

Royal National Institute of Blind People Tactile Maps

Sue King - RNIB

Sue King is the tactile images and map consultant for the UK's leading sight loss charity, the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB). She is one of the UK's leading experts in the field of tactile images and tactile maps, particularly in their design and usage. She gave an interesting and informative presentation of tactile maps.

Sue stated that there are almost 2 million people in the UK today living with sight loss that has a serious impact on their daily lives and that this number is increasing, mainly because we are living longer.

She continued by explaining the fundamental difference between accessing information by sight and touch. Tactile recognition is very different from visual recognition and involves the brain in a far more complex process to translate information picked up by finger tip exploration into something meaningful. She demonstrated this by getting the audience to sample a tactile image with their eyes closed. No one was able to recognise what the tactile image was representing but all immediately recognised it when they looked at it.

A tactile map, put simply, is a map containing information that is accessed by touch. The visual symbolism and language of a normal map has to be simplified and changed so that it can be understood by touch. This is achieved by creating a map with its own tactile symbolism and tactile language that include braille, raised print, raised lines, shapes and textures.

Although there are some limitations, Sue stressed the importance of tactile maps for blind and partially sighted people in giving them the additional information they need to allow them to make their own choices about where to go and what to do. The maps help create social inclusion and independence.

Sue outlined the different types of tactile map available and gave insight into how the maps were designed. She finished by showing some examples of tactile maps which we were able to see and feel, giving everyone an opportunity to ask questions.

