

Written evidence submitted by VIEW

The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services - response from VIEW relating to education professionals working with children and young people with vision impairment

Introduction

VIEW is the professional organisation representing the education workforce that supports children and young people with vision impairment (VI) across a range of mainstream and specialist settings. VIEW also has close links also with the VI voluntary sector, research community and training providers, as well as with health and social care professionals that support children and young people with VI and their families. Further information is available at www.viewweb.org.uk.

VIEW conducted a survey of VI education professionals at the start of May 2020 to investigate the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on educational provision for children and young people with VI across England. The survey received 305 responses, almost half of which were from qualified teachers of children and young people with vision impairment (QTVI). Another 50 responses were from managers or team leaders of VI support services. Our consultation response below is based on the findings of this survey. A full report is also available at <https://viewweb.org.uk/covid19-survey/>.

VIEW was also involved with other VI sector organisations in developing and circulating a survey to capture the experiences of parents of children and young people with VI during the current crisis. The findings of that survey are reported in a separate response from Thomas Pocklington Trust. It provides important information on the impact of Covid-19 on families which mirrors the evidence of VIEW's survey on behalf of education professionals. VIEW also supports the consultation response submitted by RNIB. We suggest the Select Committee may wish to read all three responses in parallel.

Background on children and young people (CYP) with vision impairment

We start our response with a brief overview of the population of children and young people with vision impairment and the support they receive.

- There are around 26,565 children and young people aged 0-19 in England with vision impairment (VI), making it a low incidence special educational need and disability. Approximately 50% of vision impaired children have additional SEND. Many have very complex needs in addition to their VI.
- The great majority of these children are educated in settings which do not specialise in vision impairment, relying on input from qualified teachers of

children and young people with vision impairment (QTVI) and habilitation specialists working for local authority support services.

- Sight is central to how children learn and develop, and vision impairment has the potential to have an adverse impact on a child's learning and development. Effective provision can only be delivered with the support and input of specially trained professionals. In addition to support in accessing the academic curriculum, children and young people with VI need explicit teaching of specialist VI skills in areas such as social interaction, technology, mobility and independence skills in order to become autonomous and successful learners.
- Children with vision impairment are at risk of poor outcomes across a range of emotional and social wellbeing indicators. Vision impairment affects social communication and the development of social relationships. A lower quality of life has been reported in children with vision impairment compared with their sighted peers.

Select Committee questions

General comments

We will focus first on the overall impact of the crisis on CYP with VI, before moving on to consider specific aspects relating to the select committee's questions.

Children and young people with VI clearly form a disadvantaged group because they have special educational needs. The low incidence nature of their disability also means that mainstream providers have limited expertise in meeting their needs without specialist support. They are therefore highly vulnerable in a situation where their normal educational provision is disrupted. The information obtained through our survey indicates that the vast majority of CYP with VI are being educated at home rather than continuing to go to school, partly due to parental concerns about their safety at this time outside their home environment. They are therefore relying entirely on online learning and remote support.

Our survey respondents told us that:

- As learners with VI do not have the same opportunities for incidental learning as sighted children, they are particularly disadvantaged by the emphasis on online/virtual methods of learning rather than practical, hands on experience.
- Many children, especially those who are blind and learn by touch, need direct specialist teaching support which cannot be provided at home.
- Many of those who would benefit from online learning have been prevented from doing so because it has not been possible for the specialist equipment (such as computers with specific software or functionality) that they use at school to be provided for them at home
- Lockdown presents significant social challenges for VI children, many of whom already have a need for more support in this area because of the barriers to social interaction arising from their disability.
- It is particularly difficult to teach the skills of the specialist VI curriculum (independent learning, tactile skills, mobility and independence, and social

interaction) remotely. These skills are fundamental to CYP growing up into independent adulthood.

- There is a real concern about the safety of blind children in particular when schools reopen, due to their difficulties in practising social distancing, and their need to use touch to explore their environment and navigate their way around.
- There is also a concern that when schools reopen, they will prioritise the core academic curriculum so that pupils catch up on what they have missed, at the expense of the specialist VI curriculum that VI pupils need too.
- Overall, there is a serious danger of a negative effect on VI children's ability to make a successful transition to independent adulthood, due to educational setback, poorer mobility and independence skills and reduced confidence.

Specific comments on Select Committee areas of interest

The implementation of the critical workers policy, including how consistently the definition of 'critical' work is being applied across the country and how schools are supported to remain open for children of critical workers

No response

The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people

Local authority VI services are adjusting to working remotely but many are concerned that the support they can offer to families is insufficient to meet their needs.

- Some vision specific interventions such as functional vision assessment or visual promotion (to stimulate the development of vision during a critical period) cannot be provided during lockdown. Some of these interventions are time critical.
- Services rely on individual schools providing suitably modified work for pupils with VI to study at home, which is often not happening. Only a few services have the capacity to modify work centrally for all the schools in their area.
- There is concern that some schools and LA managers do not understand the support needs of pupils with VI, believing that if they are staying at home rather than going into school they do not need specialist support.
- Some respondents expressed concern that, because some of their work is not statutory, they might be redeployed into hub schools or other LA functions.

The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to:

- **Children's early development**
- Many babies and young children with VI require visual stimulation to promote their use of vision. This specialist input cannot be provided in the current crisis and may have potential long-term impact on a child's visual development.
- There are other areas of early development requiring specialist intervention which may be adversely affected in babies and early years children with VI,

particularly where they have only recently been referred for specialist support and are awaiting assessment.

- **The early years funded entitlement and the childcare market**

No response

The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment

Candidates with vision impairment are at particular risk of disadvantage from the cancellation of formal exams for several reasons.

- The low incidence of vision impairment in CYP means there is very limited data for schools to draw upon when ranking their pupils.
- Relying on internal mock exam results begs the question whether appropriate access arrangements (in particular, properly modified papers) were provided for these exams.
- Ofqual has recommended that schools seek the advice of specialist advisory teachers when determining the grades of pupils with sensory impairment. However, we are not aware of a mechanism for ensuring that this happens.

Support for pupils and families during closures, including:

VIEW is aware that other organisations are responding to the select committee to represent the views of parents of VI children. We are therefore limiting our comments to the main points made by professionals in response to our own survey.

- **The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning**
- Many parents lack the specialist knowledge and skills needed to support their child with VI. For example, most parents of blind children cannot read braille effectively so are unable to support their child's reading.
- Schools use a wide variety of online platforms to deliver home based teaching and not all of these are designed to be accessible to learners with vision impairment.
- Even where online teaching is potentially accessible, many VI learners rely on assistive technology which they may not have been allowed to take home.
- For those who do have suitable equipment at home, the emphasis on screen use can be a problem for some partially sighted learners as extended screen use causes eye strain and fatigue.
- **Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education**

Vision impairment creates a higher risk of social and emotional challenge in children at the best of times. The current crisis has increased this risk considerably.

- A reduction in opportunities for social interaction can be a particular problem for many VI children who already have a need for additional support in this area of the specialist VI curriculum.
- Lockdown is particularly isolating for those children who do not have the skills or the equipment to access social media or may be too young to do so.
- In common with many children with SEND, many VI children rely on a regular routine which has been seriously disrupted by school closures.
- Parents may be understandably reluctant to take their children outside if they are not confident about their mobility skills and ability to social distance.

The effect on apprenticeships and other workplace-based education courses

The employment rate among young people with VI is already unacceptably low and this crisis can only make this situation worse.

- Children and young people directly affected by school closures face the prospect of no work experience or job training to help them to prepare for future employment.
- Workplace based apprenticeships or courses will in future be even more reluctant than they are now to take on VI learners, because of the added responsibility of solving the challenges of tactile learning and social distancing.

The financial implications of closures for providers (including higher education and independent training providers), pupils and families

- There is a clear financial risk to the small number of remaining specialist VI schools and colleges. The current crisis could force some of these establishments into closure, which would have significant implications for those learners with VI whose needs are best suited to this type of provision.
- The crisis also raises questions about the financial relationship between schools and local authority support services. If schools are even more strapped for cash as a result of Covid-19 they may choose not to purchase specialist support for their VI pupils in future.

The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)

We have already established that all children with VI are at risk in the current situation. Within the population of VI are children different groups who may be affected in particular ways, for example:

- Blind children need specialist resources (e.g. braille) which cannot be provided in a home environment. They also require hands on teaching support.
- Children with less severe VI may not be receiving any specialist support at all, depending on whether their school chooses to buy in specialist VI support.
- Children with complex needs require highly individualised teaching programmes which cannot be replicated at home.

- Newly referred children (particularly babies/toddlers) are at risk if they are unable to be assessed and receive home visits from a QTVI.
- Children who will be making the transition to a new school/setting in September may not receive the familiarisation training that is needed to make sure they are confident and safe in their new environment.
- Children with VI from disadvantaged backgrounds are at risk where parents may not have the knowledge/skills or motivation to engage with their learning, don't have access to internet and/or don't have suitable equipment at home (As a group, children with VI are more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds).
- Children with VI from EAL families are at risk where there is a language barrier to parents being able to home school them even with support from VI specialists.
- Pupils whose school support involves a heavy reliance on a teaching assistant (TA) are at greater risk than those who have developed the skills to access their learning independently.

What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

The Covid-19 crisis has exposed the inherent fragility of the current model of support for VI pupils. Under this model, responsibility and funding lies primarily with individual schools which are expected to buy in specialist support according to the assessed needs of their VI pupils. However, owing to the low incidence nature of vision impairment in children, many of these schools lack any prior experience and fail to grasp the far-reaching implications of visual loss on their pupils' learning and overall development. At a time of continuing austerity they are therefore reluctant to pay for the input of specialist services whose value they do not fully understand, leading to a reduction in the resourcing of these services and their ability to support families at a time of crisis.

Our survey has demonstrated once again a wide variation between LAs in terms of the support provided by VI services – the familiar story of a postcode lottery. Those services which are still well funded and have strong links with schools are much better placed to ride out this crisis than those which have been pared to the bone already. Some services appear not even to know where all the VI children are in their LA because there is no central database. To quote one respondent:

“Lack of funding for SEND education has meant mobility and habilitation, provision of learning materials and essential equipment, all needed for pupils with VI, had been sadly lacking long before the lock down, and now there will be much catching up to do (if indeed catching up is possible for children who cannot make up for lost time in school). None of this preparation for a national emergency to protect pupils with VI and their families can be done without qualified teachers of the visually impaired to advise schools how to prepare to protect children with visual impairment.”

The crisis has also raised questions about the relationship between school, home and specialist services. Many QTVIs carry out home visits for younger children and maintain close contact with families of school age children. However, their ongoing work is mainly with schools and most support services are not funded to provide

direct support or equipment for children to work at home. They are therefore having to create new support systems from scratch, often with unsuitable resources. To quote another respondent:

“As LA funding has been so limited for so long, we have not been funded with e.g. smart phones, so capacity to support families with e.g. video calls is limited & possibly guidelines on this are needed should this be available in future.”

Ultimately, therefore, a key lesson to learn from this crisis in terms of contingency planning is that there is an urgent need to strengthen the funding for and role of central VI services in order to build resilience and flexibility into the system. To quote once more from a respondent to the survey:

“The target of education and governmental policy is surely to ensure the VI population [are] enabled in their access to the same opportunities as their peers: to achieve to the best of their ability and to be as equipped and confident in their skills and abilities so as to be a positive member of society and workforce. If equity and equality is the aim then this should be acknowledged and actioned through national provision levels and funding rather than budget cuts.”

In addition to this wider plea for better recognition and increased funding for support services (held centrally by the service rather than devolved to individual schools), specific suggestions to prepare more effectively for a future emergency on this scale include the following:

- Development of guidelines and protocols on social distancing and remote learning for VI pupils.
- Funding for LA support services to provide or lend equipment for home use.
- Greater recognition of the specialist VI curriculum and top up training for pupils who have regressed or at risk of falling behind in developing independence skills during lockdown.
- More online support for creating and sharing modified learning resources for VI pupils, through existing national bodies such as VIEW.
- Make it a requirement that school VLE systems are fully accessible to VI learners.
- More training for parents to enable them to support their child’s education more effectively.
- More emphasis on teaching pupils with VI in initial teacher training, to help schools understand their needs.
- The creation of an online social hub to enable VI learners to have peer support.
- Need for GDPR, safeguarding and internet security training for staff if VI services and special schools are delivering online teaching.

June 2020