

Vehicles

When approaching transport ensure that the VIP knows which way the vehicle is facing and whether they have to step up or bend down to get in. When the VIP is getting into a car it can help if their hand is on the top of the open door and or on the roof. Point out handles, handrails, etc. Ensure that they do not bang their head as they get in. Help them locate the safety belt. When using public transport always lead the VIP, so that you can guide more effectively.

When you gotta go

Most VIPs can find their way around public toilets, asking for help when in difficulty. However many public conveniences are not maintained on a regular basis and sometimes lack “renewable items” eg. Loo-paper, soap, towels, etc. With this in mind, it can be helpful to have a RADAR key, this will get you and the VIP into “disabled” toilets, which most towns and amenities now have. These are usually well maintained, clean, and easily navigable for VIPs. For information on RADAR keys call 0207 2503222.

You only have to ask

All you need to remember is, that if in any doubt as to whether a VIP needs help, you only need to ask. Don't be offended if your offer is refused often for a good reason which may not be obvious. The knowledge that help is available if required is invaluable, giving VIPs confidence to maintain their independence.



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Useful tips for volunteers

So, you're going to help "The Blind"

We often cut corners with language without anticipating the impact. We put people into niches and categories such as “The Blind” and “The Visually Impaired”. Convenient shorthand, but phrases like these leave out the important bit - people!

People come in all sorts, shapes and sizes. We come from lots of different backgrounds, equipped in different ways, with different aptitudes and abilities. We have unique life experiences, skills and careers, whether as road sweepers, barristers, housewives or hoteliers. So it is a fair assumption that no two people are exactly the same. We have good days and bad days and this can reflect how we respond to others and how they react to us. It just happens that, for whatever reason some people are blind or visually impaired.

As we are “The Oxfordshire Association for the Blind”, these people are very important to us and so in recognition of this and for space-saving in this booklet we use the term VIP for visually impaired people!

Meeting and greeting VIPs

VIPs are denied the visual cues which sighted people take for granted, so give as much verbal information as possible. On meeting a VIP, if you know his or her name use it (especially if there are others present, so that the VIP knows you are talking to them). Sometimes a gentle touch on the arm can confirm that you are addressing them. Don't forget to identify yourself. It is perfectly OK to say things like “It's nice to see you” or “See you again soon”, VIPs say it too! (If there is a third party in the room, a carer or partner, make sure you don't get sidetracked into talking exclusively to them or through them.) As you leave do remember to tell the VIP that you are going.

In the home

Only visual impairment brings realisation of how big a part familiarity plays in our ability to get about. Don't be fooled by how easily VIPs get around at home, in their own space. Some VIPs will whizz around the house, dodging furniture and make cups of tea with ease. Just remember that this ease is borne of familiarity, routine and control, things which rapidly recede with every step away from home. In our own homes we can control what goes and where where. Thus we know where we leave tools, cutlery and personal effects. If you do use anything in a VIP's home, always put it back in the same place or at very least tell the VIP where you have left it.

Out and about

Whilst many VIPs get around without any mobility aids, some may wear a little VIP badge or use a short "symbol cane" to let other people know that they cannot see well. Others may use a long cane or a guide dog to help them avoid obstacles and to find their way.

Guiding

Sometimes a VIP may need your help as a guide. Ask if they would like help and offer an arm - *never, ever grab*. Commonly VIPs lightly take the elbow of the person guiding them. When guiding, *never push!* Occasionally, a VIP will feel more secure if the guide takes their arm. To assume is to presume - always ask.

Steps and kerbs

Tell the VIP about steps, kerbs and steep slopes (up or down, how steep and how many there are), as you come to them. It can be helpful to halt briefly before stepping up or down. Remember to point out any bannisters or handrails

Doors

When you come to doors, lead the VIP, walk slightly in front of them and ensure that the door does not swing back on to them, especially if it has a spring closing mechanism. It can help to ensure that the VIP gets a hand on the door.

Waiting

If you leave them for any length of time whilst out and about, the VIP may want to sit down. If no seating is available it can be helpful if they stand near something solid such as a wall or lamppost just as a point of reference.

Chairs and seating

When approaching a seat, guide the person's hand onto the back of the chair and tell them which way it is facing and whether it has arms which are likely to get in the way.

Food and drink

Make sure the person you are with knows when food and drink arrives and when it is taken away.

Don't over fill drinks: tell the VIP where the drink is, sometimes it can be helpful to place their hand on the cup or glass.

Some foods are more fiddly than others - it can be a pain chasing peas and French fries around a plate, whilst a sandwich is easier to handle. However, people can make a choice once they know what the options are. If the menu is not in an accessible format ask the VIP if they would like you to read it to them.

Some VIPs may prefer a description of food position on the plate, e.g. chips on the left, fish on the right and beans in front. Some people use the clock-face description, e.g. Chips at nine o'clock, fish at three o'clock and beans at six o'clock. Others may need help with cutting up food and/or removing bones, if you think there may be a problem just ask. The best kind of help with food in public places is always quiet and unfussy.