Written evidence submitted by Thomas Pocklington Trust,

Guide Dogs, RNIB and RSBC

Draft response

The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services.

Introduction

This is a joint response from Thomas Pocklington Trust, Guide Dogs, RNIB and RSBC to the inquiry on the impact of Covid-19 on Education and Children's services in England. We conducted a survey of parents of vision impaired children across the UK to gain a deeper insight into the key challenges faces by families during Covid-19 to form the basis of this response. This survey was open for a 2- week period during May 2020. The survey gained over 224 responses during this limited timeframe.

There has also been a survey completed with professionals, from 'VIEW' the professional body for Qualified Teachers for the Vision Impaired, and their response has been submitted separately to this one.

Demographics of vision impaired children

There are over 25,000 children with a vision impairment aged 0 to 16 in the UK, with 85% of those living in England. Approximately 50% of these children have additional special educational needs or disabilities.

Research informs us that vision impaired children have lower educational outcomes than their peers who do not have a special education need or disability. ([Eye Health and Sight Loss RNIB 2018](#)).

Demographics of those completing the survey

54% of respondents live in England, with the remaining in the devolved nations. We recognise that this select committee response is for matters pertaining to England only. However, to give a complete picture the data which follows relates to all respondents

91% were parents to children who were between early years and secondary school, the breakdown is as follows:

- 14% Early Years
- 45 % Primary
- 32% Secondary
- 9% Sixth Form/College

The children attended the following establishments for education:

- 49% attend a mainstream school with a resource base for pupils with vision impairment
- 16% attend a special school with resource base for pupils with vision impairment
- 2% attend an FE college with provision for their child's VI
- 34% chose "other", see below for more in-depth analysis of this category.

From the data received, for those who chose to respond with "other"(34%), the breakdown is as follows:

- o 48 attended a mainstream school/college (with no VI resource base)

- 10 attended a special school (with no VI resource base)
- 14 were preschool age
- 1 was home educated
- 2 attended specialist VI schools

The survey found that 44% of children with a vision impairment also had additional special educational needs.

Summary of Key findings

Our survey has highlighted the following key issues:

1. Inconsistent provision of specialist software for children to use at home.
2. Inaccessible materials provided to children for their learning.
3. Low levels of support for parents to home school their vision impaired children.
4. Inconsistent access to support networks – QTVI, SENDCOs.
5. Increased levels of anxiety for vision impaired children.
6. Lack of access to tribunals and Education, Health and Care Plan reviews.

Inquiry Questions and responses

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.

Parents felt that their child's learning has been impacted by non-attendance at school. There are instances in which parents who are key workers and have a child with SEND have not been permitted to send their child to school, despite them meeting the government criteria for school attendance. Unfortunately, more details around the individual circumstances were not been provided in the survey responses.

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

We asked parents about the contact they had with their child's school and found that 44% had experienced some contact with the school, but not with SENDCOs, QTVIs (qualified teacher of visually impaired children), or TAs. In one instance a child was still in school without access to the QTVI. Parental comments included:

- *"our TA is doing the work the QTVI should be doing"*
- *"We feel abandoned"*
- *"Basically, we have been left to it" (parent also VI)*

Some parents felt that there was little support for them with home schooling, including aspects of emotional support. Information received from parents highlighted different approaches taken by different education establishments, with some parents being highly complimentary about the support they have received, whilst others reported that they had received little or no support during this period.

We asked parents how easy they would find it to contact their child's QTVI;:30% were not sure how easy this would be, and 14% commented they would not find it easy at all to contact the QTVI. We also asked how supported parents had been with their child's learning,: 44% responded saying they did not feel supported, with 56% feeling they had been supported in some way with their child's learning.

The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to Children's early development.

One parent said their young child was missing the routine of nursery, and the parent was struggling to support their learning.

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

One parent did comment in our survey that they were concerned about the grading process following the cancellation of exams and the impact this would have on their vision impaired child.

Another parent wanted their child to repeat the last two terms of their final year in education. The parent commented that their child's mental health has been severely impacted mentally by the lock down, and their transition from education into employment was also impacted because they had not been able to complete their course which was part vocational.

Support for pupils and families during closures, including Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education

As part of our survey we asked parents how they felt their child was coping emotionally, and how they felt they were coping as parents. Almost 40% commented that their child was experiencing some difficulties.

A third of respondents informed us that their child was experiencing some level of anxiety, and 19% were struggling with the lack of social interaction due to lock down.

13% of parents also expressed concerns about their child's learning due to the challenges they were facing with the work they were being set; One parent cited the lack of large print material being available, meant that their child had overly to rely on someone else to support their learning, and that this was a source of anxiety for their child.

Problems accessing learning materials was also a cause of anxiety for children as some used braille and were expected to use the Seesaw app for learning, which they found inaccessible.

Recurring causes for anxiety stem from the change in the children's routine, as they had not been able to attend school, which was impacting on their social interaction and confidence.

When asked how they were coping 50% of parents commented that they were struggling with some elements, with 23% finding the combination of trying to manage home school and working from home to be challenging. Almost 9% were concerned about how they can meet the learning needs of their child.

Where social isolation was a big factor in the mental wellbeing of children (19%), only 4% of parents found social isolation has affected their own wellbeing.

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)
Access to Learning for vision impaired children

Only 20% of respondents commented that their child had all the access technology at home to enable them to continue to learn. There was additional feedback from 28% of parents who had purchased equipment themselves, or their vision impaired child was using equipment not specifically designed for their needs as it was family IT equipment.

Parents have experienced many issues, including equipment being provided that is password protected, and no password provided upon request, or school laptops being provided with settings that have prohibited it being used on an external Wi-Fi network.

Almost a third of parents did not feel comfortable home-schooling their child as they did not fully understand their children's specialist equipment. It is reasonable to conclude therefore that this will have impacted negatively on the children's learning.

That is also the case for those children who had not been sent home with any specialist equipment at all. Some parents have taken a proactive approach in challenging provision, with one parent who was not permitted to have their child's specialist equipment at home, having to challenge the decision with their local council. The outcome of this decision is not known.

Parents also expressed concerns that their children are not having the same opportunities as their sighted peers and are falling behind their peers due to their disability.

- o *"Her classmates are learning about fractions at the moment but they sent an app for her to download to see if she can identify birds tweeting in garden!!"*

Transition

Concerns were raised around transition arrangements for children who are moving from one educational establishment to another, for example primary to secondary. There is a lack of continuity around this, with parents reporting that they did not know where their child was due to go, or what support will be available.

One parent reported that they did not feel confident in their child returning to education in September due to their needs.

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

Alongside these issues, some parents have found they have had to purchase printers so that they can produce work in a larger more accessible font for their child.

Feedback from parents also included:

- *"I have needed to Braille out resources and make tactile resources to enable equal access."*
- *"Tech was not sent until week 6"*
- *"The cost of printing his work out for me to read and type up in is size is getting out of control."*
- *"This would not be possible if I was in full-time work or even a working from home situation".*

All the above is having financial implications on families, who may already be experiencing financial hardship due to the Covid19 crisis, through furlough, lack of employment and reliance upon benefits.

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

For this part of the response, there are thematic responses.

Access to Equipment

Our evidence gathering has highlighted disparities across local authority areas and education establishments. With children not having access to

equipment or to the same learning as their sighted peers in some instances.

The grant that the DfE is providing for equipment for vulnerable children is, for many of those we surveyed, coming at too late a stage. Their children have already been absent from school for three months, and by the time the grants and equipment are available to vulnerable children this will be over four months. It would have been useful for the equipment grant to have been available at an earlier stage for those parents who have had to buy electrical items, for example printers. 28% of families were having to use their own laptops etc. to support the learning of the child.

Accessible Materials

Do its low prevalence, vision impairment within the SEND arena is not as fully understood as other disabilities, and this has impacted on children's learning, through inaccessible materials being distributed, and equipment not being sent home. A better understanding of vision impairment, and the needs of vision impaired children would assist children in their learning; this could be conducted during teacher training.

Disparities have been identified with 42% of parents saying their child can only access some of the materials they have been issued with, whilst 38% said their child could access their learning materials. The ability to address this at a much earlier stage, to ensure that all children can access their learning materials no matter what establishment provides the materials needs to be implemented from the start. This also needs to be factored into when children return to school, so that children have equal access to learning.

Access to learning materials in formats that meet the child's needs should be available, so that children have the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers.

There should be less reliance upon printed materials, and access to accessible digital learning should become standardised Children must have access to their specialist equipment from the start of any future periods of lockdown.

Mental Health Support for children

There should be better support for children with their mental health and managing anxiety in the event of any future national emergencies; this could include access to counsellors. This support could be provided for parents as well who are struggling with the emotional impacts relating to such national emergency. We found that children had been impacted more than their parents in this matter.

Improved access to learning materials would assist with reductions in anxiety and stress.

Parent Support

Support for parents could be provided to enable them to feel more confident in their abilities to home school. We received suggestions including video conferencing on learning and development. This development would aid parents in how they can support their child's learning. Parents and children would have the opportunity to seek clarity on matters that are not clear during online lessons.

Training on the use of access software or specialist equipment for parents would be beneficial to build confidence and resilience. Both parents and children felt this was an area of anxiety for them, due to lack of knowledge or access to QTVIs who could support with these issues.

Ease of access to QTVIs and support networks for parents, with an easy way for parents to approach schools and support networks would be useful in building confidence around home schooling.

Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)

Reviews of Education,Health and Care Plans could be completed virtually (where applicable). Some parents commented that the EHCP reviews had been postponed, this would in some instances impact the transition period for those moving between primary to secondary education.

Understanding of Vision Impairment

Overall, the limited understanding of the needs of vision impaired children and the need for greater communication between schools and parents are the concurrent themes of the responses we received. This is most definitely an area for improvement for the future, as there are disparities across the country for parents and children.

June 2020