Protecting specialist services for children with vision impairment
Advice for local authorities

The purpose of this leaflet is to ensure that local authority officers understand the importance of maintaining specialist education services for children with vision impairment at a time when budgets are subject to spending constraints, as well as the legal implications of making any changes. RNIB would be pleased to advise local authorities on the issues raised in this document.

The impact of vision impairment on learning

Vision is our most powerful sense, providing instant access to information and helping us to make sense of the world around us. It plays a vital part in children’s play and their development of language and social interaction. Most teaching approaches take vision for granted, so making sure that children with visual difficulties achieve their full educational potential presents significant challenges. In order to understand and address these challenges, schools need specialist advice from qualified teachers of children with vision impairment (QTVI).

There are many different causes of vision impairment and they affect people’s sight in different ways. The functional effects range from moderate partial sight through to complete blindness. Some eye conditions affect central vision, making it hard to detect the details of what you are looking at. Others may affect peripheral vision, creating difficulties in finding your way around. Some children have patchy vision with a mixture of clear and blank areas and others may see everything as a blur. Wearing glasses may help some children but not all, and glasses alone will not remove the effect of a vision impairment. A small number of children are born with no sight, only some of whom will have the cognitive ability to learn through braille.

Understanding the population

RNIB estimates that around two children per 1,000 of the population up to the age of 18 have a vision impairment of sufficient severity to require specialist educational support [1,2,3]. This amounts to around 25,000 children and young people, making it a low incidence special educational need and disability (LISEND) which is characterised as follows:

- A need which has the potential to have an adverse impact on learning and development unless additional measures are taken to support the child/young person.
- The prevalence rate is so low that a mainstream setting is unlikely to have sufficient knowledge and experience to meet these requirements. Settings will need to obtain specialist support and advice on how to ensure equitable access and progression (against national standards).
- The prevalence rate is so low that any formula for allocating specialist resources for additional needs, which is based on proxy indicators of need, will not reflect the true distribution of children and young people identified as having low incidence SEND.

National Sensory Impairment Partnership (www.natsip.org.uk)
Within the population of children with vision impairment there is extensive diversity relating to:

- The extent of visual loss. Severe vision impairment or blindness can substantially delay early childhood development and learning [4], with some children following an atypical developmental pathway [5]. Even a relatively moderate vision impairment can be significant, especially if there are delays in identifying and responding to it.

- The existence of additional SEN (special educational needs). At least 50 per cent of children with vision impairment have additional disabilities and/or special educational needs. Around 30 per cent have severe and complex needs [1,3]. There is a higher than average prevalence of vision impairment in the population of children with learning difficulties and there is evidence to suggest that many children in special schools have undiagnosed visual conditions [6,7].

- Levels of educational attainment. Many children – particularly those whose vision impairment is their only SEN – perform very well at school and continue into further and higher education. However there is evidence that children with vision impairment and additional SEN are at significant risk of under achieving [8,9].

**The role of specialist support services**

QTVIs form part of a specialist team which also includes teaching assistants, mobility officers and ICT officers. QTVIs hold a specialist mandatory qualification, the importance of which is recognised by the Department for Education and Ofsted.

“Most services visited ensured a high level of expertise by encouraging staff to obtain nationally recognised qualifications in specific types of need.” Ofsted [10].

QTVIs carry out a central role in the education of children with vision impairment from birth, including:

- managing referrals from health to education
- providing direct support to babies and young children with vision impairment and their parents
- assessing children’s functional vision and liaising with health professionals
- advising in mainstream and specialist settings on curriculum access, independent learning and social inclusion
- guiding the work of other professionals such as teaching assistants
- teaching specialist skills (for example braille) to children and developing the visual and communication skills of those with additional or complex needs
- supporting students through transition into post-16/FE education and independent adulthood.
The SEND Green Paper “Support and Aspiration” [11] makes reference to the importance of specialist support services, commenting that “where schools are able to draw on the advice and guidance provided by specialist support services, this can make a powerful difference to a child’s progress and their happiness in schools” (para 5.30).

**Considerations when making decisions that may impact on services**

There are a range of considerations and legal requirements to take into account when making any decisions that may impact on specialist education services for children with vision impairment. RNIB supports the following key steps identified by NDCS in their publication “Protecting specialist education support services for deaf children” [12].

1) **Assess and audit provision**

To ensure you are making fully informed decisions, you need comprehensive and up-to-date data on children with vision impairment in your area.

- The total number of babies, children and young people in your area, their age, and educational placements.
- The needs of the children in your area, and their families. This will include information on level of vision impairment, additional disabilities and use of additional languages.
- The educational outcomes achieved by children in your area and whether the results are in line with those of other children. The National Sensory Impairment Partnership (NatSIP) has developed a range of tools to help identify outcomes and how services are adding value (www.natsip.org.uk).
- The provision (including resource provisions and special schools) that is available both within and outside your local authority and how this provision matches government quality standards.

2) **Quality standards**

Quality standards can help you deliver a better, more cost-effective service that improves outcomes and reduces the need for costlier intervention in later life. Quality standards for specialist services for children with special educational needs have been produced by the Department for Education [13]. They illustrate good practice and are an important tool in helping to develop local provision and support.
3) Arranging provision

Section 7.84 of the SEN Code of Practice [14] states that “if it appears to the [local authority] that a child has sensory difficulties, the [local authority] must obtain educational advice from a teacher qualified to teach children who are... visually impaired as well as from the school or setting.”

Local authorities are also required under the Education Act 1996 to assess the needs of disabled children and, if necessary, ‘determine’ their needs through a statement. Services cannot be withdrawn from these children without a reassessment of their needs. Many local authorities are able to provide specialist support to children with vision impairment at Early Years/School Action Plus without the need for a statement. Reducing support is likely to trigger more requests for statutory assessment, which will increase spending in the medium term.

4) Ensuring the funding system delivers help to where it is needed

Because vision impairment is a low incidence disability, children are unevenly distributed across the population. RNIB believes that funding for specialist education support services for children with vision impairment should be held centrally by local authorities. The danger of delegating this funding to schools is well recognised by Ofsted [10]:

“The delegation of funding for support services had a negative effect on the provision for some pupils with SEN. It diminished the capacity of many LEAs to monitor the progress of pupils with SEN and reduced the range and quantity of specialist staff available to provide advice and support.”

The Department for Education has recognised the risks that arise from delegation of funding for services for children with low incidence needs. In successive announcements, the Department has acted to ensure that funding for these services would not be recouped from the Local Authority Central Spending Equivalent Grant (LACSEG) as a result of the Academies programme.

5) Equality duties

Any proposed changes to services must meet the obligations set out under the Equality Act 2010 to promote equality of opportunity between disabled persons and other persons and to take steps to take account of a person’s disability. Local authorities must demonstrate they have had due and specific regard to how any changes will impact on children with vision impairment. This will require the local authority to provide an audit trail or documentation to demonstrate this.

Department for Education guidance on the Act can be found at: www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/policiesandprocedures/equalityanddiversity/a0064570/the-equality-act-2010
6) SEN Test of Improvement

Government guidance on planning and developing special educational provision [15] states that:

“When proposing any reorganisation of SEN provision... LAs [local authorities]... will need to demonstrate to parents, the local community and decision makers how the proposed alternative arrangements are likely to lead to improvements in the standard, quality and/or range of educational provision for children with special educational needs... Proposals which do not credibly meet these requirements should not be approved and decision makers should take proper account of parental or independent representations which question the LA’s own assessment in this regard.”

This is known as the “SEN Test of Improvement” and should be applied to any proposed change to provision.

7) Consultation

Before making any changes to services you should seek the views of children and young people with vision impairment, their parents and the professionals who work with them.

The law requires that any consultation:

- allows respondents to make an informed response
- ensures adequate time for responses
- genuinely takes responses into account and is conducted with an open mind.

Regional commissioning

RNIB strongly encourages local authorities to consider regional commissioning as a way of delivering better services whilst achieving valuable economies of scale. Many local authorities attempt to meet the diverse needs of all children and young people with vision impairment with just one or two QTVIs. It is highly unlikely that such a small team will have the range of skills and expertise needed.

The importance of regional commissioning has been recognised by the Department for Education in “Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability - Progress and next steps” [16]:

“Reciprocal provision and placement arrangements across boundaries were seen as helpful in encouraging stronger regional provision and better co-ordinated services, with joint-commissioning, pooling of resources and shared training opportunities offering real efficiencies.” (5.48)
References


Checklist

RNIB maintains that local authorities need clear answers to the following questions before they approve any decisions to make changes to specialist education support services for children and young people with vision impairment.

☐ Do you have reliable figures on the number of children and young people who are blind or partially sighted in the area, their education progress and the outcomes they achieve?

☐ Have you audited existing provision to check compliance with Department for Education quality standards?

☐ In proposing any changes, can you demonstrate that you have had due and specific regard to the needs of all children and young people with vision impairment and the impact on their educational progress?

☐ Have you consulted with parents of blind and partially sighted children on any proposed changes and demonstrated that you have taken due regard of their views?

☐ Have you considered joint working with other local authorities to maximise the benefits from economies of scale while improving the quality of education and range of settings available to children and families?

☐ Have you sought advice from your local authority compliance officer to confirm that your proposals and the way in which they have been developed are not open to legal challenge?

For further information and advice about the issues covered in this leaflet, please go to rnib.org.uk/researchandpolicy and follow the link to “Local Authority VI service cuts” or email RNIB’s Children, Young People and Families team at cypf@rnib.org.uk

RNIB offers practical support, advice and information to anyone with sight loss and those who work with them.

We support education professionals to work effectively with blind and partially sighted learners from birth to 25, including those with complex needs. Our goal is to ensure every child with sight loss has the best possible start in life and goes on to achieve their full potential.

For more information scan this code or visit: rnib.org.uk/educationprofessionals

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