



# A guide for BABS choruses on the inclusion of singers with a visual impairment

*Published: July 2024*

*Review Date: July 2025*

The following has been prepared for choruses approached by people who are blind or partially sighted. It contains basic details of our obligations under equality law and some tips on ways your club may be able to accommodate, accept and include the new singer. However, it's important to remember there are no hard and fast rules. People who are registered blind have a number of differing conditions. Many still have some useful vision and most will have developed their own strategies to cope with their own situation. It's important never to assume you know someone's limitations. Much better to ask how well they can see what's going on and how you could help.

## What the law says

Our clubs are covered by the Equalities legislation if:

- They have more than 25 members.
- They're governed by a set of written rules.
- They have an audition or other selection process.

The clauses which relate specifically to disability are mostly about providing "reasonable adjustments". We'll discuss these in a moment. Even clubs with fewer than 25 members may be covered by the legislation through their membership of BABS. Where BABS -related activities are concerned smaller clubs are likely to need to make reasonable adjustments, especially in activities related to contest and convention.

Not all adjustments are seen by the law as 'reasonable'. It describes unreasonable adjustments as ones which either require resources the club hasn't got or which would change the nature of what the club provides for its members.

An example of the first might be someone who says they can't learn on the risers and asks for regular 1:1 tuition at home. If the club has not the resources this could be considered unreasonable (not to mention the possible safeguarding implications). And if someone approaches you who can sing well individually but finds it impossible to sing in harmony then accommodating them could be seen as unreasonable because it would change the nature of the club.

Although there are no hard and fast rules the law asks us, as clubs, to try and anticipate the kind of help and adjustments we might be able to offer. Below are some suggestions.

## Initial conversation

As with any potential new member it's useful to understand the past singing experience of someone with low vision. Have they ever sung with a choir before? How did they get on. Were there difficulties and how and to what degree were these overcome?

At the same time it's important to be clear about your chorus's expectations of its singers; the standards you hope to achieve and the amount and type of work you need to do.

Is your prospective disabled member up for the commitment required and what help do they anticipate they might need?

## Things to think about

**Getting there:** Many disabled people have strategies for independent living and many people with visual impairments are adept users of public transport. But where the journey is long or the buses and trains sparse would it help to arrange a regular lift to and from rehearsal?

**Access and navigation:** If your prospective new singer has little or no vision would they like to be guided through your rehearsal building – at least until they get used to the lie of the land? If the answer is yes then the RNIB has some useful tips here:

<https://www.rnib.org.uk/your-eyes/navigating-sight-loss/guiding-a-blind-or-partially-sighted-person/>

**Avoid clutter:** If you have people with sight loss in the chorus it's important to keep floors and gangways in your rehearsal space clear.

Unexpected bags, music-stands or video equipment left lying around can be a trip hazard. Where music-stands or tripods are set up make sure that those who might not be able to see them are warned.

**Accessing the repertoire:** Thankfully Barbershop choruses are blessed with ample supplies of audio teach tracks. Their use can be a boon to people whose visual impairments prevent them from reading sheet music. For those who still like to check the dots is it possible to provide large-print copies of the score?

As with many singers your new recruit may wish to stand and sing with their section until they feel secure.

**Interpreting the rep:** Ask how well your new recruit can see the chorus director.

Would they like to stand closer. Would more light or less light help.

For those unable to see the MD's hand gestures perhaps ask whether a buddy next to them on the risers would be helpful, explaining what's going on – "the MD is asking us to get quieter on this phrase or basses come off at this point etc."

**Uniform and changing:** Dressing is rarely a problem for people with sight loss – though the mechanics of small clips on accessories like cufflinks and bow-ties can sometimes pose a challenge.

Let your new singer know you're happy to help if required.

**General etiquette:** One of the biggest barriers to inclusion faced by many of us with low vision is being in the midst of a group of people but not being able to identify who they are.

Don't be afraid to identify yourself when starting a conversation. If it's not needed you'll soon know. If you're moving for choreo on the risers and your VI singer seems unsure of the movement or steps required arrange to talk them through it. Some of us know from experience that some chorus members, carried away by their enthusiasm, can be tempted to yank you by the collar to where they think you ought to be. Please avoid at all costs.

**And keep thinking ahead:** Sing-outs, socials, new rehearsal venues. What does getting there mean for singers who are visually impaired? Are the buildings easily accessible and clearly signposted. Can they find their own way or will they need help from a sighted colleague.

In time asking these questions in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way should become second nature.

## A final point

The above is not intended to be a comprehensive list of suggestions. You and your singer with sight loss could well come up with other ways to make the chorus more inclusive. It's worth keeping a brief note of your discussions with disabled singers; of what people have asked for, what you've offered and what worked. This will provide a useful fund of knowledge and experience for those who come after you.

Given that we're dealing with the law it could also be useful in the very unlikely event that somebody becomes litigious. With friendship, good will and mutual respect we're sure this is something we can avoid.

Further reading on the Equalities Act and voluntary clubs and associations.

<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/what-equality-law-means-for-your-association-club-or-society.docx>

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