# Still Left Out of Learning: Local Authority Specialist Services for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment, Freedom Of Information Request, 2021

**March 2022**

## Summary

* This briefing outlines the results of RNIB’s 2021 Freedom of Information request (FOI) into local authority specialist educational support for children with vision impairment (VI) in England.
* Children and young people with VI require specialist support to access education and learn skills which other children pick up incidentally by observing others and visually taking on information.
* RNIB’s new FOI research found funding for specialist VI education services is not stable. Three quarters of local authorities have cut or frozen VI education services budgets at least once in the last four years.
* This is despite a gradual increase in children and young people using VI services, meaning local authorities are having to make their budgets stretch further.
* Many authorities are also decreasing or only maintaining the number of specialist teachers they employ, stretching provision further.
* One in eight children and young people who require essential habilitation support (support which can help them to develop independent living or mobility skills) are not receiving that support, and are on a waiting list to be assessed.
* Children and young people face a postcode lottery for the specialist support they need to participate in education and access all the opportunities childhood has to offer.
* In the consultation on the newly published SEND Review green paper we will be calling on the Government to tackle the postcode lottery of specialist VI provision, provide more funding to local authorities to deliver this vital service, and ensure there are enough specialists to provide the support children with vision impairment need.

## Introduction

Children and young people with vision impairment (VI) require specialist provision to learn on equal terms with sighted children, enabling them to develop the skills they need to succeed at school, eventually live independently as adults, and enter employment.

Low incidence of vision impairment means that most mainstream teachers or Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) will have relatively few opportunities to develop or maintain expertise on vision impairment. Therefore, to learn these skills, children with VI need direct, high quality specialist support. This support comes from Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (QTVIs) and Qualified Habilitation Specialists (QHSs) working both in mainstream settings and specialist schools and colleges.

## Key findings

Our annual Freedom of Information request (FOI) continues to demonstrate a system of specialist VI provision under significant pressure. Despite more children and young people requiring and accessing specialist support, many services have experienced budget cuts and inconsistent funding. More than three quarters of local authorities have cut or frozen their budgets at least once over the last four years.

In addition, almost two thirds of local authorities reported a decrease or freeze in full time QTVIs, affecting almost two thirds of children and young people accessing VI support. The research also found low numbers of children and young people with VI accessing habilitation support to develop their mobility and independent living skills.

The FOI highlights that structures, practices and budgets for specialist support vary significantly across local authorities. Children and young people face a postcode lottery to determine whether they will receive the specialist support they are entitled to.

As provision becomes increasingly stretched, we remain concerned that access to vital specialist support is likely to be reduced. This could impact not only a child or young person’s education and childhood, but also potentially their later life, including their ability to find employment.

## The research

RNIB contacted all 152 local authorities in England, asking a range of questions about current and future specialist services for children and young people with vision impairment. 142 of the 152 local authorities in England responded or had a response provided from a consortium, giving a response rate of 93 per cent.

The research found:

* Service budgets are changeable and not secure from one year to the next, with over three quarters of local authorities facing a budget cut or freeze at least once over the past four years.
* The total number of pupils aged 0-25 on vision impairment service caseloads, or known to these services, was 30,082. This is likely to be an underestimate as not all local authorities responded; however, it still represents an 8 per cent increase in the number of children and young people accessing VI services since 2017, indicating that these services need more funding, not less.
* The number of children and young people using braille as their sole medium also increased by 9 per cent over the past three years. These children need high levels of specialist support.
* A gradual increase in children and young people using the VI service and those requiring high levels of specialist support means local authorities are having to make their budgets stretch further.
* Despite increased need, just under two thirds (63 per cent) of local authorities reported a decrease or freeze in full time QTVIs, affecting almost two thirds of children and young people accessing VI support (19,154 children and young people).
* Only one in five children on the active caseload (19 per cent) are receiving or waiting to be assessed for habilitation support to develop their mobility and independent living skills. Of these, one in eight children and young people are waiting to be assessed.
* The research also found criteria for allocating levels of support and for consideration of EHCP assessment varied considerably across local authorities. The curriculum frameworks used to plan the delivery of education services also differed greatly. This variation points to an inconsistent delivery of education support for children and young people with VI.

## Recommendations

Specialist support for children and young people with VI is vital, and there is clear evidence that this service has become increasingly under-resourced in recent years.

At a time when there is a national focus on how children and young people can catch up on missed opportunities after the pandemic-related disruption to their education, it is vital that the support from specialists for children and young people with VI is maintained and protected.

To ensure children and young people with VI have equality of opportunity in education, we are calling on Government to:

1. Tackle the postcode lottery of specialist provision for children and young people with VI by ensuring consistency of funding and eligibility criteria across England. RNIB and partners have developed a [Curriculum Framework for Children and Young people with Vision Impairment (CFVI).](https://www.rnib.org.uk/health-social-care-and-education-professionals/education-professionals/curriculum-framework-children-and-young-people-vision-impairment-cfvi) The CFVI has been developed to support children and young people with vision impairment access an appropriate and equitable education. We are eager to engage with the Department for Education to ensure that the framework reaches every child with VI in England, through measures such as being referred to in official guidance or receiving statutory status.
2. Provide adequate and protected high needs funding for local authorities to deliver specialist education services which meet the needs of children and young people with VI from 0-25.
3. Take immediate action to boost the numbers of Qualified Teachers Vision Impairment (QTVI) and Qualified Habilitation Specialists. This should include a clear and fully-funded plan of action to improve recruitment and opportunities to qualify into the profession, and retention of the current workforce.

For more information, contact PublicAffairs@rnib.org.uk

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| About RNIBThe Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) is one of the UK’s leading sight loss charities and the largest community of blind and partially sighted people. Every day, 250 people begin to lose their sight. We want society, communities and individuals to see differently about sight loss. In our 150th year, RNIB renewed our focus on creating a world where there are no barriers to people with sight loss. |