

Welcome to our Autumn edition of In Touch. Our feet haven't touched the ground since we opened our new Centre in May. The response to our move has been overwhelmingly positive, with many people telling us that we are much easier to reach than before. Now we have our brand new blue and yellow signage on our front windows and a large, colourful mural of a woman in a Roman dress on the side of our building, we are even easier to find!



Our stats don't lie – we know that more of you have been visiting us, just to be curious, or because you have heard good things about our service.

In fact, from May to July, we have had a total of 259 people through the door for our morning drop-in sessions – that's a lot

of tea, coffee, cake, biscuits, laughter and tears. Some of these are repeat visits, but considering we had hoped to reach 100 people, we are very pleased with the end result. The photo above shows Bjorn and Annabelle playing Connect 4 at a recent board games activity session for children.

The fact that we are one of the two charity's chosen by the Mayor this year is also good for raising our profile around the city of Southend and beyond. Already, the fundraising committee have ordered a braille copy of a recent church service, and are starting to think about the suitability of a venue or event for someone who is blind or partially sighted.

These small steps can make a huge difference to the people we support and we are proud to be part of this change of thought.

# Team Talk

**Written by Catherine Hodgson, Fundraising & Comms. Manager**

Our Centre has seen a rise in new people visiting and an increase in people needing advice and guidance, which is exactly what we are here for. The phone is ringing constantly with enquiries, along with our newly installed doorbell! Somehow, Coralie and Lucy B have found time to run an information session on glare glasses and a benefits drop-in with volunteer David as well.

Our weekly tech advice appointments with volunteers Steve and Paul are as popular as ever – we held 15 in July alone. They can help with voiceover, Apps and finding ways to navigate your phone or laptop.

Dean continues to make regular calls to people, with the support of 9 volunteers. He is also our “energy guru”, giving out information about the Priority Services Register and energy saving initiatives. Dean is running a drop-in session in November on this very subject, so please do pop in to meet him if you are free.

Georgie has been rushed off her feet over the summer months with extra sessions for local visually impaired children, including Kids Kingdon, Just Ride, bowling and a board games session. The working age group has enjoyed a pizza night, cycling and have a pier walk to look forward to. Our regular activities for adults continue – please refer to the yellow flyer for the dates and timings of these.



With a new grant from Active Southend, we have organised 5 monthly sessions of chair exercises until the end of the year. The first trial run took place in July. The photo left shows our ladies sitting

comfortably in their chairs with arms outstretched. If you are interested in joining this new activity, please call Georgie on **01702 34 21 31** to book your place.



Our second Talking Book Club has also taken off, with a new group of avid readers/listeners meeting up monthly.

They are pictured left at their very first session, chatting and eating lollies (it was a hot July day). Please call us if you are interested

in joining this new group.

Our bowling group has grown in popularity, with 20 people filling up 5 lanes at CJs in Hockley. In fact, with our volunteers and plus ones, we are quite a crowd on a Thursday morning. During the school summer holiday, the bowlers have kept themselves busy with a picnic, a pier walk and a fish and chip lunch. Roll on September!

As always, our Eye Clinic Liaison Officer Tracey is busy, busy, busy! In July alone, she supported 167 patients (109 of them were new) and was instrumental in registering 41 people for their Certificate of Visual Impairment. Don't forget Tracey's new number: **0300 443 7774** and please do leave a message, as she is generally with patients all day.

To finish, a heartwarming tale all the way from Clacton! For many years we have supported Neil with equipment in the home, technology and advice. He recently moved away from South Essex and asked at his local library in Clacton if a group existed for visually impaired people. The library called him a few weeks later to inform him one was being set up. Neil is now helping to organise the monthly coffee meet ups and named the group the "Seesiders", booking speakers and imparting his own knowledge to the newly diagnosed, even demonstrating his Blindshell phone and guide cane. We are so proud of Neil for having the confidence and belief in himself and we thank him for keeping us updated on his progress.

# Diabetes and Sight Loss

## Extracts from the RNIB and Retina UK websites.

Diabetes is a lifelong condition and can cause several health complications. Not everyone who has diabetes develops a related eye condition, so it's possible that your diabetes won't cause any changes to your vision. These are some of the ways that diabetes can affect your eyes.

### **An unstable glasses prescription.**

The changes in blood sugar levels caused by diabetes can affect the natural lens inside your eye, making your vision become more blurred or more variable throughout the day or from day to day. This can make your glasses prescription variable and unreliable. As your blood glucose becomes better managed, this variation in your vision will settle down.

### **Diabetic retinopathy.**

Diabetes can affect the network of blood vessels supplying the retina at the back of the eye, and this damage changes how well the retina works. This is known as diabetic retinopathy. Some of the early signs of diabetic retinopathy include:

- floaters, these look like wispy clouds, floating in and out of your vision
- dimmer vision, like you're wearing sunglasses all the time
- struggling to see when it's dark.

**Diabetic Maculopathy** is a type of retinopathy that affects the small central part of the retina called the macula. You may notice changes to your central vision with this. Your vision to the side (peripheral vision) may still be normal.

### **Cataract.**

Diabetes can cause the lens in your eye to become cloudy. This condition is known as a cataract. If you have diabetes, you're more likely to develop a cataract, and at an earlier age than might be expected in someone without diabetes. Cataracts can be removed with surgery.

### **Glaucoma.**

Some people with diabetes may develop glaucoma, an eye condition where the pressure inside the eye damages the optic nerve at the back of the eye. Glaucoma can be treated with eye drops, laser treatment or surgery if necessary.



## **How can I reduce the risk of developing retinopathy?**

If your blood sugar levels are continually high, there's a greater chance the blood vessels in your eyes will become damaged and that more serious diabetic retinopathy will develop over time. There are things you can do to help control your risk of developing retinopathy, or stop it from getting worse. These include:

- Doing your best to keep your blood glucose level in your target range as consistently as you can.
- Controlling your blood pressure to keep it within your target range.
- Controlling your cholesterol levels.
- Keeping as fit as you can with regular exercise and a healthy diet to help maintain a healthy weight.
- Giving up smoking.
- Attending regular diabetic eye screening appointments as advised. Early detection and treatment will protect your sight.

## **How can diabetes related sight loss be treated?**

**Diabetic retinopathy** can be treated with a laser. Laser treatment does not make your sight better; its aim is to protect your vision from becoming a lot worse.

**Diabetic macular oedema (DMO)** can also be treated with laser to reduce the macular swelling and try to prevent any further blurring of your central vision.

**Anti-VEGF injections** can also be used to treat central DMO. Anti-VEGF stands for anti-vascular endothelial growth factor, and it is given as an injection into the eye. Anti-VEGF drugs work by reducing leakiness of blood vessels and stopping new leaky blood vessels from growing. They can also help the fluid to be reabsorbed, reducing your macular oedema, and this can improve vision for some people.

### **Steroid implants.**

Sometimes, you may be given a treatment which involves the injection of a steroid implant into your eye. The implant slowly releases small amounts of steroid into your eye to help control the swelling. You may be treated using an implant every 6 months or with one that can stay in your eye for up to three years.

For more information on diabetes related sight loss, please call **Retina UK** on: **0345 123 2399** or the **RNIB** on: **0303 123 9999**.

# Maria and Pascoe

**Written by Catherine Hodgson, Fundraising & Comms. Manager.**

Maria has been volunteering with us for the last 18 months at our Wednesday drop-in sessions. She is currently studying for a Counselling degree in London and was recently successful in being matched with a Guide Dog. We thought we would share her journey with you...

Maria first applied for a Guide Dog over 2 years ago, on the recommendation of the ECLO at Moorfields Hospital. Before she was even put on the waiting list, she was assessed for her eligibility and how her sight loss was affecting her independence. Maria is registered as severely sight impaired, with some usable central vision.

This April, she received a call that she had been matched with Pascoe, a 2 year old German Shepherd. This was not her first choice of breed, but she was persuaded to meet him and find out more.

The Guide Dog handler visited Maria at home with Pascoe and they practised a walk in harness together to ascertain if Pascoe would listen to commands from his potential new owner. On another occasion, Pascoe had a "sleepover" at Maria's home to check his reactions to his new environment.

By the end of April, Maria and Pascoe were embarking on a 5 week bonding session together. They stayed in a hotel in Brentwood for 2 weeks, training together all day and sleeping in the same room at night. 3 other dogs and their potential new owners were also taking part in the training at the same time.

During her stay, Maria learnt all the commands to handle Pascoe correctly, as well as treat based training. She was taught how to groom him and check his health. They also practised walking at night, something that Maria doesn't normally do, due to her lack of vision. Maria and Pascoe passed their training with flying colours!

The next step involved 3 weeks at Maria's home, learning the local routes with her Guide Dog Mobility Specialist, Georgia. Part of this training was learning the route from Maria's house to Southend in Sight, using the train.

At the end of the 5 weeks, Maria and Pascoe were assessed and their partnership was officially signed off by Guide Dogs.

Maria is very reflective on her journey, as we sit chatting, with Pascoe asleep at her feet. She says the 5 week training course is intensive and she felt that her life was on pause during that time, as she was not yet trained to go out on her own with Pascoe and could not leave him on his own. She likens it to bringing a newborn baby home from hospital, where you spend time getting to know each other.

Maria has found the journey emotional. She has had to reach a different level of acceptance with her sight loss. Whereas she would have only used her cane on occasion, happy to hide her sight loss, she now wears a hi-vis jacket and is the proud owner of a Guide Dog.



There is no doubt they make a great pairing and Maria is quick to praise the staff and trainers at Guide Dogs, who have made all this possible. The photo left shows Maria with Pascoe sitting dutifully, after a full day at our Centre. She says that she has learnt to relinquish full control and to trust Pascoe, as he has amazing natural instincts. Pascoe has off days (just as humans do!), but he has never missed a kerb or step and will be fully focussed when he is working

Despite his intelligence, Pascoe is quite happy to tear about at home like a 2 year old when he is out of his harness and off duty! With the hard work and dedication of all involved, a true partnership has formed between Maria and Pascoe, changing

Maria's life in such a positive way.

If you would like to find out more about owning a Guide Dog or supporting Guide Dogs, please call: **0800 781 1444**.

# Out and About

**Written by Catherine Hodgson, Fundraising & Comms. Manager.**

It has been a busy Spring and Summer with people getting active both locally and further afield.



teams in the country, but also came away from Sheffield with some well-deserved silverware.

Russell, Clare and Gary were delighted to achieve the highest pinfall on the day of the Finals, and also the highest pinfall across the entire season. Congratulations Southend Vipers! The photo above shows Gary, Clare and Russell at the bowling alley holding a blue Southend Vipers t shirt, standing next to their trophies.



During the summer holidays, we organised a cycling session with “Just Ride” at Garon Park, for our local visually impaired children and working age adults. Just Ride Southend runs inclusive cycling sessions for people of all ages and abilities in a safe, traffic-free environment. Almost 30 people whizzed around the track, with family, friends and volunteers supporting them. It was great to have all ages together, joining in and most importantly having fun. The photo above shows Jake and his mum Danielle on a side by side tandem.



# Meta Ray-Ban Smart Glasses

**Written by Catherine Hodgson, Fundraising & Comms. Manager.**

We have met a few people over the last few months that have purchased and used these new glasses, enjoying a positive experience. One lady we spoke to said they had changed her life.

Meta Ray-Bans are smart glasses outfitted with a camera, microphones and stereo speakers built into the frames of the glasses. Using the Meta View app, you can pair your glasses with your phone allowing you to take photos, record video, listen to music, ask questions courtesy of Meta AI, make and receive calls, and basically have a voice assistant at your disposal like Siri, Alexa or Google.

Battery life lasts around four hours, but largely depends on what the glasses are being used for (the camera is a large power drain). The case comes with a USB C and pairing button, so you can pop the specs in their case and charge them several times over.

The biggest selling point for Meta Ray-Bans for blind and partially sighted people is its 'Look and Tell' feature. This gives you the ability to ask Meta questions such as: 'summarise this menu' or 'What do you see in front of you?' Be My Eyes is also available via the Meta Ray-Ban Smart Glasses, enabling a volunteer to see the view from the attached camera.

Meta Ray-Ban Smart Glasses can be bought from Vision Express, Argos, Currys, John Lewis and other retailers. They start from £299.99 and go up to around £400, depending on the style of frames and lenses you opt for. You can also request your local Optician to insert prescription lenses for you. We do not make recommendations for particular products and have yet to try these glasses out for ourselves – we will keep you updated on our findings!

You can apply for RNIB's Technology Grant for up to £200 towards purchasing Meta Ray-Bans if you meet their eligibility criteria and can prove you can pay the rest of the cost. For more information on this, please call the RNIB on: **0303 123 9999**.

# Celebrating Volunteers

**Written by Catherine Hodgson, Fundraising & Comms. Manager.**

We celebrated Volunteers' Week at the start of June with 35 of our volunteers at a lunch held at SAVS.

We took the opportunity to thank one of our volunteers, Lin Butler, who has decided to stand down after 20 years of service. Lin has supported us in our shop and with fundraising since 2005, and we will miss her. We are sure she will still pop in for a chat and she will always be part of the Southend in Sight family.

Chair of Trustees, Russell Cable, who was unable to attend due to work commitments, sent this heartfelt message: "This past year the charity has seen some significant changes, but as ever, the dedication, passion, and unwavering commitment of our volunteers has been nothing short of extraordinary. Whether you've been working in the shop, offering practical support, sharing your skills, lending a listening ear, or advocating for our cause, your efforts have directly impacted the lives of blind and partially sighted people in the community. You are the backbone of our organisation, bringing our mission to life every single day".



Thank you to each and every one of our volunteers for everything they do for us. The photo left shows Lin Butler (centre) being presented with flowers from Assistant Shop Manager Debbie (left) and Shop Manager Sarah (right).

If you are interested in volunteering, please call us on **01702 34 21 31** to find out more.

# Exhibition Time

**Written by Catherine Hodgson, Fundraising & Comms. Manager.**

Our annual exhibition will take place on **Wednesday 29 October 2024 at The Ekco Club, Thornford Gardens, Southend, SS2 6PU**. This popular event gives local visually impaired people the chance to try out equipment before making a purchase and meet with suppliers face to face. This venue has worked well over the last few years as it is familiar to many of those who attend our social activities, has ample free parking, is close to a bus stop and we are able to provide some refreshments for those attending.

As with previous years, to minimise numbers at any given time, we are asking anyone that is thinking of attending to book an hour time slot between **10am and 2pm**. Please call our office on **01702 34 21 31** to register your booking. We found this system has allowed our suppliers, staff and volunteers to spend more time demonstrating equipment to attendees.

As we go to print, we have the following suppliers confirmed to attend:

**Associated Optical.**

**Humanware.**

**Optelec/Enhanced Vision.**

**Professional Vision.**

**Vision Aid.**

We also welcome representatives from the local **Talking Newspapers, The Macular Society, The Essex Wellbeing Service**, along with the **Sensory Team from Southend City Council** and **Essex Cares Ltd (ECL)**. Our exhibition is a popular event, so please do remember to call and book your place.

**AGM.**

We will also be holding the Annual General Meeting (AGM) for Southend in Sight after the exhibition from 2.45pm onwards. Anyone is welcome to attend, but only official members have voting rights. Our AGM will be opened by the Mayor of Southend, Councillor Nigel Folkard, this year.

## **Southend in Sight – your local sight loss charity.**

Registered Charity Number: 1069765

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### **Our Contact Details:**

**Telephone:** 01702 342131

**Email:** [info@southendinsight.org.uk](mailto:info@southendinsight.org.uk)

**Website:** [www.southendinsight.org.uk](http://www.southendinsight.org.uk)

### **Our Charity values:**

- Excellence
- Community
- Empowerment
- Support
- Integrity

**Your vision is our vision**

