

Written Evidence submitted by the Royal Institute of Blind People

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

## **1. Introduction**

RNIB welcome the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. We have worked closely with partners in the sector in developing our response and have used the results from two surveys that were conducted in May 2020 to inform our submission.

VIEW (Vision Impairment Education Workforce) conducted a survey to investigate the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on educational provision for children and young people with vision impairment (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.

Guide Dogs conducted a survey with parents/families/carers to investigate the impact of the crisis on families with children with vision impairment. The survey received 224 responses.

## **2. Background on children and young people with vision impairment**

In RNIB's view, the crisis is having a very serious impact on some of the most vulnerable children in the country, those with vision impairment and additional needs. This is a widespread but under-discussed issue. There are around 26,565 children and young people under the age of 19 living in England with vision impairment. About half have additional special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), alongside their vision impairment and a significant proportion of these have very complex needs.

Most children with VI are educated in mainstream settings which do not specialise in vision impairment. They rely on qualified teachers of children and young people with vision impairment (QTVI) and habilitation specialists working for local authority support services.

Vision is central to how children typically learn and develop. Apart from support in accessing the curriculum, children with vision impairment

therefore also need explicit teaching of specialist VI skills in social interaction, technology, mobility and independence skills in order to become successful learners. Effective help in these areas can only be delivered with the support and input of specially trained professionals.

Without the right support, children with VI are not only at risk of poorer educational outcomes but also of poorer outcomes across a range of emotional and social wellbeing indicators, as vision impairment can affect social communication and the development of social relationships.

### **3. General comments**

Several common themes emerged across both the surveys of parents of children with vision impairment and the survey of professionals, as follows:

- Inconsistencies across councils of processes and provision in specialist support services and equipment in the home.
- Concerns over ability to provide specialist support remotely when much of the support needed by young people with VI requires direct teaching and thus cannot be provided at home.
- The availability of access technology, such as screen readers, for use at home. For parents, obtaining and using this equipment was a challenge. For professionals, the issue is ensuring the specialist equipment could be sent to people's homes and be supported remotely.
- The accessibility of school online learning platforms for young people with VI even when using access technology is limited.
- Social isolation as a result of lockdown has had a negative impact on social skills and development of independent skills.
- This is compounded by the lack of ability to provide teaching in those skills which form part of the VI curriculum e.g. mobility and independence skills.
- Concerns about how to help a successful transition to another educational setting without key preparation that would have ordinarily taken place.
- Similarly, there are concerns about the ability to ensure a successful transition to independent adulthood, because lockdown has meant educational setback, as well as a lack of opportunity to develop necessary mobility and independence skills, which among other things, has reduced confidence.

## **4. Specific comments on Select Committee areas of interest**

### **4.1 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 simply insufficient. 92.6% of professional respondents told us that VI services were open, with staff home working and using technology.

However, concerns were raised that remote working presents significant challenges and that some important areas of work for QTVIs is not possible remotely, including:

- Functional vision assessments<sup>1</sup>
- Braille tuition
- Modification of work i.e. ensuring work is presented in a text and format which is accessible to the individual either in print or through their chosen method of access technology
- Mobility and independence skills

There was also concern that QTVIs may be redeployed, which would damage specialist support to young people with VI. There were worries that managers may feel children with VI at home do not require the same level of specialist support as if they were in school.

#### **Recommendations:**

- The Department for Education should issue guidance on how assessments and face-to-face support for children with VI can be carried out safely
- Local authorities should commit not to redeploy QTVIs, away from their core role of providing specialist support for children with a vision impairment

### **4.2 The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to: Children's early development**

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<sup>1</sup> These assessments look at how a child or young person uses their vision in everyday settings. As a result, changes can be put in place to support a child or young person to use their vision more effectively e.g. changing the lighting to help with certain tasks

<sup>2</sup> Dale N J, Sakkalou E, O'Reilly M A et al (2018) Home-based early intervention in infants and young children with visual impairment using the Developmental Journal: longitudinal cohort study. *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*, (DOI) – 1.1111/dmcn.14081

Research<sup>2</sup> clearly indicates that early intervention for children with VI can improve their lives long-term. Specialist intervention is key and without it, early development 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 waiting for assessment.

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

The current replacement grading system relies on a combination of sources of information, including teacher input, mock exams, ranking and coursework. There is a risk of disadvantage for candidates with VI with this system, notably where mock exam results may not be a true reflection of ability if all access arrangements were not in place or papers were not properly modified.

Moreover, while the system recognises that teacher input is critical, we believe specialist advice from a QTVI is just as important in grading. A QTVI will have an understanding of the specific individual access and learning needs of a candidate due to the impact of their vision impairment and can ensure that due consideration of these factors is taken into account. Indeed, Ofqual has recommended that schools seek the advice of specialist advisory teachers when determining the grades of pupils with sensory impairment. However, there is no robust procedure in place to make sure this happens and so we have substantial concerns that it may be missed.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Schools must ensure they are seeking the advice of QTVIs in determining grades of pupils with visual impairment
- We recommend it is a requirement in the documentation which exam centres submit that they evidence having sought the advice/guidance/input from their QTVI.

### **4.4 Support for pupils and families during closures**

Nearly all (92%) of respondent's children in the parents' survey were not attending school at the time of the survey. While some parents were very complimentary about the support they were getting from their school, the majority of families said they had not had contact with their child's school or their QTVI.

Contact with a QTVI is pivotal for the education of young people with VI and their wider development. Councils must work to ensure that their QTVI service is supporting all children and young people with VI in their area and that schools are proactively contacting the families of those with SEND to make sure they are getting the right support.

**Recommendation:**

- The Department for Education should reverse its decision to relax duties on local authorities to make the provisions set out in Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and make clear to local authorities that they need to make sure that children with SEND are getting the support they need.
- Schools should ensure that SENCOs are in regular contact with all children with SEND, who are not attending school and working with other professionals, including QTVIs to make sure that support is being provided to pupils and families at home

**4.5 The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning**

Both the parent and professional surveys reveal inconsistencies in messaging on what learning should be continuing remotely and how this should be supported, particularly around the use of technology.

Many young people with VI use specialist equipment. However, not all parents are equipped or able to support this. For example, some parents will be unable to use the technology, and some will be unable to read Braille.

In the parent survey, 65% of respondents said that their child used access technology to access the curriculum. However, there was confusion and inconsistency on whether all/part of the technology was allowed home for use.

In addition, online learning platforms used by many mainstream schools are not compatible with accessible technology, leaving parents to work alongside the child rather than independently.

**Recommendations:**

- The Department for Education should provide guidance for local authorities and schools about the use of specialist equipment at home.

- Government should ensure that guidance provided to Councils and schools with regard to online learning platforms provides information on the need to ensure they are accessible and therefore that schools are complying with their duties under the Equality Act.

#### **4.6 Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education**

Having a vision impairment can affect development of social skills, communication and building relationships owing to missing out on key visual cues. The current crisis increases this risk considerably.

Reduced opportunities to meet with peers and the need to socially distance means that alternative methods of communication and interaction, such as touch, are prohibitive and can further impede interactions.

During lockdown we have all turned increasingly to the use of technology to stay connected. Without the necessary equipment, skills and support, accessing these alternative methods of staying in touch can be very difficult for children with vision impairment thus increasing their risk of social isolation.

Some children with vision impairment may require close supervision to keep them safe when out and about. Due to a lack of clear guidance on how to safely support children who require this type of support, parents may be reluctant to take children out, increasing their risk of social isolation.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Government should create tailored guidance for blind and partially sighted children and adults on social distancing and how to get out and about safely, including clear rules around guiding, tactile learning and communication.

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

This situation and our surveys have highlighted inconsistencies in how services and schools support young people with VI, particularly in terms of equipment.

Some specialist equipment is provided by specialist local authority services. In other areas the responsibility is devolved to the school. Reduced budgets in local authorities raises concerns that specialist equipment may not be provided.

Specialist VI schools and colleges have been under increasing pressure to remain operational and this current crisis risks forcing some of these settings to close, reducing options for learners with VI who require this very specialist provision and whose local authority cannot provide it.

### **Recommendations:**

- Government must clarify funding and processes for local authority support services to provide or lend equipment for home use.
- Local authorities and schools should develop training and information sessions for parents so they can understand the support and equipment their child needs
- In its ongoing review of SEND, the Government must look at the impact the crisis has had on special schools and colleges and look to put particular measures in place so that the right mix of schools is available for children with SEND

### **4.9 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)**

The range of VI (in severity and thus impact) varies greatly in individuals. The effect is significant both in the short and long term.

Those with the most severe vision impairment will need specialist resources and equipment -e.g. Braille - and require a hands-on teaching approach. This cannot be provided in the home environment.

They will require specialist habilitation services for mobility and independence skills, which need face-to-face help.

Half of young people with VI have additional needs, often complex. The support and programmes needed require specialists and materials outside the home.

There are additional challenges for those who are due to move to a new setting. The lack of opportunity to plan and train with new staff, and the lack of opportunity for familiarisation visits, are a particular problem:

young people with VI referred by health services may not be able to access the assessments and initial visits needed by a QTVI.

Those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those for whom English is not their first language are at even greater risk, as parents may not have knowledge, skills or language to be able to engage with what is needed to support their child's learning, leaving their child without any structured support. (As a group, children with VI are more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds).

### **Recommendation:**

- The Department for Education should develop guidance on the additional support children who have been particularly disadvantaged during this crisis may need and make sure councils and schools have appropriate funding to provide this support.

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

The Covid-19 situation has further highlighted the inconsistencies in approach around the country as well as the vulnerability of the model of support for VI pupils.

In the current 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 there is some reluctance on the part of schools to invest in specialist support (from teachers) and equipment. Whilst in schools, young people with a vision impairment may be able to manage, the current situation has harmed their ability to continue to work independently without the necessary equipment and accompanying support.

Both surveys highlight inconsistencies in approach of local authorities and schools, which leaves children and families facing a postcode lottery. Services which have been well funded are much better positioned to survive this current situation and maintain a good level of support. However, in many areas, local authorities are unable to provide



specialist equipment, schools are also struggling leaving children with VI at home without any of the necessary support and equipment.

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 work is mainly with schools; most support services are not funded to provide direct support or equipment at home. They are therefore having to create new support systems from scratch, often with unsuitable resources.

The coronavirus situation has further highlighted the need to strengthen the funding for and role of local authority VI services in order to build resilience and flexibility into the system, should the need ever arise to manage a similar situation again. Given the low incidence of visual impairment, it is vital that local authority VI services have the appropriate level of funding rather than that funding being devolved to individual schools.

### **Recommendations:**

In addition to the issue of appropriation of funding there is a need for action in the following areas, in order to be able to prepare more effectively for any similar future situations:

- Government must clarify funding and processes for local authority support services to provide or lend equipment for home use.
- Local authorities and schools should develop training and information sessions for parents so they can understand the support and equipment their child needs
- Government work with councils and schools to advise them on the use of online learning platforms to ensure they are accessible and therefore that schools are complying with their duties under the Equality Act
- Government to work with councils and schools to ensure that suitable mechanisms for connecting families and children/young people with VI remotely are developed to reduce social isolation
- Public Health England should work with councils to advise them on contingency planning to continue face to face services in the safest way possible, as appropriate
- Government to make the VI curriculum statutory to ensure that during any future school closures, councils and schools continue to

provide support for the teaching of additional skills which form the VI curriculum e.g. mobility and independence skills.

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