

Written evidence submitted by Guide Dogs

The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services
Education Select Committee inquiry
Guide Dogs response
July 2020

About Guide Dogs

Guide Dogs provides a range of life-changing services to support the independence of people with sight loss across the UK. To support children and young people's education and development, Guide Dogs provides assistance through its Education Support Service and habilitation provision.

Guide Dogs' Education Support Service provides support, information and advice for families of children with a vision impairment via our telephone advice line, email and internet resources. We employ Specialist Education Support Officers who are all Qualified Teachers for the Visually Impaired (QTVIs). These Education Support Officers can offer independent and tailored advice to parents, carers and professionals regarding a child's educational access, including their statutory and legal entitlement. This may include guidance around transitions, Education Health and Care Plans, annual reviews and classroom support.

In addition, Guide Dogs is a leading provider of habilitation services in the UK. Habilitation is the training and support needed for blind and partially sighted children and young people to gain skills they need to move around independently. It includes mobility skills, special orientation, auditory skills, navigation skills and independent living skills. The SEND Code of Practice recognises the need for habilitation for visually impaired children and this specialist support is provided by qualified Habilitation Specialists that support children and young people with vision impairment within an educational setting (from nursery all the way through to university and postgraduate study), in public spaces and in the home.

Alongside our services, we campaign to remove barriers that prevent blind and partially sighted people living the life they choose. It is estimated that there are around 41,000 CYP with sight loss across the UK, with approximately 35,500 CYP aged 0-25 living in England.¹

¹ RNIB, Sight Loss Data Tool

Although the delivery of our face-to-face services has been affected by social distancing measures due to the coronavirus outbreak, we continue to support families through our Education Support Service and are rolling out our new “Hab@Home” delivery method: an alternative virtual support model which include regular telephone support so the child or young person do not lose skills, on line resources to support parents. A quarter of the Local Authorities that we support have taken up this offer.

Recommendations

1. The Department for Education should issue guidance for schools on supporting children and young people (CYP) with sight loss at this time. In particular, guidance is required on the return to school process, and in the event of further school closures to make sure that remote learning is accessible for CYP with sight loss.
2. Funding for additional habilitation support is needed to ensure that CYP with sight loss do not fall behind in skills development.

Impact on habilitation services

Face-to-face contact is a fundamental part of delivering habilitation: a child who can see will typically develop skills through watching and imitating what family members and other people do in everyday situations. Children and young people (CYP) with a vision impairment need to develop different strategies to learn everyday skills such as walking, dressing and using public transport, and habilitation often uses touch to help develop these skills.

Covid-19 restrictions have naturally significantly impacted on habilitation services. At the start of the pandemic, Guide Dogs developed alternative methods to support CYP and their families. Our new “Hab@Home” service aims to provide an alternative to face-to-face delivery, offering digital resources and regular contact to CYP and their families over the phone or via video calls. However not all local authorities participated in this opportunity, and the level of support some children has received has been unclear. This is on top of the fact that habilitation provision between local authorities was already widely variable.

The lack of habilitation provision will have a particularly significant impact on children and young people who are due to start education, in a school where the layout has changed, or are transitioning between schools, further education or adult services over the coming months. Habilitation input is crucial during these transitions, both in preparing the child or young person for changes and supporting teaching staff in the educational environment or adult service.

Habilitation provision during this transitional stage often supports familiarisation around the school building, learning routes around school, and learning how to get to and from school safely and independently. It often also involves teaching sighted guide techniques to staff within the education setting and completing environmental audits. Much of this practical teaching will not be possible if current restrictions remain in place. It is also difficult to conduct an environmental audit without being physically present. This could result in significant stress and anxiety for CYP and their families in the coming months.

Guide Dogs is sharing resources with parents, professionals and CYP service users to prepare for the transition, but we remain concerned that more is needed for children with sight loss to feel safe and confident in their classrooms.

The lack of habilitation services will also have a significant impact on early years. Habilitation interventions over this time can be vital to support the development of key early years milestones, as well as helping parents understand how they can best support their child's development. Most of this work is normally conducted face-to-face within the family home, with observations by the Habilitation Specialist being key to assessment, delivering activities and monitoring progress. It is unlikely that children with additional or complex needs who were in receipt of occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech and language therapy are still being supported by those professionals, so the impact is even more significant.

As restrictions loosen, it is likely that many CYP with sight loss will need additional habilitation support to recap on skills that they may have forgotten over this period, learn new skills which relate to the pandemic such as social distancing, changes in how they move around a school or shop, and staying safe on public transport.

Challenges with remote learning

While children with SEND were entitled to remain in school during the lockdown period, most families that Guide Dogs work with did not send their children to school, leaving them reliant on remote learning. A survey of families with a CYP with sight loss, conducted in May by sight loss sector organisations, including Guide Dogs, found that only 2% reported that their child was still attending school².

From calls to the Guide Dogs helpline, we have heard mixed reports on contact with schools while pupils were not attending. The survey found that 44% of families had only had contact with their child's school generally, rather than a specified person suitable for supporting the child's sight loss³, meaning there has been no contact with the child's Qualified Teacher for the Visually Impaired (QTVI) nor with the child's teaching assistant or SEND coordinator.

Calls to the Guide Dogs education helpline have also highlighted challenges with accessing children's schoolwork remotely. School materials have been sent that are inaccessible, for example, without descriptions for images, or being formatted in a way that the child cannot read it or use a screen-reader.

In one instance, a local authority issued a child with an iPad so that they could access their schoolwork, yet the settings were locked so the family weren't able to turn on the accessibility functions of the iPad. This appears to be due to lack of awareness of the needs of pupils with sight loss and how best to cater for them. Often there are straightforward solutions, but the difficulty comes in families having to "fight" to ensure their child can access education remotely.

While there has been a drive for many services to go digital, some families do not have access to smart devices or broadband. This excludes them from online support such as digital materials and activities, video calls or Zoom groups. There is also the issue of accessing alternative resources where English is not the first language and interpreters may not be available. This significantly impacts on education and for delivering alternative forms of habilitation.

Return to school

² Vision Impairment Sector Survey to Families of CYP with sight loss, conducted May 2020 - see response to Education Select Committee inquiry

³ *ibid*

The Department for Education advised schools and local authorities to carry out risk assessments for pupils with an EHC Plan in the first waves of students returning. There has been a necessary focus on the practical safety of pupils and staff in the first instance, but as social distancing continues, it is important the emphasis shifts from simply helping students with sight loss to access educational support, to ensuring that students are supported to reach their full potential in this difficult context.

We recognise that there are limitations for all pupils at this time, but blind and partially sighted children and young people are likely to be at a particular disadvantage because:

- Children transitioning to a new educational setting, or existing pupils needing to learn a new school layout, will have additional support needs to enable them to learn about the new environment and routes around their school to ensure their inclusion.
- Social distancing is particularly challenging for people with sight loss and it is highly likely that the majority will need support from peers and staff to enable them to social distance. Additionally any signage on new routes around schools needs to be accessible to all.

We do not feel the current broad SEND guidance for returning to school adequately provides advice for this low incidence, high needs group, which could lead to pupils feeling excluded. We recommend the Department for Education:

1. Work with local authorities, to produce guidance that identifies the challenges blind and partially sighted children and young people face in educational settings, and how they can support them reach their full potential. It is important that this guidance emphasises the need to communicate with parents and guardians about the adaptations that have been made, and how their child is being supported.
2. Ensure qualified habilitation specialists or qualified teachers of children and young people with vision impairment (QTVI) are made available to each school who has a child with sight loss attending to advise on their needs and adaptations that could be made. If needed, once face to face support is able to take place,

this habilitation specialist or QTVI should be able to work with the child to help them understand their new surroundings.

3. As pupils return to school, the Department for Education to monitor the characteristics of pupils returning to educational settings and those remaining at home to ensure that pupils with special educational needs - including those with sight loss - are not being excluded and disadvantaged.

For more information, please contact Chris Theobald, Public Affairs Manager

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