**Education Provision for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment in Wales (2023)**

**May 2023**

RNIB Research and Insight

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RNIB Cymru

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# Foreword

Children and young people with vision impairment in Wales deserve equitable opportunities to thrive in education and beyond, alongside their sighted peers.

With the implementation of the 2018 Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (ALNET) Act and Code underway, we were prompted to request information on the structure, organisation and funding of the 22 Local Authority Vision Impairment Services, their current caseloads, habilitation services, and understanding of the new Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI). This is to examine to what extent children and young people with vision impairment in Wales are currently receiving the level and type of support they need to develop their independence, access education and realise their potential.

This report also examines the provision of Qualified Teachers of children and young people with Vision Impairment (QTVIs) in schools across Wales. QTVIs are a fundamental part of the educational pathway of pupils with vision impairment and must be effectively resourced.

RNIB would like to thank the following organisations for their assistance with this Freedom of Information Request: Guide Dogs Cymru, The Welsh Association of Vision Impairment Educators (WAVIE) and Pembrokeshire Local Authority Sensory Service. We also thank all 22 Local Authorities for responding to our request.

The report indicates an active service caseload of 1,663 children and young people with vision impairment across the country. It is the responsibility of society, and Welsh Government, to ensure them the best possible educational experience. We look forward to working together to raise aspirations, attainment, and the ability to meet the needs of our children and young people with vision impairment in Wales.

**Ansley Workman**

Director, RNIB Cymru

# Glossary

Here we explain the acronyms used in this report with their definitions. For ease, we have used some terms - such as teaching assistant and Local Authority - but we acknowledge different terms are used both across Wales and elsewhere. There are two columns in this table. The first column contains the acronym, and the second column contains the definition.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ALN | Additional Learning Needs |
| CFVI | Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment |
| CYP | Children and young people |
| FEI | Further Education Institution |
| FOI | Freedom of Information |
| FTE | Full time equivalent  |
| LA | Local Authority |
| NatSIP | National Sensory Impairment Partnership |
| QTMSI | Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Multi-Sensory Impairment |
| QTVI | Qualified Teacher of Children with Vision Impairment  |
| ROVI | Rehabilitation Officer for the Visually Impaired |
| RQHS | Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialist |
| TA | Teaching Assistant  |
| VI | Vision impairment |

# Executive Summary

For children and young people with VI to have equitable access to education, provision needs to be delivered consistently, through adequate and protected funding. In January 2023, RNIB Cymru conducted a freedom of information request with all local authorities in Wales. This focused on current and future education provision for children and young people with vision impairment.

The key findings are outlined below.

## Key findings

**Service provision – budget cuts**

* VI services providing support across six local authorities have been affected by an overall decrease in budgets from 2020/21 to 2022/23.
* Three local authorities indicated that specialist provision may be changed for children and young people with a VI as a result of budget changes.

**Team structures – need for specialist lead teachers**

* VI services providing support across 12 local authorities reported having no strategic lead with the mandatory qualification for QTVI or a lead QTVI. This represents provision for over half the local authorities in Wales.

**Patchwork of provision – children and young people in some areas are missing out on vital support**

The level of specialist support available varies widely across authorities:

* Ten local authorities confirmed having over 50 children or young people with a visual impairment per QTVI.
* The ratio of QTVI to children and young people ranges from 1:13 to 1:85
* The time between referral and an initial visit from a QTVI ranges from 2 weeks to 2-3 months.

**Habilitation**

* The percentage of children and young people on VI service active caseloads who are accessing habilitation support ranges from below 9% to 48%.
* Waiting times for habilitation support vary from 1 week to 12 months.

# Introduction

Provision of specialist education support for children and young people (CYP) with vision impairment (VI) is essential to ensure that they are not disadvantaged in their education.

RNIB Cymru issued a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to all Local Authorities and Education Consortia in Wales. It is planned to be an annual FOI in order to understand, monitor and track trends over time in the provision of specialist education services for children and young people with VI.

In January 2023 RNIB Cymru submitted an FOI request to 22 Local Authorities in Wales asking a range of questions about the current and future education provision for children and young people with VI.

The FOI requests covered the following:

* Funding arrangements
* Changes to provision
* Budget
* Caseload
* Support settings
* Staffing arrangements
* Additional and support staff
* Habilitation support
* Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment.

Of the 22 Local Authorities (LAs) in Wales, all responded. Of the five education consortia, two provided a joint response rather than individual responses from the constituent local authorities as their budget and staffing was combined/managed by the consortium.

The five Education Consortia are:

* **Central South Consortium (CSC) –** covering Bridgend, Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf and the Vale of Glamorgan.
* **Education Achievement Service (EAS)** – covering Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport, and Torfaen.
* **North Wales Regional School Improvement Service (GwE)** – covering Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Isle of Anglesey, and Wrexham.
* **Partneriaeth** – covering Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, Swansea.
* **Mid Wales Education Partners (MWP)** – covering Powys and Ceredigion.

Neath Port Talbot is not part of a consortium.

# Findings

## Service provision and organisation

###  Funding arrangement

Education budgets in Wales are complex, with some being managed by consortia and some managed by individual local authorities. However, all confirmed their budget for specialist support for children and young people with VI was centrally funded.

###  Changes to provision

Three local authorities reported that, in the previous 12 months, there had been changes to their budget which affect the way in which provision for children and young people with VI is funded, structured or staffed. One of these authorities and two additional authorities indicated that there are current or proposed reviews of the VI service that are likely to affect the way that support for children and young people with VI is provided or funded.

Worryingly, one local authority stated that 18 children and young people with VI were receiving reduced support due to a restructure of their service which happened in the past 12 months.

##  Budget

In the FOI request, we asked authorities to provide the service budget across three separate years, 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23 and all responded. Some budgets were held within an overarching Education Consortium. In this case, we have analysed the consortium in place of individual Local Authorities.

VI services covering 15 local authorities reported an overall increase in budget between 2020/21 and 2022/23.

VI services covering six local authorities reported two budget cuts in the three-year period; one local authority reported one budget cut in the same period.

## Caseload

###  Caseload

In Wales there are 1,663 children and young people with VI currently on local authority VI service active caseloads. VI services providing support across ten local authorities have over 50 children on their active caseload for every QTVI. In one of these authorities there are 85 children for each QTVI. With high caseloads, the specialists needed to teach and support the development of specialist skills are under significant pressure in terms of time and resource as illustrated by one respondent:

“Our caseload … has increased significantly without any increase in QTVI hours. There is significant pressure on training and quality of resources provided to schools as we strive to maintain recommended NatSIP allocated hours.”

VI services providing support across 17 local authorities reported an average wait time from referral to an initial visit from a QTVI of two weeks or under. Worryingly, one local authority reported a wait time of two to three months and another did not supply this information.

Table 1 below shows the breakdown of children by year group or progression step.

**Table 1: Number of CYP with VI by progression step**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Year/age group** | **Number of children** |
| Progression Step 1 – Nursery to reception | 111 |
| Progression Step 2 – Year 1 to year 3 | 332 |
| Progression Step 3 – Year 4 to year 6 | 348 |
| Progression Step 4 – Year 7 to year 9 | 382 |
| Progression Step 5 – Year 10 to year 11 | 259 |
| Years 12 and 13 | 124 |
| 18 to 25 years | 52 |
| Other | 55 |

###  Support settings

All local authorities or education consortia stated that they provide support within the child’s home, in pre-school and early years settings and in school settings. All but two provide support in settings where the child is cared for by a childminder (outside of the home). When asked if they provided support in other settings, three local authorities specified playgroups while the other local authorities gave no additional information.

Two local authority VI teams provide support for students in further education institutions (FEIs) as part of the service offer; four authorities set up service level agreements with FEIs on a case-by-case basis with one of these also providing habilitation support, recognising its importance in enabling access to education.

“Whilst we do deliver Habilitation support to those between 16 and 18 who are not in education, we are not mandated to do so. ROVIs start to work with young people from 18, so we meet this gap even though we do not have to.”

In three local authorities FEIs are reported to have their own specialist staff and five local authorities report providing appropriate support for transition to further education. Notably, a number of authorities have offered additional information highlighting that provision for post-16 is under review as part of the implementation of the ALN system.

###  Staffing arrangements

When asked about the qualifications of the person with responsibility for strategic management, VI services for only ten local authorities said this was a QTVI. Others reported that the strategic manager was a Qualified Teacher of the Deaf or held no mandatory qualification for sensory impairment. Not having a lead QTVI could potentially impact on the professional development, experience, specialist support and supervision of the team.

There are a total of 39.1 FTE posts for QTVIs and QTMSIs across 22 local authorities. All of those working as specialist teachers hold the mandatory qualification except two who are in training. There are currently no QTVI vacancies unfilled.

###  Additional and support staff

Within Wales, Local Authority VI services and education consortia reported that together they employed a total of 20.4 FTE Teaching Assistants. Additional staff in specialist roles are presented in Table 2 below. Some of the 20.4 FTE TAs are also specialist braille support staff so are counted in both totals.

**Table 2. Roles and numbers of FTE support staff**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Staff type** | **Number of staff members** |
| Habilitation Specialist | 14.6 |
| Habilitation Assistant | 0 |
| Trainee Habilitation Worker | 3 |
| Specialist Braille Support Staff | 24.48 |
| Resource Technicians (FTE) | 1 |
| ICT support technicians (FTE) | 1.2 |
| Dedicated early years staff (FTE) | 0 |
| Family Support Workers (FTE) | 0 |
| Admin/Secretarial (FTE) | 3.8 |
| Other Role (FTE) | 1 |

Two local authority VI services employ no specialist TAs or support staff which risks children and young people with VI relying on TAs in schools who may not have the requisite level of specialist knowledge and skills.

##  Habilitation Support

A total of 312 pupils are currently on active habilitation caseloads with a further 42 waiting to be assessed. Two authorities did not supply this information.

The percentage of CYP on LA VI service active caseloads accessing, or on a waiting list to access, habilitation support varies across authorities from below 9% to 48%, with the time from referral to an initial visit ranging from 1 week to approximately 12 months. This patchwork of inconsistent support has the potential to leave some CYP without the support they need to access education and develop their independence.

When asked how habilitation services are delivered, VI services providing support across 19 local authorities said they employ a habilitation specialist; VI services covering a further five local authorities said an external provider is commissioned to deliver the service (most commonly Guide Dogs). Two authorities said they use Rehabilitation Officers for Visually Impaired without the habilitation top-up, which raises issues around the lack of suitably qualified staff available to provide adequate specialist support in an education environment.

Providing habilitation support is the responsibility of education services across most of Wales. However, information from three authorities within a consortium paints a confused picture. A lack of clarity around who is responsible for providing habilitation services has the potential to result in children and young people not being able to access the specialist support they need.

## Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI)

We asked local authorities what existing frameworks or curriculums they used to support CYP with VI.

Being used across almost all authorities were the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment, the Developmental Journal and the NatSIP Learner Outcomes Framework. In use across the majority of authorities was Quality Standards for Habilitation.

Use of robust, evidenced frameworks across all authorities would bring about greater consistency in the level and type of support delivered across the country.

When asked if LAs were aware of the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI) 100 per cent said they were. VI services for 11 local authorities responded to say that they have been involved with the CFVI project as a consultation participant, resource provider, resource reviewer or reference group member.

Authorities were asked if they incorporated any aspects of the CFVI in their normal working practices; the majority of authorities said they use both the criteria and resources in assessment, planning and reports. VI services providing support across eight local authorities also shared that they are rolling out training to other educational support teams, medical professionals, educational professionals in mainstream settings and families.

“High Tarif / visit children have a Vision Support Plan based on the Areas of Learning in the CFVI. Outcomes have been written for each area of the Framework for these CYP.”

“[We are] starting to include key aspects into normal working practices and using the framework to set outcomes for learning. This will be developed further and become more embedded in practice”

“[We] can advise that training [on the CFVI] is delivered to all teams and information is to be shared with inclusion service management.”

# Conclusion

Specialist support for children and young people with VI is vital to enable them to access education and the wider world with as much independence as possible.

To ensure that children and young people with vision impairment now, and in the future, can access the support they need to thrive we are calling on the Welsh Government to:

* Recognise and reference the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment in ALN policies, guidance and documentation including any new ALN legislation.
* Provide adequate and protected high needs funding for local authorities to develop effective VI team structures and deliver a consistent level of specialist education services across Wales to meet the needs of children and young people with VI no matter where they live.
* Take immediate action to boost the numbers of Qualified Teachers for Vision Impairment (QTVIs) and Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialists (RQHSs). This should include a clear and fully funded plan of action to improve recruitment and opportunities to qualify into the profession.
* Support the skills development, and retention of the current workforce through investment in specialist training and career development opportunities.