CONSUMER PROTECTION | BHUTAN

Accessibility and Consumer Shopping Experiences of Persons with Visual Impairments: A Consumer-Side and Retailer-Side Assessment

By Karma Wangchuk

Assistant Program Officer, Consumer Empowerment & Economics Division, Competition and Consumer Affairs Authority (CCAA)

1. Background

For visually impaired consumers, shopping is a game of guesswork. Labels, prices, expiry dates, ingredients, instructions and payment screens are made to be seen. Without access to them, shoppers struggle to identify and compare products, check dates and pay without help, and so cannot exercise consumer rights on equal terms. Relying on family, friends or staff helps, but it can cost privacy, dignity and independence. Retailers, for their part, may not know what help is wanted or how to give it.

In this study, visually impaired consumers are people with significant difficulty seeing or accessing visual information, from partial vision loss to blindness. Bhutan's Constitution guarantees equality and non-discrimination, and the Consumer Protection Act of 2012 provides for fair and non-discriminatory treatment of consumers. The 2017 census recorded nearly 24,000 people with some difficulty seeing, including 464 who could not see at all (NSB, 2018). Yet there is little research in Bhutan on how these consumers shop or how retailers serve them.

This study looks at both sides of the counter in Thimphu. It aims (1) to understand the shopping experiences and barriers of visually impaired consumers, from finding and reading product information to dealing with sellers and paying; (2) to examine how retailers serve them, including staff attitudes, assistance and the accessibility of premises and information; and (3) to identify practical steps that the government (including CCAA), retailers, banks and payment providers, and civil society organisations can take to make shopping easier and fairer for visually impaired consumers.

2. Methods and materials

Data were collected through two questionnaires: one for visually impaired consumers and one for retail businesses. Thirty visually impaired consumers were surveyed between 18 and 30 October 2026, and 15 retailers between 27 October and 5 November 2026. Informed consent was obtained from every respondent before the questionnaire was administered.

Not everyone answered every question. Some questions did not apply to every respondent and some were left blank. All percentages in this report are therefore calculated on the number of people who answered that particular question, not on the full sample of 30 consumers or 15 retailers. For consumers the number answering is mostly between 25 and 30; where the group is much smaller, such as the nine card users, the text says so.

The samples are small and were not designed to represent all shoppers or shops, so the results are indicative rather than representative and may differ outside Thimphu or in larger shops. With only 15 retailers, each shop accounts for about 7 percentage points, so retailer figures should be read as broad pointers. The consumers and retailers surveyed are different people, not customers and their own shops, so comparisons between the two groups are descriptive.

3. Results and discussion

The results follow a shopper's journey: getting around the shop, reading the product, dealing with staff, paying and, when things go wrong, seeking redress. They then turn to what retailers say and how the two views compare.

3.1 Respondent details

The consumers surveyed were experienced, frequent shoppers: most were aged 25 to 44 and shopped at least weekly (Table 1). Even so, only 23% shopped fully independently. Most (57%) usually went alone but sometimes asked staff for help, and 47% usually went with family or friends (respondents could give more than one answer, so these shares add to more than 100%). The main reasons for not shopping independently were reading labels, prices or dates (86%), finding products (72%) and moving safely (66%), while only 10% said they preferred company.

Dependence on others is a constraint, not a choice. It is also much heavier for completely blind shoppers: more than half of them (53%) rarely or never shopped without a companion, compared with 8% of those with low vision.

Table 1: Respondent details

Percentages are of those who answered each question

Characteristic	Share	In plain words
Consumers surveyed (30)		
Aged 25 to 44	**86%**	More than 8 in 10
Completely blind	**59%**	About 6 in 10
Low vision	**41%**	About 4 in 10
Has had difficulty seeing since birth or early childhood	**47%**	Nearly half
Shops at least once a week	**83%**	More than 8 in 10
Shops without a companion often or always	**43%**	About 4 in 10
Rarely or never shops without a companion	**33%**	1 in 3
Uses a screen reader (software that reads the phone screen aloud)	**70%**	7 in 10
Gets help from another person	**67%**	2 in 3
Uses a white cane	**60%**	6 in 10
Uses Braille	**50%**	Half
Retailers surveyed (15)		
Grocery or general store	**33%**	1 in 3
Person answering is the owner	**47%**	Nearly half
Has been operating for less than a year	**33%**	1 in 3
Has five or fewer employees	**67%**	2 in 3
Customer area described as small	**40%**	4 in 10
Visually impaired customers visit rarely	**53%**	About half

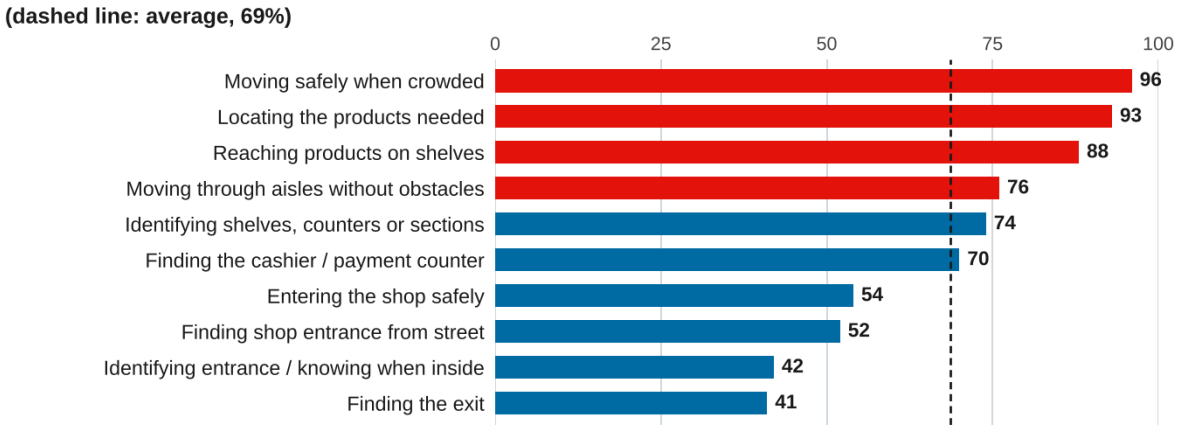
Source: CCAA survey, Thimphu, 2026

3.2 Finding the way round the shop

Moving around inside the shop is the hardest part. Nearly all respondents found it difficult to move safely when the shop is crowded (96%), to locate the products they need (93%) and to reach items on shelves (88%) (Chart 1). Getting in and out was easier, although about four in ten still found it hard to identify the entrance or find the exit. On average, 69% of respondents found the ten tasks difficult and only 6% found them easy.

Chart 1: Getting round the shop is hard; getting in is easier

Consumers finding each task difficult or very difficult, % of valid responses (n = 25-28 per task)



Source: CCAA survey, Thimphu, October-November 2026

The main barriers over the past three months were missing information and unpredictable layouts rather than the building itself: no tactile or audio guidance (67%), shop arrangements that kept changing (63%) and crowded or noisy shops (30%). Steps (13%) and poor lighting (7%) were rarely mentioned. Respondents rated staff availability (96%), information about the shop layout (96%) and clear pathways (93%) as very or extremely important, ahead of safer entrances (66%) and lighting (59%).

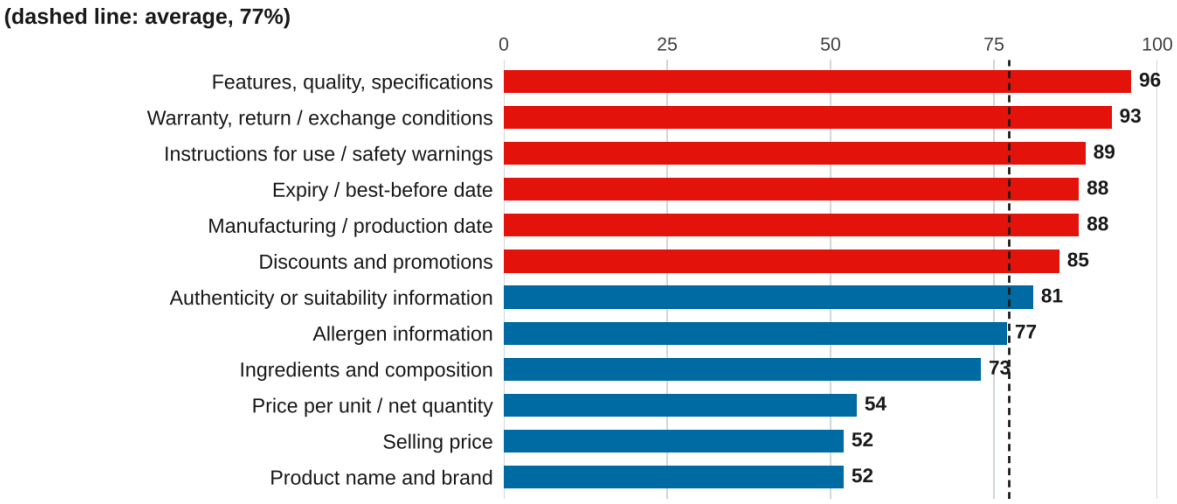
Shoppers are held back mainly by not knowing where things are, not by obstacles at the door. This probably reflects the kind of shops in the sample, which are mostly small (two-thirds of the retailers surveyed have five or fewer employees), where help from staff and a predictable layout can make most of the difference.

3.3 Reading the product information

Shoppers mostly get product information by asking staff (77%) or companions and other customers (77%), and rely on brand familiarity (63%), touch (50%) or camera and text-recognition apps (40%). Independent access was difficult for almost every type of information (Chart 2), including product features and specifications (96%), warranty terms (93%), instructions and safety warnings (89%) and expiry dates (88%). Even the product name and selling price were difficult for about half (52%). On average, 77% found the twelve types of information difficult and 5% found them easy.

Chart 2: The details that protect shoppers are the hardest to read

Consumers finding each item difficult or very difficult to access without help, % of valid responses (n = 26-28 per item)



Source: CCAA survey, Thimphu, October-November 2026

Staff are an imperfect substitute: fewer than half of respondents (48%) said staff often or always gave accurate and complete information (a separate question from the staff-behaviour list in section 3.4, where accurate product and price information scored 44%), and 82% found it hard to compare products. Many therefore bought without being able to check. In the past 12 months, 76% bought something without checking the expiry date and 52% without checking ingredients or warnings; 38% paid more than they intended and 24% bought an unsuitable product. Only two respondents decided not to buy. The most common suggestions for improvement were trained staff (72%) and Braille or tactile information (55%), followed by scannable codes (38%) and clear spoken information, larger print or better contrast (34% each).

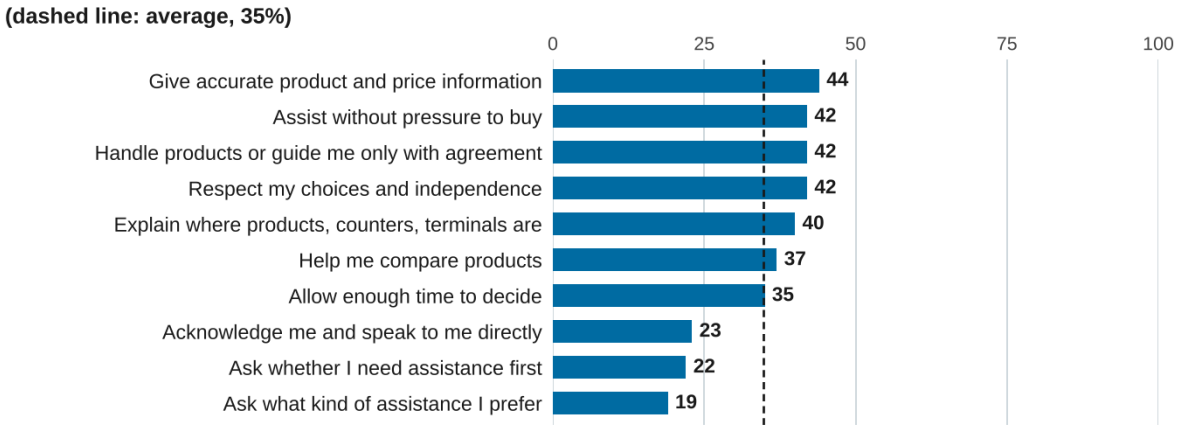
When information cannot be read, shoppers tend to buy anyway rather than walk away, which shifts the safety and financial risk onto them. Although most respondents use a screen reader (70%), only one used accessible digital product information when shopping, which suggests that technology has not yet reached everyday shopping.

3.4 Staff help and treatment

Staff help was inconsistent. For none of the ten helpful behaviours listed did a majority of respondents say staff did it often or always (Chart 3). The least common were basic courtesies: asking what kind of help is preferred (19%), asking whether help is needed (22%) and speaking to the customer directly (23%). On average, only 35% of respondents saw these behaviours often or always.

Chart 3: Good service is the exception

Consumers saying staff 'often' or 'always' behave in each way, % of valid responses (n = 25-27 per item)



Source: CCAA survey, Thimphu, October-November 2026

Experiences were mixed rather than uniformly bad. More than half (55%) had met impatient or dismissive staff, and a similar share (52%) had met helpful, patient staff; seven had met both. Nearly half (48%) said staff spoke only to their companion, 41% were given incorrect or incomplete information and 24% met staff who assumed they could not decide for themselves. Overall, 34% rated the help they received as poor or very poor, 55% as neither good nor poor and only 10% as good. About one in ten (10%) had avoided a shop because of how they were treated, and a further 38% were unsure. As one respondent put it, “Some were very rude.”

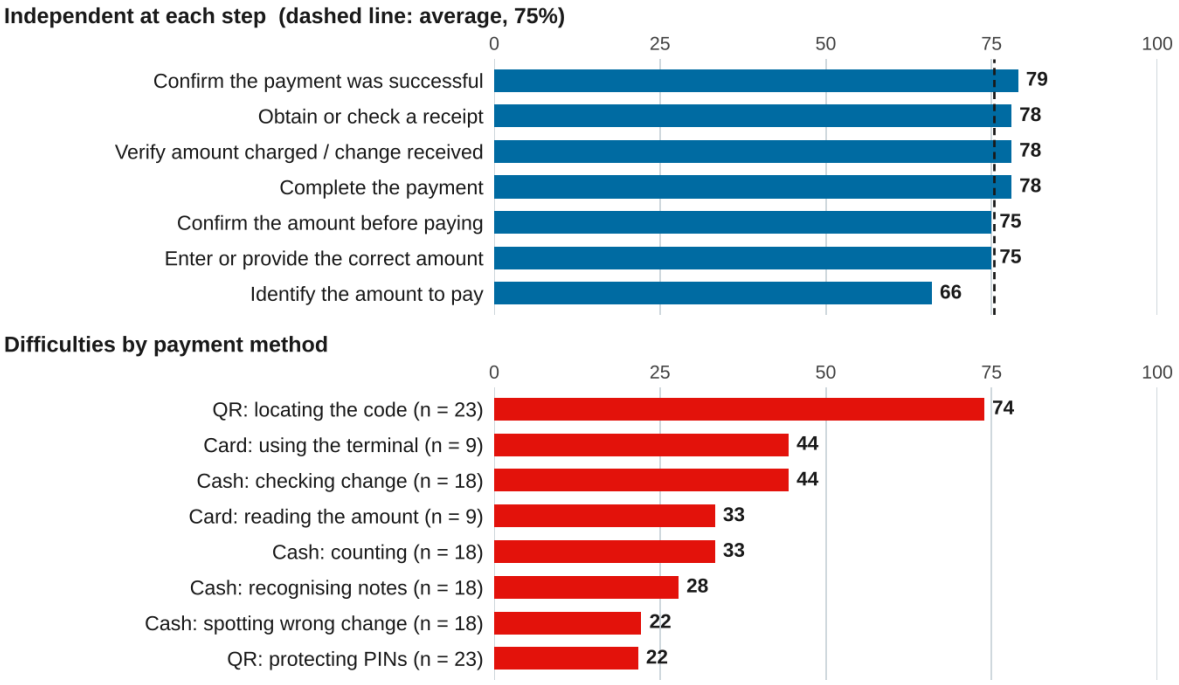
Staff are not hostile by default, but few follow a routine of asking first and helping only with consent, and poor service risks losing customers. Unless staff are trained to offer specialised services, the help offered varies from one person to another.

3.5 Paying for goods

Most respondents usually paid by mobile banking or QR code (69%), followed by cash (31%); none named cards as their main method. Most managed the individual payment steps on their own: about eight in ten usually or always completed the payment, confirmed it had gone through, checked the amount charged or change received, and checked a receipt, and three-quarters confirmed and entered the correct amount (average 75%). The weakest step was identifying the amount to pay (66%; Chart 4).

Chart 4: Paying works for most; QR codes and change are the snags

Consumers completing each payment step independently, 'usually' or 'always' (n = 27-29); difficulty by payment method, % of users of each method



Source: CCAA survey, Thimphu, October-November 2026

Difficulties depend on the method. Among QR users, finding the QR code was the main problem (74%). Among cash users, checking change was hardest (44%), followed by counting money (33%) and recognising notes (28%). Of the nine card users, 44% had trouble locating or using the terminal. Privacy was also a concern: 52% said their privacy or control over their money had been compromised at least occasionally. Respondents wanted accessible banking and payment apps (70%), accessible or standardised payment terminals (60%), spoken confirmation of payments (47%) and payment training for staff (37%). Eight respondents asked for tactile or Braille features on Nu 5, 10, 20 and 50 notes, two asked for a review of the daily payment limit and one for fingerprint authentication in a mobile banking app.

For digital payments the barriers lie in how QR codes, terminals and apps are designed; for cash, in the lack of tactile marks on lower-value notes. The Royal Monetary Authority (RMA) has said that tactile features are currently limited to the Nu 100, 500 and 1,000 notes and that lower denominations may be considered in future designs (BBS, 2026). Respondents' requests are therefore consistent with changes the RMA has already said it may consider.

3.6 Rights, complaints and redress

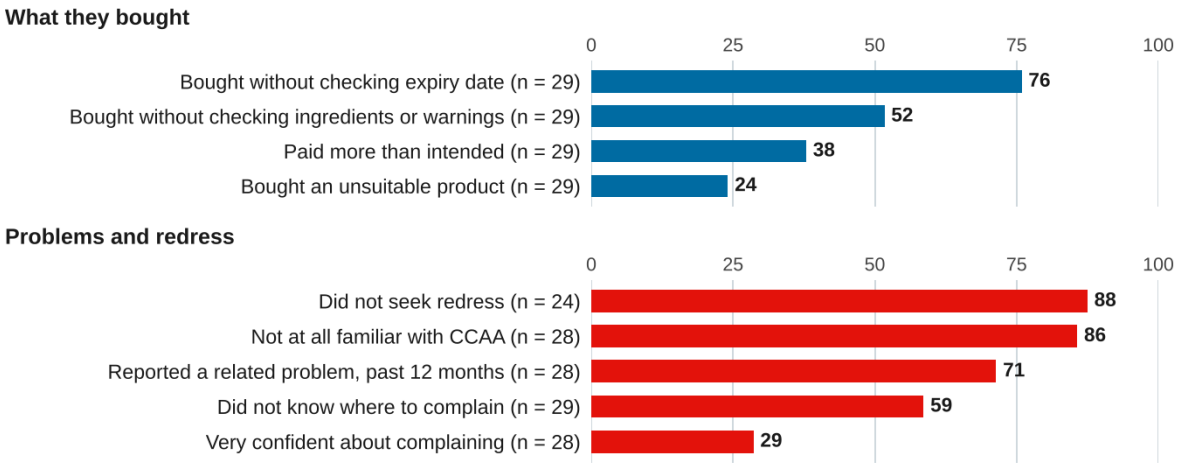
Confidence in complaining was low: only 29% were very confident, while 46% were only slightly confident or not confident at all. Seven in ten (71%) had experienced a consumer problem in the past 12 months linked to inaccessible information or inadequate help. Among those who answered, the most common problems were unsuitable or expired products (64%), being unable to verify information (45%), and incorrect change or incorrect prices (41% each).

Few took the matter further. Most respondents (59%) did not complain because they did not know where to, and 14% felt it was not worth the effort. Of the 24 respondents to whom the question applied, 88% never sought redress, and none of the three who did obtained full resolution. Most respondents (86%)

were not at all familiar with CCAA (Chart 5). Overall, 79% found independent shopping in Thimphu difficult or very difficult (21% very difficult), 17% were neutral and only 3% found it easy.

Chart 5: Unchecked purchases, unreported problems

Consumers' experiences over the past 12 months, % of valid responses



Source: CCAA survey, Thimphu, October-November 2026

Respondents said they most needed training in identifying and comparing product information (83%), financial literacy and safe payments (72%), using scanning and text-recognition apps (52%), recognising fraud (48%) and knowing their consumer rights and where to complain (38%). They saw responsibility as shared across the supply chain: 59% named disability organisations, 52% retail owners, 41% manufacturers, importers and distributors, 41% financial service providers, and 38% each CCAA and other government agencies; only 7% named retail staff.

Open-ended suggestions from 25 respondents fell into six themes: accessible product information in Braille, audio or large high-contrast formats; tactile low-denomination banknotes; accessible digital banking and payment; staff training and respectful, honest assistance; consistent layout and safe pathways; and clearer policy, rights and incentives. Individual respondents also proposed affordable assistive devices such as smart glasses, a dedicated accessible shop and information in Dzongkha. One described good practice: shopkeepers stepping away so that PINs can be entered privately, and allowing customers to touch products.

The route to redress is effectively invisible. Consumers do not know where to complain, so problems go unreported and neither regulators nor retailers see the scale of the harm. This is a gap the government, including CCAA, can close directly.

3.7 What retailers say

The 15 retailers included grocery and general stores, pharmacies, clothing shops, electronics and mobile shops, cosmetics shops and one market stall. Contact with visually impaired customers was limited: 53% said such customers visit rarely and only one retailer reported daily visits.

Retailers described help as willing and frequent: between 64% and 71% said they always help with communicating prices, comparing products, locating products and payment counters, and checking expiry dates. More than half (53%) were very confident that their staff can assist appropriately and 40% moderately confident, and none had received feedback or a complaint from a visually impaired customer. Yet the practices consumers value most were the least common (Table 2): only 33% said they get consent before physically guiding a customer and 27% that they speak to the customer directly.

Table 2: What retailers say they do

Share of the 15 retailers (the five “Handling payments” rows are shares of the 14 who answered)

Practice or arrangement	Share	In plain words
Practices when serving visually impaired customers		
Giving verbal product and price information	**73%**	Nearly 3 in 4
Helping compare products without pressure	**67%**	2 in 3
Asking whether help is needed	**53%**	About half
Respecting the customer’s decisions	**53%**	About half
Asking what kind of help is preferred	**53%**	About half
Getting consent before physically guiding a customer	**33%**	1 in 3
Speaking to the customer directly	**27%**	About 1 in 4
Facilities and arrangements in place		
Staff to help locate products	**87%**	Almost 9 in 10
Clearly identified cashier	**87%**	Almost 9 in 10
Good lighting, stable shelves, organised sections and staff who can explain the layout (each)	**73%**	Nearly 3 in 4
Easy entrances and exits	**67%**	2 in 3
Displays that minimise hazards	**47%**	Nearly half
Clear, unobstructed pathways	**33%**	1 in 3
Handling payments		
Confirming amounts without taking control of the device or money	**79%**	Nearly 8 in 10
Saying the amount clearly	**71%**	Over 7 in 10
Private PIN entry	**64%**	Nearly 2 in 3
Providing receipts	**64%**	Nearly 2 in 3
Not asking customers for their PINs	**43%**	About 4 in 10

Source: CCAA survey, Thimphu, 2026

Retailers rated their shops good (53%), very good (27%) or fair (20%); none rated them poor. Just over half (53%) had made no changes to their shop in the past three years, although some described concrete plans for the next 12 months, such as clearer price tags, price barcodes and easier arrangement of goods. The information retailers found hardest to communicate accurately was product specifications (40%), followed by instructions or warnings, ingredients or allergens, and warranty terms (33% each): much the same information that consumers cannot check for themselves. Only 33% had formal procedures to keep verbal information accurate, 27% had informal ones and 33% had none.

None of the 15 retailers or their staff had received any disability training. Retailers named limited staff knowledge (43%) and limited awareness (36%) as the main challenges; legal uncertainty (14%) and cost (7%) were rarely mentioned. Half were very or extremely willing to improve if given guidance, the rest moderately or slightly so, and none was unwilling. They asked for training materials and workshops (64%), practical guidelines (43%) and layout advice (36%), and wanted training to cover respectful communication (64%), understanding impairments (50%) and consumer rights and complaints (29%). Asked to set priorities, 77% chose training and capacity building, 46% each collaboration with disability organisations and voluntary guidelines, and 31% incentives; only one retailer chose mandatory minimum standards. On payments, all retailers accepted mobile or QR payments, 93% accepted cash and none accepted cards, and 27% reported privacy or credential concerns when helping these customers. Open comments asked for shopkeeper training on consumer rights, Braille provision, accessible approaches to shops, a directory of accessible outlets and a dedicated, non-volunteer support organisation.

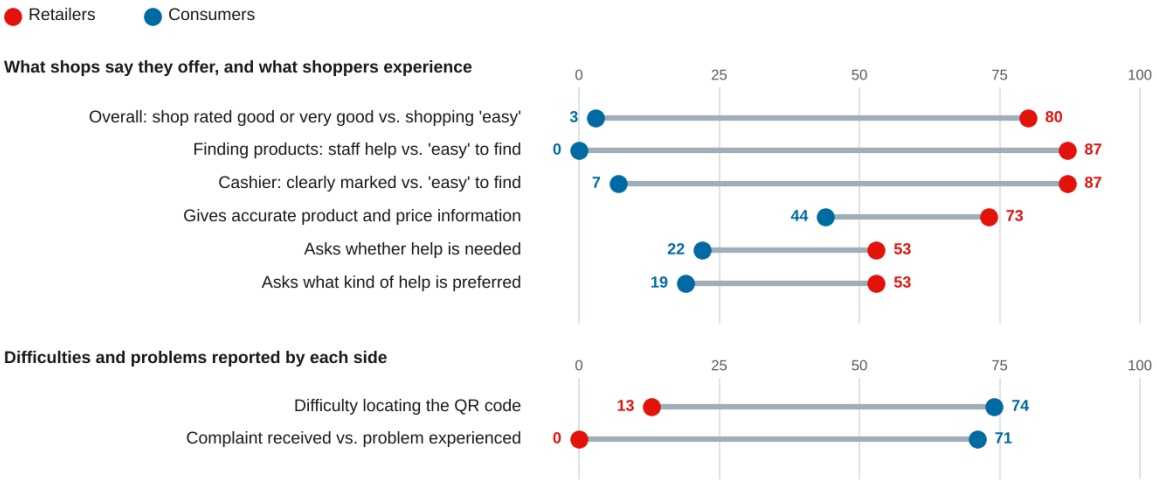
Service is willing and frequent, but the practices that matter most to consumers are the least common, and what retailers find hardest to explain is what consumers cannot verify. The main gap is knowledge, not cost or reluctance, and retailers prefer support such as training and guidelines to new rules. The absence of complaints should not be read as satisfaction, since consumers do not know where to complain.

3.8 Two views of the same shop

Because the two groups are different people, the comparison is descriptive, but the differences are striking (Chart 6). Most retailers (80%) rated their shop good or very good, while only 3% of consumers found independent shopping easy and 79% found it difficult. Retailers pointed to facilities on offer: 87% said staff help customers find products and 87% said the cashier is clearly identified. Yet no consumer found locating products easy, and only 7% found the cashier easy to find.

Chart 6: Shopkeepers and shoppers see two different shops

Red: share of retailers reporting the practice or facility. Blue: share of consumers reporting a good experience of it, or, in the lower panel, a problem. Different respondents, so compare broadly (%).



Source: CCAA survey, Thimphu, October–November 2026

On assistance, the gap lies in the quality of help, not its availability. About half of retailers (53%) said they ask whether help is needed and what kind is preferred, against 22% and 19% of consumers who said staff often or always do so. Views are closer on speaking to the customer directly (27% of retailers against 23% of consumers) and on getting consent before guiding (33% against 42%). Payments and problems run the other way: only 13% of retailers reported difficulty with locating the QR code against 74% of QR users. The widest gap is on redress: no retailer had received a complaint, yet 71% of consumers reported a related problem. Zero complaints reflects silence, not satisfaction.

Retailers' confidence rests on facilities being present, not on whether they work for someone who cannot see them, and on infrequent contact with visually impaired customers. Taken together, the findings show that visually impaired consumers face real difficulty with access, information and control over their own money, and that those serving them are largely unaware of how large the difficulty is. The recommendations that follow therefore focus on awareness, simple practices and a visible route for complaints.

4. Recommendations

These recommendations are shaped by Bhutan's circumstances: a small market, packaged goods that are mostly imported, many small shops with few staff, and public agencies with limited resources. Measures common in larger and richer markets, such as requiring larger print, Braille or tactile labels on every product, are not realistic for Bhutan to impose on foreign manufacturers and importers, and would raise

costs for small retailers. The survey also shows that most barriers are about information, habits and procedures rather than buildings and products, so much can be achieved through simple practices, guidance, training and coordination.

The recommendations are grouped by who is best placed to act. Priority goes first to steps that can start within the next year at little cost: a visible complaint route, a simple staff routine, predictable shop layouts, and private, confirmed payments. Changes that depend on currency design, banking systems or legislation will take longer and are identified as such.

4.1 Government Agencies

Make the complaint route visible and easy to use. The most urgent finding is that most visually impaired shoppers do not know where to complain and are unfamiliar with CCAA. CCAA should promote its toll-free number and other phone-based ways to make complaints and ask questions without reading or typing, through disability organisations, radio and audio messages, and its regular consumer advocacy sessions. Audio versions of existing consumer awareness material, in Dzongkha and English, would help, and staff who take these calls should be briefed to handle them patiently.

Issue short, voluntary guidance for shops. CCAA and the Disabled People's Organization of Bhutan (DPOB) can issue a short, plain-language guide on serving visually impaired customers. It would cover the basic staff routine, keeping goods in consistent places, reading out prices, dates and warnings on request, and protecting payment privacy. Retailers favoured training and voluntary guidance over mandatory rules, and a voluntary approach suits a small market where many shops have few staff. A simple form of recognition, such as a published list of shops that have completed the orientation, would give shops an incentive and give visually impaired customers a directory of shops to turn to, which retailers themselves suggested.

Build training into existing work. Training for shopkeepers and staff, the measure retailers asked for most, need not mean a new programme. Short sessions led by DPOB can be added to the consumer and business advocacy sessions CCAA already holds, and offered through business associations. Routine market inspections can also be used to hand out the guide and to remind shops of existing price display requirements, which matter most to shoppers who depend on staff to read prices aloud. The aim in both cases is awareness, not penalties.

Work with importers and distributors on information, not label design. Because most packaged goods are imported, Bhutan cannot realistically require larger print or tactile labels on products, as some developed countries do. What CCAA can do, through its regular engagement with importers and distributors, is encourage them to make sure that expiry dates, ingredients and instructions are clear on the goods they bring in, and to give shops a simple information sheet or contact point for products with complicated instructions or warranty terms, such as electronics and appliances. Shop staff could then read this information out on request. As local producers update their labels, they could also be encouraged to add a phone number or scannable code for product information, which costs little.

Clarify how non-discrimination applies to shopping. The Constitution and the Consumer Protection Act already promise fair, non-discriminatory treatment. When consumer protection rules are next reviewed, CCAA could consider whether the needs of consumers with disabilities should be stated explicitly, after consultation with disability organisations and businesses. This is a longer-term step; the survey gives no basis for mandatory standards now.

Keep the approaches to shops safe and measure progress. Thimphu Thromde and other local governments can help by keeping footpaths and market approaches clear and drains covered as part of regular upkeep, although respondents ranked this below information and staff help. CCAA should also repeat this survey, ideally in more Dzongkhags, after one to two years to see whether shopping experiences have improved and whether the complaint route is being used.

4.2 Retailers

Adopt a simple staff routine. Most of what visually impaired shoppers asked for costs nothing. Staff can greet the customer and speak to them, not their companion; ask whether help is wanted and what kind; get agreement before touching or guiding the person; read out prices, expiry dates and warnings when asked; let the customer touch products; allow time to decide; and avoid pressure to buy. A one-page reminder kept at the counter is enough to start with.

Keep the shop predictable. Goods should be kept in consistent places and regular customers told when things are moved. Aisles and entrances should be kept free of boxes and stock, and staff should offer a short spoken orientation to the layout, the cashier and the exit. Having a staff member free to help at busy times matters, because crowded shops were the hardest condition for respondents.

Check what you sell and what you say. Only a third of retailers have any formal way of making sure that what they tell customers about products is accurate. Regularly checking expiry dates on shelves and keeping a short list of key details, such as ingredients, warranty terms and instructions for popular products, would help staff give correct information and would also protect shops from selling expired goods.

Make payments private and easy. The QR code should be displayed in a fixed place at the counter and marked so that it can be found by touch, for example with a strip of tape. Staff should say the amount aloud, say when the payment has gone through, let customers enter PINs privately, and never ask for a PIN or take hold of a phone or money without permission. Shops should also invite feedback and note any complaints.

4.3 Banks, payment providers and the Royal Monetary Authority

Consider tactile features on lower-value notes in future designs. It is understood that the RMA may consider tactile features for the Nu 5, 10, 20 and 50 notes in future designs, which matches a request made by several respondents. Because currency redesign is costly and slow, this is a longer-term measure. In the meantime the RMA and banks can raise awareness of the tactile features that already exist on the Nu 100, 500 and 1,000 notes among shopkeepers as well as visually impaired people, through disability organisations and the business advocacy channels above.

Make apps and payment devices easier to use without sight. Banks and payment operators can test their mobile banking and payment apps with screen readers and with visually impaired users whenever the apps are updated. A few respondents asked for fingerprint authentication and a review of daily limits; providers are best placed to judge what can be offered safely. Where new payment terminals or QR devices are introduced, models that give a spoken or audible confirmation of the amount and result should be preferred, so that both customer and shopkeeper know the payment has gone through.

4.4 Disability organisations and civil society

Co-deliver training and build consumer skills. DPOB and other disability organisations are well placed to lead the shopkeeper orientation described above, because retailers asked for exactly this kind of practical, respectful training and consumers see disability organisations as the actors most responsible. They can also run sessions for their own members on comparing products by asking the right questions, using free text-reading apps to check dates, safe digital payments and fraud, and how and where to complain.

Connect shoppers, shops and regulators. With members' consent, disability organisations can pass complaints and common problems on to CCAA so that they become visible, and can help keep the list of accessible and welcoming shops up to date.

5. Conclusion

Visually impaired consumers in Thimphu shop often and capably, yet most find independent shopping difficult because information, layout and procedures are designed for sighted customers. The consequences are concrete: purchases made without being able to check expiry dates or ingredients, incorrect charges and prices, and problems that go unreported because most consumers do not know where to complain. Retailers are willing to help but untrained, and largely unaware of how great the difficulties are, as their favourable self-ratings and the absence of complaints show.

Because the main barriers are informational and organisational, much of the remedy is inexpensive and within reach of a small, import-dependent market: a visible complaint route, a short staff routine, predictable shop layouts, and private, confirmed payments. Larger changes, notably tactile marks on lower-value notes and more accessible banking apps, rest with the RMA and the banks and will take longer. The samples are small and confined to Thimphu, so a larger follow-up study would be valuable. But the two sets of findings point the same way: consumers face real barriers, and retailers are willing to help but lack training and guidance. That is a sound basis for early, voluntary and supportive action by the government, retailers, financial service providers and disability organisations working together.

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