# Left out of Learning: Local authority education provision for children and young people with vision impairment in England: 2020

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# i. Glossary

The following table is a glossary containing acronyms used in this report and their definitions. There are two columns. The first column contains the acronym and the second column contains the definition.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **CYP** | Children and Young People |
| **DfE** | Department for Education |
| **EHCP** | Education, Health, and Care Plan |
| **FOI** | Freedom of Information |
| **FTE** | Full-time Equivalent |
| **HI** | Hearing Impairment |
| **LA** | Local Authority |
| **MQ** | Mandatory Qualification |
| **MSI** | Multi-sensory Impairment |
| **NatSIP** | National Sensory Impairment Partnership |
| **QTMSI** | Qualified Teacher of children and young people with Multi-Sensory Impairment |
| **QTVI** | Qualified Teacher of children and young people with Vision Impairment |
| **RNIB** | Royal National Institute of Blind People |
| **SEN** | Special Educational Needs |
| **SEND** | Special Educational Needs and Disabilities |
| **TA** | Teaching Assistant |
| **ToD** | Teacher of the Deaf |
| **VI** | Vision Impairment |

# 1. Introduction

Provision for specialist educational support for children with a vision impairment is essential to ensure they are not disadvantaged in their education. In order to better understand and monitor the provision of specialist education services for children with a vision impairment, RNIB runs an annual survey of local authorities across England. This report summarises findings from the most recent Freedom of Information (FOI) survey in Autumn 2020.

It is important to note the timing of the FOI was six months since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. Although COVID was frequently mentioned by authorities, the true impact of the pandemic on services is not clear cut. Additional information would need to be collected in a future FOI to truly understand how the situation impacted on services during the pandemic and to what extent changes are likely to persist as the country emerges from it.

# 2. Key findings

**Service provision**

* Over the last three years over a third (35%) of local authorities have reported a decrease in their funding for VI services. 5,638 children and young people are supported by these local authorities that underwent budget cuts.
* While half reported an increase in budgets (54%) and 11% reported a freeze.
* Of the local authorities that saw budgets cut in 2019, 29% saw an increase in budget in 2020 while 35% saw their budgets being cut further in 2020
* 13% of LA’s have identified changes in the past 12 months that have affected the way provisions for children and young people with a vision impairment are funded or organised.
* 19% of local authorities have acknowledged current or proposed reviews of the VI service within the coming year that may affect the way said services are organised, managed or funded.

**Caseload and capacity**

* The total number of children and young people on active vision impairment caseloads, or known to vision impairment services, was 27,464 for 2020. This represents a 1% increase from 2019, and an overall 8% increase from 2017.
* However, the real caseload figures are likely to be higher as 19 local authorities did not respond to this year’s FOI.
* 11% of 133 local authorities have a QTVI caseload ratio of over 100. This is a 3% decrease from 2019.
* 36% of local authorities have reported an increase in full time QTVI’s compared with 2019.
* A similar proportion (35%) reported their QTVI numbers remained the same, and 29% reported a decrease.
* Of the total number of FTE QTVI’s, including those in training or due to begin training, there was a 1% decrease in 2020 compared to 2019.

# 3. Method

In October 2020, RNIB contacted all 151 local authorities in England, asking a range of questions about current and future education provision for children and young people with vision impairment. After consultation with local sensory services we decided to issue this FOI in October rather than earlier in the year due to the pandemic.

133 of the 151 local authorities in England responded or had a response provided from a consortium, giving an overall response rate of 88%. This is a decrease on the 97% response rate of 2019 (Edwards, 2019).

# 4. Findings

## 4.1 Service provision and organisation

### Funding arrangement

Of the 133 local authorities that responded to the FOI request, 94% centrally fund specialist support for pupils with vision impairment. A minority (3%) of local authorities said they partially delegated some or all of their funding to individual schools who purchased specialist support under the ‘traded services’ arrangement.

In total, just 11% of local authorities provided additional comments regarding their funding arrangements. Common themes include funding from Delegated Schools Grant and High Needs Budget agreed by directorate or centrally managed team, traded services for sixth form colleges and funding dependent on number of VI children.

### Changes to provision

#### Past changes to provision

Over the past 12 months only 12% of local authorities have made changes to the way provision for children and young people with vision impairment is funded or organised.

Changes amongst half of these local authorities were largely negative. For example, four authorities identified a restructure that removed several managerial roles within the team leading to “changes to criteria for involvement”. Another authority identified the “de-commissioning of the primary Sensory Resourced Provision” all together.

Two authorities have combined their sensory service with hearing support service which is being led by a single VI qualified manager. While another authority has introduced a new banding system to “better identify and allocate top up funding for children with special educational needs in mainstream schools”. It is unclear as to how this will effect services provided.

Five authorities identified COVID as being the key driving force behind their decision of delivering a more virtual service. One authority stated, “provision and organisation moved to virtual platforms, enhanced telephone contact in relation to COVID however since September school visits have been reinstated and home visits where a virtual alternative will not meet intended outcomes”.

**Consultations on past changes to provision**

Of the 13% of local authorities who have made changes to the way provision for VI are funded or organised, just over a quarter said they consulted with parents about these changes. Over a third (35%) consulted with both parents and VI organisations when making changes to VI service provisions.

However, 47% of local authorities said they did not consult with either parents or VI organisations.

Most local authorities who made changes to provisions did not provide reasons for their decision to consult, or not consult, parents and VI organisations. Of those who did provide an explanation, three local authorities said they consulted with parents, VI and other SEN specialism advisory teams regarding their satisfaction with the previous structure before implementing new changes.

A further two local authorities stated that there was no need for consultation as it was a “restructure of management” with no changes to the level of QTVI support being received.

#### Proposed changes to provision

Of the 129 local authorities who responded to this question, less than a quarter (19%) said there were current or proposed reviews of the VI service that will affect the way it is organised, managed or funded. 6% didn’t know whether there were any current or proposed reviews of the service and 74% did not have any current or proposed reviews.

Further information was provided by the 19% of local authorities who have current or proposed reviews. Three local authorities have already conducted reviews but are unable to implement the proposed changes relating to VI/ SEN services due to circumstances surrounding COVID- 19.

Of the remining local authorities, four have proposed changes to the way funding is distributed, 3 indicated a change in the current staffing models, while reviews for two other authorities have suggested a reduction of services such as QTVI and SEN.

### Budgets

In the 2020 FOI request, we asked authorities to provide the service budget across three separate years, 2018/19, 2019/20 and 2020/21.

Out of the total 151 authorities in England, three quarters have provided budget information. Not all were able to provide all years requested and not all were able to separate the service budget specifically for vision impairment education services from the sensory support budget or other combined budgets.

**Funding trends**

It was possible to analyse the VI service budgets provided by 116 individual authorities, representing three quarters of all authorities. In the three years between 2017/18 and 2020/21, 29 authorities cut their VI service budget (35%), which is likely to affect the VI support provided to the 5,638 children and young people within these LAs. 11% of LAs froze their budgets, whilst 54% increased budgets.

Amongst the authorities that had their funding cut, figures show just under £4 million has been lost from the service budget over the last year alone. This is a 17% increase from 2017 where a total of £3.4 million was lost from the service budget. It’s important to consider that budgets are not always recorded the same way each year.

Of the local authorities that saw an increase in budget in 2019, 42% saw a further increase in budget in 2020, while 35% had their budgets cut.

Of the local authorities that had their budgets cut in 2019, 29% saw an increase in budget in 2020 and 35% saw their budgets being cut further in 2020.

The overall number of children and young people accessing these services has increased by 8% from 2017 to 2020. However, it may be worth considering that the response rate for this year’s FOI is 9% less than 2019 which suggests that the number of children and young people accessing the service could in fact be higher.

Of the local authorities that increased their budget in 2017/18, only 37% had their budgets increased each year for three years. Whilst some local authorities are recognising the importance of the VI education service, others are failing to make the required investment to maintain service levels. A gradual increase in children and young people using the VI service mean two thirds of local authorities are having to make their budgets stretch further, which is likely to leave less funding available per head.

The evidence of budgets cuts alternated with budget rises suggests that service budgets are changeable and not secure from one year to the next. As numbers of children on the caseload tend to increase year on year, the reason for fluctuating budgets is not clear and is likely to be complex and managed differently in each local authority.

If we look at regional trends in funding, we can see that half the local authorities in London saw the biggest increase in funding over the last year, while the other half saw the second highest budget cuts. Whereas local authorities in the East of England were at the bottom of the list for the highest decreases in funding, as well as the lowest increase over the last year. This has been case for them since 2017. However, it is worth mentioning that local authorities in the East of England make up less than 10% of the responding LA’s, and London LA’s make up 20%.

The table below shows the proportion of authorities increasing, decreasing, or freezing budgets.

**Table: Annual budget trends shown as proportion of local authorities responding, 2017/18 to 2020/21**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Change 19/20 to 20/21 | Change 17/18 to 20/21 |
| Increase | 42 | 54% |
| No change | 17% | 11% |
| Decrease | 42% | 35% |
| Total LAs | 114 | 114 |

## 4.2. Children and young people supported by the service

### Caseload

The total number of children/young people aged 0-25 on vision impairment service caseloads, or known to services, was 27,464. This is likely to be an underestimate as five authorities did not provide any figures, and a further 19 authorities did not respond to the FOI request. In addition, some figures were suppressed and not counted in the year group/support level breakdowns by authorities who stated a figure of ‘less than five’ due to data protection.

Comparing figures from authorities that responded to the 2020 and 2017 FOI survey, the number of children with a vision impairment has increased by 8%. Despite the missing responses, this demonstrates that the number of children with a vision impairment accessing services is increasing. This mirrors similar growth trends seen in SEND figures published by the Department for Education (Department for Education, 2020).

23,365 CYP were recorded on active service caseloads with a further 4,099 CYP known to services. The split in caseload and CYP known to the service across different support levels is detailed in the table below.

**Table: Proportion on active caseload by group**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Support level | Proportion on active caseload |
| Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) | 49% |
| Special Education Need (SEN) Support | 44% |
| Not yet assessed | 5% |
| Other | 4% |

### Braillists

The total number of CYP supported across 110 local authorities using braille as their main or sole medium was 683. This figure is likely to be higher if dual media users were included however the question only asked about the main or sole medium.

23 authorities did not respond to this question or stated a figure of ‘less than five’ due to data protection. This represents nearly a quarter of authorities for which we have no data. If all LAs had responded, we estimate around 1,000 CYP will currently be using braille as their sole or main medium.

### Criteria for support levels and eligibility for EHCP assessment

When asked about the criteria used for allocating levels of support authorities could select multiple answers. Of 128 authorities, 88% responded that the NatSIP eligibility framework was used and 22% said that criteria were locally developed. Several authorities indicated that elements of locally developed framework were taken from NatSIP. This variance in criteria suggests no complete standardisation across the country although 2/3 use the NatSIP eligibility framework.

When asked if CYP with vision impairments are required to meet any specific eligibility criteria before being considered for assessment for EHCP, 57% said that a specific level or severity of vision impairment needs to be met. 19% responded that the CYP must be failing to make the expected level of progress. A further 4% said they are expected to attend a special school and 10% said they must have an additional SEND. Authorities were able to select multiple options and note other criteria not listed.

It is evident from the above figures that assessment criteria are not applied equally across the country, therefore hindering the eligibility of children with vision impairment to be equally assessed for ECHP. Thus, leaving children in some authorities without support while others in a similar situation elsewhere would receive this support.

A large number of authorities also used the ‘other’ option provided in the survey. Just under a third of authorities noted that CYP are assessed on individual circumstances for their eligibility of EHCP as opposed to strict criteria.

Several others stated that although “visual acuity is part of it, there needs to be evidence of the presence of vision impairment”. Other required the use of a medical diagnosis or involvement of an ophthalmologist.

## 4.3 Teachers and support staff

### QTVI posts

There are a total of 499 FTE posts for QTVI’s across 133 local authorities, this figure is inclusive of the those in training or due to begin training. 78% of QTVI’s hold the mandatory qualifications in VI, with a further 14% currently in or due to begin training. 5% hold QTMSI and only 3% hold both QTVI and QTMSI MQ.

36% of local authorities have reported an increase in full time QTVI’s compared with 2019. A similar proportion (35%) reported their QTVI numbers remained the same, and 29% reported a decrease. When compared with FTE QTVI figures over the last three years, 57% of local authorities recorded an increase. 12% recorded their QTVI figure remained the same, and 31% recorded a decrease.

The total active caseload was 23,365 across 133 local authorities, resulting in an average caseload ratio of 47 pupils to every FTE QTVI. 11% of the 133 local authorities had an average caseload ratio of over 100. This figure has decreased from 2017, which saw 13% of local authorities have an average caseload ratio of over 100.

Figures show a 1% decrease in full time equivalent QTVI from 2019 to 2020. However, the decrease in 2020 responses means we are unable to paint an accurate picture of QTVI numbers across local authorities.

If we look at regional trends, we can see that the South East have the overall highest number of QTVI’s (120 FTE QTVI) amongst their LA’s, especially since LA’s in this region make up just 15% of the total. They are followed closely by the North West (72.6) then London (57.7). The North East region has just 11 FTE QTVI’s.

**Teaching assistants**

The total number of TA posts (headcount of both full-time and part-time) across 129 local authorities is 694. However, this figure is likely to be higher as most TAs are employed directly by schools as opposed to sensory services.

Of the 129 local authorities, 55% recorded a decrease in the number of TA posts over the last year, this is an increase from 30% in 2017. Only 16% recorded an increase in the number of TA posts, while 30% recorded no change.

However, we are currently unable to accurately report on the number of TA’s supporting children with vision impairment. This is because TAs may not be known to the services as we have had a poor response to this question in recent years. In fact, in 2015 a similar survey of local authorities found over 2,700 TAs employed that the vision impairment education services were aware of. TAs tend to be employed directly by schools and gathering an accurate picture of the TA workforce across the country would be very difficult.

## 5 Conclusion

Children and young people with VI require a high level of specialist provision to learn on equal terms with sighted children. Having the right support in place can remove the barriers to learning and enable them to develop the specialist skills they need to succeed not just at school but as adults with full lives. Findings continue to show a steady change in specialist provision over the last three years, whether this year’s changes are due to Coronavirus or not is still unclear.

The number of children and young people accessing specialist provisions over the last three years has increased, along with the number of full time equivalent QTVI’s. This is in line with over half of local authorities reporting an increase in budgets across VI services. However, the lack of responses this year suggests that the above figures could in fact be quite different. There may be further cuts in the pipeline with nearly a quarter of local authorities reporting current or proposed reviews of the VI service. One has to consider if the current economic climate will play a large part in this.

The variations in service structure across the country is problematic and poses a challenge for us and the sector to accurately report on service provisions. Although Coronavirus has played a significant role in the way schools and VI services have been delivered, such as an increase in virtual learning, the full impact of this will not be known until the next set of FOI data has been gathered.

## 6. References

Edwards (2019) Freedom of Information (FOI) questions on local authority education provision for children and young people with vision impairment in England: 2018. RNIB. Accessible from [here](https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/knowledge-and-research-hub/research-reports/education-research).