Good practice guide for restaurants when supporting blind and partially sighted customers

This guide has been written by blind and partially sighted (BPS) people working with Sight Loss Councils.

Visual impairment and access

Visual impairment can sometimes be hidden, not everyone has a cane or a guide dog.

Some people may have some useful vision, but may still need help with certain tasks, like finding tables or reading menus with small print.

Under the 2010 equality act it is illegal to refuse guide dogs entry to a restaurant on the grounds of hygiene, a no dogs policy, religion or because food is being served and eaten. Doing this could result in prosecution.

Helping your customer

Introduce yourself as soon as possible after they arrive. They may not know where to sit or order food in your restaurant – and they will be unable to see you to ask.

Identify yourself as a staff member and ask if they need assistance and, if so, what assistance they require.

When offering sighted guiding, you may also need to ask how they would like to be guided: hand on shoulder, hand on elbow, or simply to follow.

It is important you ask if they want guiding, and how, before touching them.

Helping with the menu

Once people are settled in their seats, you can offer assistance with reading the menu. Bear in mind, one or more of the group may be able to manage by themselves.

If you have large print or braille menus, please offer them as an option. Ensure that the braille or large print menus are updated in line with your standard print versions.

When offering to read the menu, ask the customer if they have a dish or drink in mind. If not, ask how they would like the menu read to them, i.e., menu headings, or each item on the menu.

During the meal

Check on BPS diners a little more than with other customers. They can't catch your eye and might find it harder than the average person to attract your attention.

When bringing food and drinks to the table, say what you are putting down and where it is – including condiments and sauces.

Paying for the meal

Offer to read the bill, so BPS customers can figure out any split payments and offer to help customers insert cards into the machine.

To help customers enter a pin, show them where the number 5 is. It's usually indicated by a tactile dot.

Consider looking into the access features of your chip and pin machine. Some touchscreen models have access modes to help customers with low or no vision. Some touchscreen models have keypad overlays. These cover the touchscreen and allow the user to input their pin as if using a physical keypad.

It is your responsibility to ensure customers can pay for your services. You should therefore ensure you know how to make the process as accessible as possible.

Leaving the premises

You may need to guide your customer off the premises. Offer whatever assistance is reasonable and permitted by your manager, such as assisting them to a nearby bus stop, taxi or station.

Helping with the menu

Ensure signage is clear, displayed at eye level and is written in 48-point font minimum. It is important that there is appropriate lighting in all areas. Both glare and darkness can make reading and navigation very difficult.

Ensure walkways are always kept clear. Even if a person has some usable central vision, impairments to peripheral vision may mean that they would not see a chair or box in the walkway which may cause them to trip and fall.

Using conveniences

You may guide a customer to a toilet door if they ask. You could wait near an open door, before the person enters, so that you can describe the layout inside, but only if they ask you to do so.

Sitting BPS customers near facilities can be helpful, but always ask where the customer would like to sit first.

Guide dogs

If you see a dog guide wearing a harness, that means it is working and should not be pet, fed or distracted. Doing so can put its owner in danger because it is not focusing on guiding.

Guide dogs are specifically trained to lie down quietly beneath the table while their owner is dining.