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## Academically Successful and Independently Able

The role of special schools in addressing the holistic needs of children  
and young people with vision impairment

### Executive Summary

With the right support, children and young people with vision impairment can thrive in education, and through specialist intervention can be supported to reach their potential. Children with vision impairment are part of a low incident, high needs heterogeneous population, which is why there is international recognition that support should be provided by professionals with specialist training. It is also recognised that educational support should not only focus on ensuring children with vision impairment are able to access the core curriculum, but also in supporting the development of specialist skills to allow them to work and live as independently as possible. For example, Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment support children's learning strategies for accessing information, using specialist technology and developing literacy skills, while Habilitation Specialists support development of independent living skills and orientation and mobility skills.

We welcome that the Schools White Paper and proposed SEND reforms recognises some of the key issues facing the sector, including an overreliance on EHCPs and tribunals, delays in receiving specialist support and a lack of specialist support in mainstream schools. In this report we outline some of the specific challenges that are faced by children and young people with vision impairment. Due to its low incidence, the needs of this group can often be overlooked, and therefore it is vital that such challenges and proposed solutions are taken into account through the SEND reforms. This includes:

- Recognising the role of education to support the *holistic* needs of children and young people with vision impairment from ages 0-25. As well as support in the

home after diagnosis, this should include nursery, compulsory education, FE and HE and the transition from education into employment.

- The importance of oversight by specialist vision impairment professionals when developing EHCPs and Individual Support Plans.
- The role of specialists in supporting the inclusion of children and young people with vision impairment, including identifying solutions to complex access needs.
- The important role of specialist settings in meeting specific needs and in supporting the wider sector.
- The need to train more Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment and Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialists, while ensuring that there is a sustainable funding model in place for their ongoing employment.

## **The challenges faced by children and young people with vision impairment**

### **Vision impairment and the need for specialist educational support**

Vision impairment in childhood impacts on that child's development. It affects their exploration of the world around them and limits how they can observe the actions and behaviour of others (McLinden et al, 2023, pp16-17). The World Health Organisation state that vision:

- enables access to educational materials, and is pivotal to educational attainment;
- supports the development of social skills in order to foster friendships, strengthen self-esteem and maintain well-being;
- is important for participation in sports and social activities that are essential to physical development as well as mental and physical health, personal identity and socialisation. (WHO, 2019, p3).

This means children with vision impairment need specialist input to compensate, supporting them in their development and to gain the specialist skills they need to learn independently, get around and communicate with others (Recommendation 1). In the UK this support is provided by Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (QTVIs) and Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialists (RQHSs). Viewed as vital by parents and non-specialist educators, these specialists work with children from diagnosis into young adulthood and provide support across educational settings, the home and wider community. Vision impairment education has a dual role: to ensure fair and optimised access to the curriculum ('access to learning') and to support children and young people to develop the specialist skills and experiences they require to become as independent as possible ('learning to access') (McLinden et al, 2016) (Recommendation 4). Most

children with vision impairment are educated in mainstream schools with specialist support coming from peripatetic support from Local Authority Sensory Support Services. However, specialist VI settings make a vital contribution – especially for those who have a later onset of vision impairment, progressive conditions or additional and complex needs (Recommendation 2).

Children with vision impairment are a very heterogenous group due to the vast range of causes of childhood vision impairment and the high proportion with cooccurring conditions. This means that interventions and adjustments are often highly personalised and specialised such as specialist software like screen readers and magnification software, Braille (including specific Braille codes for Maths and Music) and use of mobility aids like long canes to get around safely and independently (Recommendation 1).

## **A postcode lottery of support**

### **Inconsistent support**

As acknowledged in the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reform consultation documentation, there is a postcode lottery of provision. For children and young people with vision impairment this might be the difference between how often a QTVI is able to visit their school, whether they are able to access an essential piece of equipment, or if they get any specialist support in FE College. Research also shows how experience can differ significantly from school to school, including willingness to meet the needs of a child with vision impairment (Hewett et al, 2025a) (Recommendations 2 and 4).

### **Use of Tribunals**

Despite being a high-needs group, according to the Royal Society for Blind Children (RSBC 2025) only 27.3% of children with vision impairment had an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), representing 0.8% of all EHCPs. Of concern is the number of parents who are having to use tribunals to get EHCPs for their child with vision impairment. Statistics show a huge increase in EHCP appeals since 2015-16, with 21,106 in 2023-24, compared to 3,712 in 2015-16. Tribunals can happen at any time throughout the year, meaning students are often out of school whilst they await the funding. This has a huge impact on the young person and their family, and lost learning may mean they need to stay on for an extra year. This uncertainty also impacts on resource planning by specialist providers (Recommendation 2).

### **The impact on families**

The negative impact of navigating the SEND system on families is widely documented. Parents have emphasised the presence of the 'postcode lottery', where they were constantly having to advocate to receive the most basic of support. They

described this as an emotionally and resource demanding process and called for systemic changes (Hewett et al, 2025b) (Recommendations 5 and 6).

After excelling in a mainstream primary school where the support was available, Marie struggled when she got to secondary school, where a lack of appropriate support led her to withdraw socially and academically. Marie began to experience significant mental health challenges and her attendance dropped to around 60%. As her mother, Tania, fought to get the right support for her daughter, she encountered numerous obstacles and ever-moving goalposts from her local authority over three years.

Tania eventually won a tribunal which ruled that Marie should be granted the funding for a place at New College Worcester, a specialist day and residential college for 11-19-year-olds who are vision impaired. Despite being academically able, due to the lack of support at secondary school Marie was only able to take two GCSEs. Once at New College Worcester the turnaround was remarkable; Marie has been predicted three A grades for A-level and is in the process of applying to study at the University of Bristol, the University of Exeter and the University of York. Marie's story is testament to the transformative impact that the right specialised education can have on a child's life. The victory has been bittersweet though, as the journey to get there has taken a toll on Marie, Tania and the rest of the family, following three years of multiple tribunals.

## The Case for Change

### Pressures on specialist services

Despite specialist professionals like QTVIs and habilitation specialists being integral to the support of children and young people with vision impairment, Freedom of Information requests from the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB 2024) reveal that the number of these professionals are reducing, with large numbers of local authority vision impairment teams cutting or freezing budgets (Recommendation 4 and 7). QTVIs or habilitation specialists complete advanced training over two-years to provide this specialised support, funded by their employer. Research into habilitation support for children and young people with vision impairment shows the majority of children are already going without the support they need, with resources being prioritised for those with only the most severe needs (Thomas Pocklington Trust and Guide Dogs, 2020). Current data shows there are just over 600 QTVIs and 120 Habilitation Specialists supporting over 37,000 children with vision impairment. The government has reversed plans to fund QTVI training through Level 7 Apprenticeships but have not provided alternative solutions. Moving forward it is vital that ring-fenced funding is made available to ensure an adequate number of specialists are trained to meet the ambitions set out in the Schools White Paper (Recommendation 7).

## **Supporting children to reach their potential**

To ensure that children and young people with vision impairment can achieve their potential, research evidence shows the importance of the support they receive being holistic and not just focusing on academic outcomes (Hewett et al, 2020) (Recommendation 1 and 6). Despite performing relatively well academically compared to other SEND groups, employment surveys repeatedly show how particularly vulnerable this population is to becoming long-term NEET, economically inactive and stuck in a benefit trap. Longitudinal surveys also highlight how poor the mental health and wellbeing of this population is compared to their peers (Slade and Tipping, 2022). Through research and practice we know that there are many factors which contribute to positive outcomes for young people with vision impairment, such as:

- Support to develop self-advocacy skills, including helping children and young people to overcome the emotional side of their vision impairment, such as the fear of looking 'different' (Recommendation 5).
- Being supported to develop a range of skills to help them access their work, so they can adapt to the situation (Recommendation 5).
- Being taught mobility and orientation skills, including how to navigate around unfamiliar environments and use public transport (Recommendation 5).
- Having opportunities to practice specialist skills in less formal settings, including the workplace through work experience (Recommendation 5).
- Receiving support that responds to and anticipates changing sight conditions.
- Learning in genuinely inclusive learning environments, which allow children to access formal and informal learning opportunities (Recommendation 6).
- Being taught by educators who have appropriately challenging aspirations for them and recognise their underlying ability, providing the right adjustments are made (Recommendation 8).

## **A holistic approach to support**

The Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI) outlines the support needed by children and young people with vision impairment to ensure they can access core education, while also being supported to become as independent as possible (Recommendation 1). Developed through a three stage UK-wide Delphi study, the first edition of the CFVI was published and launched in April 2022. By 2025 it was being used by 92% of Local Authority specialist vision impairment services in England and having a positive impact on their work.

Through the credibility which the CFVI offers specialist professionals and the way it promotes shared language, clarity, and understanding it has facilitated more effective collaboration between different professionals. As well as providing a framework for children who access the national curriculum, it also outlines the support which is important for children who have more complex learning needs.

It is vital the CFVI has formal recognition, so that schools and decision makers working with children and young people with vision impairment recognise the breadth of support required by this population, beyond simply meeting the core curriculum (Recommendation 5).

## The Role of Specialist Settings

At present the role of specialist settings in supporting the education of children and young people with vision impairment in the proposed SEND reforms is unclear and does not recognise the important role which specialist settings can have (Recommendation 2).

While the majority of children with vision impairment are educated in mainstream settings, for some children and families a specialist setting is the right place to meet the child's needs, with classroom teachers who are trained as QTVIs and dedicated teams to support the development of specialist skills (Recommendation 2). Factors which impact on a child being placed in a specialist setting include:

- Development of advanced specialist skills which require a QTVI with particular expertise, for example Braille Music.
- Need for intensive specialist support following sudden loss of vision.
- Having a progressive condition which means that support needs to rapidly adapt and respond to future anticipated challenges.
- Need for ongoing specialist social and emotional support linked to vision impairment.
- Being able to support additional needs alongside support for vision impairment (Recommendation 3).

Specialist settings also play an important role in supporting the wider vision impairment sector, including:

- Providing subject specific expertise to the wider education sector.
- Acting as outreach hubs.

## Recommendations

When reviewing and implementing future SEND policy, the government should:

1. Ensure that specialists maintain long-term oversight of the support of children and young people with vision impairment. This should include placing requirements on the educational setting to work with specialists when drawing up **Individual Support Plans**, ensuring they recognise the broad holistic needs of the child rather than just the academic.
2. Ensure that the **ongoing reform process** recognises the role of special schools and specialist settings in meeting the needs of particular groups of children and young people with vision impairment, and in supporting the wider vision impairment education sector.

3. Ensure that funding rules for **Specialist Provision Packages** allow schools to adequately support children with complex learning and medical needs.
4. Ensure that there is ring fenced **funding** for children and young people with vision impairment, allowing them access to the range of support and specialist equipment they need to thrive in education and beyond.
5. Formally recognise the CFVI within **National Inclusion Standards** to ensure that the holistic needs of children and young people with vision impairment are accounted for and assist collaboration between educators, parents, specialist services, ensuring that this remains child centred.
6. Ensure that **National Inclusion Standards** focus on the inclusion of children in the broadest sense, including access to extra-curricular activities.
7. When investing in the **specialist workforce**, identify funding solutions to ensure that there are the resources available to fund the training of more QTVIs and Habilitation Specialists, and to sustain their employment.
8. Develop **nationally available CPD** for SENCOs, classroom teachers and teaching assistants which ensures they develop an understanding of the role of education in supporting the independence of children and young people with vision impairment.

#### **Case study: The importance of the right support**

Eddy grew up in Birmingham, attending primary then secondary school close to his family home, but experienced a stark contrast in the support available when he transitioned from one school to the next. In his mainstream primary school with a dedicated visual impairment resource base he benefited from the 'typical school experience', while accessing the specialist support needed. However, at secondary school he faced significant challenges:

*"Secondary school was a real battle," says Eddy. "I was put in the lowest sets and was told there was no point doing GCSEs, and given no real adjustments by the school. I just found it all really disheartening. I spent my days exhausted just trying to access the work, with no energy left for friends, hobbies, or anything extracurricular. I wasn't even given a laptop to access work. Instead, I had piles of large printouts spread across my desk. I'd end up hunched over them, straining to read text. It was exhausting."*

Eventually Eddy secured funding to attend New College Worcester, a specialist setting for children with vision impairment, where he was able to receive the support he needed.

*"My education no longer became a battle!" says Eddy. "I could finally focus on doing the work rather than struggling to just access it."*

After completing A-levels, Eddy secured a place at a Russell Group university, later progressing into a graduate role in the financial sector.

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