe and well in the winter:

- **Use a symbol cane:** A small, reflective cane can help you be seen by others and can be folded and carried in a pocket or bag. You can also talk to your rehabilitation officer at Southend City Council or ECL about training to use a long cane.
- **Carry a torch:** A small torch can provide extra light in unfamiliar areas or for tasks like checking bus timetables.
- **Wear bright clothing:** Brightly coloured clothing can help you be more visible.
- **Bundle up:** Wear extra layers of clothing to stay warm.
- **Take a taxi:** If you feel unsafe waiting for public transportation, consider taking a taxi on occasion.
- **Reduce tripping hazards:** Remove or repair tripping hazards like loose room dividers or frayed carpets and rugs.
- **Keep outdoor areas clear:** Keep outdoor areas free of moss and fallen leaves, and replace broken slabs.
- **Wear glare glasses:** These reduce glare from bright sunlight or the low winter sun reflecting on ice, snow and wet surfaces.
- **Be aware of dry eyes:** Cold weather can cause dry eyes, which can lead to blurred vision. If symptoms persist, please talk to your doctor or optician.

Travel Concessions.

To be able to stay active during the winter months, it might be useful to find out if you can receive discounted train or free local travel on buses. Please call us for more information, but here are a few guidelines:

The **Disabled Person's Railcard** gives at least one-third off the price of certain rail tickets for anyone registered sight impaired or severely sight impaired, and an accompanying adult where applicable.

You are eligible for a free **Disabled Bus Pass** to travel locally if you are registered blind or partially sighted, no matter your age.

If you are registered as severely sight impaired, you are automatically eligible to apply for the **Blue Badge** scheme to allow you to use disabled parking bays. The Blue Badge would be in your name to use in any vehicle in which you travel.

Welcome Wednesdays.



Here at Southend in Sight, we understand the positive impact that meeting with others in a similar situation can have on your mental wellbeing. We continue with our diary of activities throughout the winter months, starting a little earlier if necessary, taking into account the darker evenings.

You are always welcome to drop into us on any Wednesday morning between 10:30am and 12:30pm for a cup of tea (or coffee) and a chat with our volunteers Jackie and Maria, pictured left.

Financial Help.

If you are worried about paying your bills this winter, please do call us to check if you are eligible for any benefits in the first instance. We are part of the “Centres for Warmth” project with Cadent and can offer advice on energy saving.

We can also refer you to other organisations to seek help through grant schemes such as the Household Support Fund. This offers both households and individuals one off payments for those in extreme financial hardship living in the Southend area.

A busy October...

Written by Catherine Hodgson, Fundraising & Comms. Manager.

World Sight Day is an opportunity for Southend in Sight staff to be out in the community delivering sight loss awareness training and promoting the work that we do to help those living with sight loss lead independent lives.



We are very grateful to our long-time supporters, the Southend Lions, for once again organising a walk with Southend City Mayor Ron Woodley and to the staff at the Southend Marks & Spencer store for hosting us. The Mayor was blindfolded and guided around the local store with the help of our CEO, Lucy Martin, to raise awareness of the challenges faced every day by visually impaired people. The photo above shows Marks & Spencer Deputy Manager Sam Fellows, The Mayor blindfolded, Lucy Martin, Southend Lion Nigel Folkard, Tayf Yildizeli, President of City of Southend Lions Club and his wife Sheila Yildizeli.

Lucy Martin said: “World Sight Day is a chance for us to remind the local community of the daily challenges a blind or partially sighted person has to overcome. Some of you may be applauding Chris McCausland’s determination and tenacity on the BBC show “Strictly Come Dancing” as

he learns a new skill with little or no sight. The people we support are just as inspirational in the way they navigate their way through life on a day to day basis.”



Meanwhile, our Eye Clinic Liaison Officer Tracey and Sight Loss Advisor Coralie met staff from different wards at Southend Hospital, offering practical sight loss awareness tips. A few of the patients we support also talked about their experience of living with sight loss and the mechanisms they use to remain independent. The photo left shows NHS staff trying out some spectacles that simulate different eye conditions.

Our annual exhibition held at the end of October was a huge success, with 55 local blind and partially sighted people attending, many with friends, family and carers. It was lovely to meet faces new and old and to witness their voyage of discovery as they found out about all the low vision equipment that is currently on the market. The two tray talking air fryer was a huge hit, as was the “café”, run by staff members Georgie and Liz!



We received some lovely feedback from our attendees on the day. One visitor said they were struck by the caring and extremely professional service they received, especially from an independent local charity. Another said that the exhibition provided a great opportunity to look at the different equipment geared to the needs of visually impaired people and that it was a great way to network with many different organisations and people. Our thanks to everyone who helped make the exhibition such an enjoyable and worthwhile event. The photo left shows Claire and Coralie manning the

Southend in Sight stand, displaying their large print diaries and calendars.

Local Legend Lee

Written by Catherine Hodgson, Fundraising & Comms. Manager.

Some of you may have met Lee Mercer at one of our activities, or you may have heard him give a talk at the hospital or over Zoom for one of the many local groups he volunteers for. He is certainly known by the conductors at Greater Anglia as he travels about Essex and further afield, booking assistance with staff he himself has helped train in sight loss awareness!

Lee is comfortable talking about his sight loss, which occurred quite suddenly during 2018 and was related to his diabetes. By early 2019, following numerous surgical interventions, Lee was registered as severely sight impaired and was told there was nothing more that could be done for his sight at the age of 30.

Lee says he felt angry with himself, he was shocked, he grieved for the life he thought he couldn't have and for the loss of his independence. At that time, he met Tracey, our Eye Clinic Liaison Officer at Southend Hospital, and was put in touch with the sensory team at Essex (ECL) for an assessment and cane training.

Lee started to talk to others in a similar situation to his own and to think about his life goals. He began working for Evenbreak – a disability job agency run by and for people with lived experience of disability. Lee's role involves liaising with employers, checking in with them and organising training, something he clearly excels at (being a chatty and likeable chap!)

You get the impression, when you talk to Lee, that he lives life to the full. As well as working 25 hours a week, he manages to volunteer in 5 different roles. His longest serving role is as a Leader with Explorer Scouts, something he has been doing for over 12 years. Lee says the biggest life lesson he can teach these 14-18 year olds is that a disability doesn't have to stop you from doing anything. The boys certainly seem to enjoy getting Lee across an assault course or two!

Having received support from Essex Cares Ltd in the early days of his diagnosis, Lee now volunteers for them. He gives talks at sight loss

awareness sessions around Essex for GP surgeries, care home staff and even train companies like Greater Anglia. We all know that someone speaking from experience is a much more effective and powerful way of portraying sight loss in a positive way.

In the rest of his “spare” time, Lee is a moderator for the East of England RNIB Connect Facebook page – a forum for younger people to meet socially in person or online. He is also part of the Essex Sight Loss Council, run by the Thomas Pocklington Trust. This role is all about campaigning and working with employers, government and in particular travel companies to ensure the voices of blind and partially sighted people are heard.

Lee’s latest venture is Goalball. When he realised there was little or no provision for visually impaired sport in Essex, he decided to set up a Goalball team. He had some input from players in Cambridge and London, but he has applied for funding and is making it happen. The team meet monthly in Chelmsford to train and compete in this Paralympic sport where everyone is blindfolded and the ball can be heard. It seems there is nothing that Lee can’t achieve if he puts his mind to it!



Lee says that his life may have thrown him a few curve balls, but he is very far removed from the young man who used to work in an office in Basildon. He is grateful for the support he has received and the connections he has made in the local community. Lee’s parting words are that we do live in a very visual society, one that relies on the written word, pictures, signs and symbols. When you no longer have your sight, you need to work out other ways to do things, and sometimes you do need to ask for help. Lee is a fantastic role model and a great advocate for not being

afraid to try new things that may be out of your comfort zone. He is pictured above at the top of the 02 with Georgie on a recent trip with Southend in Sight, putting what he preaches into practice!

Meet our new trustee

Penny Hefferan joined our Board of Trustees recently. She came across us when she moved back to the area and wanted to make contact with and volunteer for her local sight loss charity.

Penny was born with vision loss but has not let that hold her back. She attended a boarding school for the blind from the age of 5, but went against the grain and took her “A” Levels at a local sixth form college, followed by a music degree at Colchester University.

Her working life has been just as eventful with jobs at a Regional Arts Council in the Midlands, the BBC, Radio 4, charitable trusts and since 2012, she has been working for Guide Dogs. Her role with them is very much around engagement, shared experiences, campaigning and giving a voice to blind people, something she is clearly very passionate about.



Penny is married to Mike and has grown up children, but you get the impression her family don't wrap her up in cotton wool – her grandma taught her to ride a bike and her grandad bought his own Perkins Braille so he could write to Penny at boarding school! Questa, Penny's golden labrador Guide Dog, also features large in her life. The two are pictured left.

Penny is an avid reader and has seen a huge change in the quality and availability of talking books over the years. She says she finally felt equal when the latest audible Harry Potter Book was released on the same day as the printed version and she could enjoy it at the same time as the rest of her family.

Penny hopes to bring her wealth of experience in living with sight loss and her knowledge of other charities to her role as a trustee. She is keen to expand our provision of services for children, young people and those of working age as this is something she feels was missing when she was growing up. Welcome to the fold Penny!

And Finally...

Written by Catherine Hodgson, Fundraising & Comms. Manager.

New Book.

Some of you may know or have met local blind campaigner Jill Allen King, OBE. She has been a member of the National Federation of the Blind for many years and leads their local committee in Westcliff.

Jill has just published her third book, **Jill's Walk of Life**, which is available through the RNIB Talking Book service. Her first Autobiography, **Just Jill**, from 2010 and **Jill's Leading Ladies** from 2016, a tribute to her guide dogs throughout the years, are also available to download.

In this latest book, Jill brings us up to date with her life, including the impact of Covid-19 on herself and her partially sighted husband, Alvin, who was required to shield, effectively cutting off the couple's support system of sighted helpers.

Jill has spent the last sixty years fighting for equal rights and improved access and conditions for blind and disabled individuals. In **Jill's Walk of Life**, she also details the campaigns and committees she has been involved with, some of which are ongoing. For such a busy lady, we don't know how she finds time to write a book!

Update on our building.

As stated in our last newsletter, our premises at 117 Hamlet Court Road require investment for our operational services that is not considered good value for money and does not benefit local blind and partially sighted people. The building is currently up for sale, but in the meantime our services and activities continue as usual.

Our future ambition is to open our doors more often for people to drop in, be more accessible and inclusive and be able to offer confidential sight loss advice alongside some of our activities.

We will keep you all updated on any changes, but please be assured that Southend in Sight will continue to provide the high quality service and range of activities that you have all come to expect.

Southend in Sight – your local sight loss charity.

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