# Specialist support for blind children

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This statement should be read alongside RNIB’s other

This statement should be read in the context of the Equality Act 2010, the Children and Families Act 2014, and the 2015 statutory guidance, ‘[SEND Code of Practice](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25): 0 to 25 years’.

This statement is supported by VIEW, the professional association of the vision impairment workforce.

## What we think

Sight plays a fundamental role in children’s play, development of language and social interaction. There are significant challenges to making sure that children with vision impairment achieve their full educational potential, as most teaching approaches take typical vision for granted.

Blind children in particular require high levels of specialist input to address crucial needs in their cognitive development, communication, social and independence skills. Examples of these skills include the ability to touch type and read back using a screen reader. Young children with profound vision impairment are at particularly high risk of ‘developmental setback’, with ‘plateauing’ or loss of cognitive and language skills, and increasing disorder of social communication skills. Early intervention that includes support from a practitioner with specialist knowledge, skills and understanding of childhood vision impairment is therefore a priority.

The exact nature of this intervention will vary according to the needs and skills of each individual child, the nature of their setting and other factors. However, we maintain that it must always include specialist input and advice from a qualified teacher of vision impairment (QTVI). Evidence shows that the QTVI is usually the key worker for blind children, assessing their needs and co-ordinating the provision to address these.

Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialists (RQHSs) are also key professionals that provide specialist support for blind children. They support children and young people to develop their mobility and independent living skills including getting to, from and around school, travelling around their community, independence skills such as dressing and washing and social communication skills to enable them to take part in social and leisure activities.

## What’s the current issue

An estimated 2 in every 1,000 children and young people up to the age of 18 in the UK have a vision impairment, of whom around 5 in every 10,000 are blind. There are between 900 and 1,000 children who use braille as their sole or main literacy medium in education. This makes children with vision impairment a low incidence group with most teachers only coming across one or two throughout their career, if any. That means it is unlikely that most teachers would build up the expertise and understanding to support these children’s needs.

While many local authorities make good provision for blind children, we are aware of considerable variation in levels of support around the country. Pressure on school and local authority budgets is commonplace in the current climate of financial austerity. We are particularly concerned that in some situations provision is being tailored to match available resources, rather than being based on a specialist assessment of need by a QTVI.

We are also aware that in some local authorities specialist input for blind children is confined largely to advisory work. Ongoing support in crucial areas, such as braille literacy, is being carried out by unqualified staff such as teaching assistants. We are also concerned that some blind children do not receive adequate support to address the social, emotional and independence needs that are often associated with profound vision impairment.

These practices go against both the letter and the spirit of the SEND Code of Practice (2015) which emphasises the importance of specialist support from QTVIs and habilitation officers and the need for specialist professionals to hold an appropriate qualification.

## Recommendations

We maintain that the entitlement of blind children to appropriate levels of specialist support must be protected from erosion through budgetary pressures. To achieve this, we are calling on the Department for Education to:

* Provide adequate and protected funding for local authorities to deliver specialist education services which meet the needs of children and young people with VI from 0-25.

We also maintain that schools and local authorities should apply the following principles and practices:

* The specialist needs of blind children must be determined by an independent assessment carried out by a QTVI.
* Averaged over time, any child learning through non-sighted means will require specialist support that is likely to be equal to or greater than 0.4 of a QTVI post.
  + A child may need more specialist support in the early stages of their development and learning, at any point when there are significant changes in their vision or other SEND, during periods of transition, to catch up on any missed learning during the coronavirus pandemic and/or where there are other factors such as additional disabilities or learning English as an additional language.
  + A child may need less support from a QTVI when they are settled in an educational setting with experienced, trained staff, they are proficient with access technology and have well established social communication, literacy and independence skills.
* Anyone supporting a child learning through braille who is not a QTVI should have a relevant qualification in braille and should be working under the close guidance of a QTVI.
* The overall support of a blind child will also depend on effective deployment and training of teaching assistants.
* Blind children should receive regular assessment and support from a qualified habilitation specialist or a mobility officer trained to work with children.
* QTVIs should provide regular training to classroom teachers and staff to help develop their understanding of vision impairment and the support and adjustments blind children need.

## What RNIB is doing

RNIB continues to work with partner organisations to campaign for better support for children and young people and young people with vision impairment, so they can reach their full potential in adult life. Many of our policy priorities are reflected in the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment which defines specialist skills development and best practice for children and young people with VI.

## Contact

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