# Left out of Learning: Local authority education provision for children and young people with vision impairment in England: 2019

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Authors: Emma Edwards and Tom Crawley.

With contributions from: Caireen Sutherland; Sarah Holton; Chrissie Pepper; Michael Wordingham; and Isabel Stanley.

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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.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **CPI** | Consumer Price Index |
| **CYP** | Children and Young People |
| **DfE** | Department for Education |
| **EHCP** | Education, Health, and Care Plan |
| **EYFS** | Early Years Foundation Stage |
| **FE** | Further Education |
| **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 |
| **PMLD** | Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties |
| **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 |
| **SLD** | Severe Learning Difficulties |
| **TA** | Teaching Assistant |
| **ToD** | Teacher of the Deaf |
| **VI** | Vision Impairment |

# 1. Introduction

Provision for specialist educational support for children with 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 2019.

# 2. Key findings

**Service provision**

* Over the past two years, a quarter (23%) of local authorities have cut funding for their VI service.
* A further 21% have frozen their budgets.
* When inflation is accounted for over the same period, it reveals that three quarters of local authorities cut or have not increased funding for their VI service in line with inflation.
* Over 5,000 children and young people with vision impairment are supported by services where budgets have been cut in the last two years. A further 13,300 CYP are accessing services that have failed to keep their budgets in line with inflation, meaning real term cuts to funding. In total, these children make up 61% of all children supported by VI services across England.
* There could be further cuts in the pipeline with a quarter (24%) of LAs reporting there are current or proposed reviews of the VI service that will affect the way it is organised, managed or funded.

**CYP supported by the service**

* The total number of pupils aged 0-25 on vision impairment service caseloads, or known to these services, was 30,326. This is likely to be an under estimate as not all local authorities responded, however it still represents a 7% increase from 2017 when data was last collected in full.
* The total number of braillists supported across 120 local authorities was 869. This figure would likely be much higher if figures were available for the remaining 32 authorities who did not supply figures.

**Caseload and capacity**

* Just over a quarter (28%) of 129 local authorities had an average QTVI caseload ratio of over 100, which is equivalent to 63 FTE QTVI posts. This figure has increased from 21% in 2017, which was equivalent to 43.2 FTE QTVI posts. A ratio of over 100 students per QTVI raises concerns about capacity to support high numbers of students.
* Over the past two years, 43% of local authorities recorded a decrease in the FTE QTVI posts. Across these authorities, almost 50 FTE QTVI posts were lost from 2017 to 2019.
* When asked about reduction in support, a quarter (23%) of authorities have reduced support for children due to service capacity or service restructure.
* 16% of VI service managers do not hold a mandatory qualification for VI, MSI or HI.

# 3. Method

In May 2019, RNIB contacted all 152 local authorities in England, asking a range of questions about current and future education provision for children and young people with vision impairment. 147 of the 152 local authorities in England responded or had a response provided from a consortium, a response rate of 97%. This is a marked increase on the 74% response rate of 2018 (Edwards, 2019).

To allow for the difference in response rates between 2018 and 2019, this report will make comparisons with responses from the 2017 FOI request to better understand trends. A similar near 100% response rate was achieved in 2017 (Flynn, 2018).

Following the FOI request, we also circulated a feedback questionnaire, to enable improvements to the structure and questions in future FOI requests.

# 4. Findings

## 4.1 Service provision and organisation

### Summary

* Of the 12% of authorities that have made changes to services in the past 12 months, two out of five did not consult parents or VI organisations when making changes to their VI service provision.
* Over the past two years, a quarter (23%) of local authorities have cut funding for their VI service.
* A further 21% have frozen their budgets.
* When inflation is accounted for over the same period, it reveals that three quarters of local authorities cut or have not increased funding for their VI service in line with inflation.
* Over 5,000 children and young people with vision impairment are supported by services where budgets have been cut in the last two years. A further 13,300 CYP are accessing services that have failed to keep their budgets in line with inflation, meaning real term cuts to funding. In total, these children make up 61% of all children supported by VI services across England.
* There could be further cuts in the pipeline with a quarter (24%) of LAs reporting there are current or proposed reviews of the VI service that will affect the way it is organised, managed or funded.

### Funding arrangement

Of the 147 local authorities that responded to the FOI request, 87% 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.

And 10% of authorities did not state whether their service funding was central, partially delegated or fully delegated.

In total, just over a quarter (27%) of authorities provided additional comments regarding their funding arrangements. Common themes include consortium or joint funding arrangements and traded services for some or all parts of VI support for post-16 education and further education colleges.

### Traded services

Of the 129 local authorities who responded the question about traded VI service support to maintained schools, 90% traded no elements of VI service support to maintained schools (including academies). Just 2% fully traded VI service support to maintained schools (including academies) and 8% partially traded support.

Some authorities who did not trade elements of VI service support to maintained schools, did trade support to Further Education colleges or individual support. 29 authorities partially traded VI service support to Further Education colleges and 25 fully traded this support. 18 local authorities traded some aspect of direct CYP individual support. Although, in most cases, authorities trading direct support said this only applied to independent school settings.

### Changes to provision

#### Past changes to provision

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

Changes in five services were positive, reflecting increased capacity or funding to the service. For example, one authority spoke of an “increase in funding to support increasing numbers of tactile learners…[and] additional provision of centrally employed Curriculum Access Specialists.” Another told us they had an “increased number of specialist Teachers employed by 1fte”

However, the same number of authorities (five) mentioned changes that would reduce support available to CYP, for example by reducing direct teaching or other measures to maintain the service with reduced capacity. One service stated “no reduction in budget but a reduction in levels of support due to a rise in Severely Sight Impaired CYP transitioning into secondary or arriving new to the LA.” A further seven authorities mentioned structural changes and it is unclear how these might impact learners.

Other specific changes mentioned include curriculum changes, professional training, management arrangement, increased parental involvement and increased collaboration between schools. Some local authorities said their team structure had changed to combine provision for VI service support with provision for hearing and multi-sensory impairments.

**Consultations on past change to provision**

Of the 12% of local authorities who have made changes to the way provision for children and young people with vision impairment is funded or organised in the past 12 months, all provided further information about who they consulted in making these changes.

Of the 12%, over half consulted with parents or VI organisations when making changes to VI service provision. However, only 39% of these consulted both parents and VI organisations. The remainder (39%), consulted neither parents or VI organisations when making changes to VI service provision.

Most local authorities who made changes to provision did not provide reasons for their decision to consult, or not consult, parents and VI organisations. Only two local authorities provided explanation that neither parents or VI organisations were consulted because there were no changes to “delivery or service specification”.

#### Proposed changes to provision

Of the 139 local authorities who responded to this question, almost a quarter (24%) said there were current or proposed reviews of the VI service that will affect the way it is organised, managed or funded. 9% didn’t know whether there were any current or proposed reviews of the service and 67% did not have current or proposed reviews.

Further information was provided by the 24% of local authorities who have current or proposed reviews. A quarter (eight authorities) expect to make no changes to VI service provision following reviews and five authorities had reviews that were yet to start or ongoing.

Of those that reported proposed changes to VI service provision, responses varied. Five involved proposed changes to the host provider and five more, changes to management structures. Nine local authorities are proposing to change some aspect of their service provision, including how services are provided across the county/borough, the roles of staff members, and how CYP are seen for reviews. Reviews in three authorities are on budgets for VI service provision with cuts likely.

### Budgets

In the 2019 FOI request, we asked authorities to provide the service budget across three separate years, 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20.

Out of the total 152 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.

**Funding trends**

It was possible to analyse the VI service budgets provided by 114 individual authorities, representing three quarters of all authorities. In the two years between 2017/18 and 2019/20, 26 authorities cut their VI service budget, equating to 23% of those responding. Another 21% froze their budgets. Whilst 56% increased budgets, it is worrying that 44% either cut or froze their budget.

Furthermore, when inflation is accounted for, over half of those that increased funding did not do so in line with inflation (ONS, 2019). This means three quarters of authorities cut or have not increased funding in line with inflation over the past two years. Just 24% saw an increase to their budgets in line with or over inflation. (note: uses CPI inflation from 2016 to 2018 of 5%)

In authorities that have reduced funding, over the last two years £1.1 million has been lost from service budgets to support children and young people with vision impairment. This is despite a 7% increase in children and young people accessing the service. Over 5,000 children and young people are accessing education services in authorities where budgets have been cut in the last two years. A further 13,300 CYP are accessing services that have failed to keep their budgets in line with inflation, meaning real term cuts to funding. In total, these children make up 61% of all children supported by VI services across England.

Funding was cut more in the single year between 2017/18 to 2018/19, with just under a third cutting budgets (31%). The 2018 FOI request also found a third of authorities responding reduced their budgets between 2016/17 and 2017/18.

Yet in the most recent year, fewer authorities decreased their budgets and more increased them. The reasons for this recent change is unclear. It could be that budgets have been cut previously and are returning to more sustainable levels. Or, budgets that have remained static may now be increasing to bring them more in line with inflation as the real-term cuts in leaving budgets static year on year was becoming unsustainable. This theory is supported by trend analysis which reveals that only 27% of authorities increased their budget each year for the past two years and only 13% increased their budget each year for the last 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. As previously mentioned, this is in the backdrop of an increasing number of CYP with visual impairment on the caseloads, which means budgets are stretched further with less funding available per head.

The table below shows the proportion of authorities increasing, decreasing or freezing budgets. Actual change and change in line with inflation is shown.

**Table: Annual budget trends shown as proportion of local authorities responding, 2017/18 to 2019/20**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Change 17/18 to 19/20 | Change 17/18 to 19/20 in line with inflation |
| Increase | 56% | 24% |
| No change | 21% | - |
| Decrease | 23% | 76% |
| Total LAs | 114 | 114 |

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

### Summary

* The total number of pupils aged 0-25 on vision impairment service caseloads, or known to these services, was 30,326. This is likely to be an under estimate as some authorities did not respond, and it represents a 7% increase from 2017.
* Half of CYP on the active caseload have additional education needs to their vision impairment.
* The total number of braillists supported across 120 local authorities was 869. This figure would likely be much higher if figures were available for the remaining 32 authorities.
* When asked about reduction in support, a quarter (23%) of authorities have reduced support for children due to service capacity or service restructure.
* Provision for some groups remains inconsistent across England. In particular, those in older age brackets receive support in some parts of the country and not others.

### Caseload

The total number of pupils aged 0-25 on vision impairment service caseloads, or known to these services, was 30,326. This is likely to be an under estimate as 18 authorities did not provide any figures (including five authorities who 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 2019 and 2017 FOI survey, the number of children with a vision impairment has increased by 7%. Despite the under estimate, this demonstrates that the number of children with vision impairment accessing services is increasing. This mirrors similar growth trends seen in SEND figures published by the Department for Education (Department for Education, 2019).

24,990 CYP were recorded on active service caseloads with a further 5,336 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 caseload and known to service by group**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Support level | Proportion on active caseload | Proportion known to service |
| Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) | 49% | 51% |
| Special Education Need (SEN) Support | 44% | 41% |
| Not yet assessed | 4% | 6% |
| Other | 3% | 2% |
| Total for which group data is available | 89% | 61% |

There is little difference between the spread of the active caseload or CYP known to services across the different support levels. Children on an Education, Health and Care Plan make up the largest cohort, followed by those in need of Special Education Need (SEN) Support. Only a small proportion of CYP were reported as not yet assessed or belonging to a non-categorised support group (other).

Year group analysis for CYP receiving support is detailed in the table below, separated by those on the active caseload and those known to the service.

**Table: Proportion on caseload and known to service by year group**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Year group category | Proportion on active caseload | Proportion known to service |
| Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) | 18% | 6% |
| Year 1 to Year 6 | 42% | 33% |
| Year 7 to Year 11 | 29% | 35% |
| Year 12 to Year 13 | 7% | 14% |
| Above Year 13 | 4% | 11% |
| Proportion with age data available | 99% | 98% |

Year group figures were provided by most authorities. CYP on the active caseload tended to show a younger demographic than those known to the service. The largest year group for CYP on the active caseload was year 1 to year 6, at 42%. Just 11% were year 12 or above. Whereas, of those known to the service, the largest year group was year 7 to year 11 and 25% were year 12 or above.

This indicates that, as children grow older, they are receiving less intensive support. This could be due to a number of reasons. However, there is a risk that reducing support could be detrimental to the outcomes for CYP in older age groups, depending on the reasons for reduction in intensity of support.

### Braillists

The total number of CYP supported across 120 local authorities using braille as their main or sole medium was 869. This number would be higher if figures were available for all authorities.

Thirty-two 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.

Were data available for these authorities, it is likely the figure would be close to the 1,077 braillists supported by or known to vision impairment services recorded in 2017. An estimate of the total across all authorities, in line with the numbers we do have, suggests an additional 180 braillists across the non-responding authorities. This would give a total in the region of 1,050 for 2019.

### Additional SEN

Authorities were asked to provide information on the number of CYP on the active caseload with other SEND additional complex needs, in addition to vision impairment. Of authorities responding, 49% of CYP on the active caseload were found to have additional needs. This is in line with findings from previous research that suggests half of children with vision impairment have additional needs (Keil, 2018). For these CYP, vision impairment may not be recorded as their primary SEN.

The proportional split of children with additional needs by year group mirrors that across the active caseload. When comparing the split by different support levels, CYP with additional needs are more likely to have an EHCP and less likely to be on SEN support, as can be seen in the table below.

**Table: Proportion on caseload with additional needs, compared with all on caseload, by support level**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Support level | Proportion of CYP with additional needs on active caseload | Total proportion on active caseload |
| Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) | 66% | 49% |
| Special Education Need (SEN) Support | 27% | 44% |
| Not yet assessed | 3% | 4% |
| Other | 4% | 3% |
| Total for which group data is available | 100% | 89% |

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

When asked about the criteria the VI service uses for allocating levels of support, 95% responded that the NatSIP eligibility framework was used and 23% said that criteria were locally developed (out of 132 authorities responding). There is clearly some overlap and many authorities provided additional information that a modified version of the NatSIP framework was used. This represents a clear difference in approach used by some authorities with no strong evidence of standardisation across the country where local modifications are in use.

We also asked whether CYP with vision impairment are required to meet any specific eligibility criteria before they will be considered for assessment for an EHCP. Authorities could select multiple options and note other criteria not listed. Of the 113 authorities responding, 46% said that a specific level or severity of vision impairment needs to be met to be eligible for an EHCP assessment and 29% responded that the CYP must be failing to make the expected level of progress. A further 7% said they are expected to attend a special school and 6% said they must have an additional SEND.

This again represents a differing approach by some authorities which may limit the eligibility of some children with a vision impairment to be assessed for an EHCP. Criteria are not applied equally across the country leaving children in some authorities without support while others in a similar situation elsewhere would receive this support.

However, a large proportion of authorities used the ‘other’ option to indicate a different arrangement. Almost a third said eligibility for EHCP assessment did not require specific criteria and the authority considered CYP on individual circumstances when considering them for assessment for an EHCP. Local authorities providing more detail said they assessed individual circumstances in a variety of ways which included needs-based assessment, the level of support a CYP requires and their education setting.

### Reduction in support

Reduction in support can be part of appropriate case management and is not always a concern, as highlighted by a number of authorities responding to the FOI request.

We asked authorities whether support for any of their CYP with vision impairment was reduced for a set list of reasons and 119 authorities responded to the question. Some had not reduced support for any CYP and some selected multiple reasons for reduction in support. A review of SEN support or EHCP was reported as a reason for reduction in support by 20% of authorities responding. Positive changes in the CYP’s management of their own vision impairment and improved independence was reported as a reason for reduction in support by 43%.

However, for 23% (28 local authorities), service restructure/change or capacity issues within the service was noted as a reason for reduction in support for some CYP. A review of comments from authorities concerned suggests this was most frequently due to staffing levels and staff vacancies. It is very concerning that a quarter of authorities reduced support due to service pressures or changes.

We also asked authorities to provide the number of CYP whose support was reduced in the past 12 months. A total of over 1,300 with reduced support were recorded by authorities, however many could not provide or withheld figures even though the authority answered that some CYP had their support reduced. Hence, this figure is likely to be an under estimate. Half of the CYP recorded as having their support reduced (650 CYP) had this reduction due to service restructure/change or capacity issues within the service.

### Education settings

Local authorities were asked to provide the number of CYP educated in a range of different settings. Setting information was provided for about 90% of the total caseload in authorities responding to the survey. The proportion by setting type is detailed in the table below.

**Table: Proportion of CYP on the active caseload by setting type**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Setting | Proportion of CYP on active caseload |
| Mainstream school | 47% |
| Generic special school (e.g. PMLD, SLD (maintained & non-maintained) | 18% |
| Mainstream academy | 16% |
| Special school academy | 9% |
| Other type of setting (e.g. hospital school, home educated) | 5% |
| Maintained specialist school for pupils with VI | 2% |
| Mainstream with VI resource provision | 2% |
| Non-maintained specialist school for pupils with VI | 1% |

Many authorities responded that they could not separate out mainstream school settings from mainstream academy settings. The combined total of these two groups represents the setting with most CYP receiving support at 53%. Special school academy and other types of special school represent the setting with the second most CYP supported at a combined 27%. The ‘other’ type of setting was most commonly reported as early years settings such as nurseries or a home educated setting.

A further question on settings where early years provision is in place for those aged 3 and under found that almost all 134 authorities responding provided support within the child’s home, in pre-school settings and in school settings (99%, 100% and 97% respectively). And over two thirds (69%) provided support in other non-school settings such as in a child minder setting.

### Groups not supported

There is a lack of consistency across local authorities in support for children and young people in certain groups.

9% of authorities reported that specific age groups were not supported. These ranged from post 16 education (6% do not support), post 18 education (3%), post 19 education (2%) and 20 to 25 (2%). Since the 2014 SEND reforms, the SEND Code of Practice secures the entitlement of specialist support to young people with SEND up to the age of 25 if they are in full time education or training (SEND Code of Practice, 2015). Although it is a small proportion, it is a concern that young people in some authorities are still not offered support in line with the entitlements set out in the SEND Code of Practice.

18% of authorities reported that CYP in specific types of setting were not supported. The most significant was further education colleges, with 14% of authorities reporting that they did not offer support, or only in certain circumstances (for example, if colleges bought in support or if a CYP had an EHCP). Including authorities who said FE age groups were not supported, this increases to 21% not supporting either older age groups or FE colleges or both. This suggests young people in one in five authorities are not receiving support due to their age or attending an FE setting which, as stated previously, is not in line with the entitlements set out in the SEND Code of Practice.

5% of authorities did not offer support to CYP with vision impairment in special schools, or only in certain circumstances. 5% of local authorities did not offer support to home-schooled CYP.

A further 5% of authorities reported that CYP with vision impairment and complex needs were not supported. Specifically, 4% of local authorities do not offer support to CYP with vision impairment and complex needs in special schools.

14% reported other groups that were not supported. These included home-schooled CYP (5%) or those educated out of area (3%).

## 4.3 Teachers and support staff

### Summary

* Just over a quarter (28%) of 129 local authorities had an average QTVI caseload ratio of over 100, which is equivalent to 63 FTE QTVI posts. This figure has increased from 21% in 2017, which was equivalent to 43.2 FTE QTVI posts. A ratio of over 100 students per QTVI raises concerns about capacity to support high numbers of students.
* Over the past two years, 43% of local authorities recorded a decrease in the FTE QTVI posts. Across these authorities, almost 50 FTE QTVI posts were lost from 2017 to 2019.
* Over the past four years, more services have moved to a more generic management structure where those responsible for senior leadership of the VI service do not hold QTVI qualifications. 57% of strategic managers held a QTVI MQ and 7% held a QTMSI MQ, compared to 65% and 5% respectively in 2015.
* 16% of service managers do not hold a QTVI MQ, QTMSI MQ, or ToD MQ.
* 46% of the 147 local authorities recorded a decrease in the number of TA posts in the last two years. The remaining percentage is made up of local authorities reporting either an increase or no change. However, local authorities do not hold information on all TAs, with 72 local authorities stating that they are aware of other TAs that the VI service does not hold information on. More information is needed to understand the landscape of TAs employed directly by schools.

### QTVI posts

There were 365.5 FTE posts for QTVIs and 20.2 FTE posts for QTMSIs across 131 local authorities. There were an additional 16.3 FTE posts holding both a QTVI and QTMSI MQ (mandatory qualification).

The total active caseload was 24,668 across 132 local authorities providing active caseload data, resulting in an average caseload ratio of 77 pupils to every FTE QTVI. Over a quarter (28%) of the 129 local authorities had an average caseload ratio of over 100, which is equivalent to 63 FTE QTVI posts. This figure has increased from 2017, which saw 21% of local authorities have an average caseload ratio of over 100, which was equivalent to a total of 43.2 FTE QTVI posts.

43% of the 110 local authorities providing comparable data recorded a decrease in the number of FTE QTVI posts over the last two years. 33% reported an increase, while 25% reported no change. Please note that percentages written may not sum to 100% due to rounding. The overall change in support is equivalent to a net reduction of 23.4 FTE QTVI posts between 2017 and 2019, a 7% reduction in resource. However, across authorities recording a decrease in FTE QTVI posts, 48.5 FTE posts were lost.

The total number of QTVI posts (headcount of both full-time and part-time posts) was 451 across 135 local authorities, 19 of which were temporary contracts. There were 28 QTMSI posts and 18 joint QTVI and QTMSI posts, each with one temporary contract.

### Other service posts

Of service managers with responsibility for strategic management of the VI service, 57% held a QTVI MQ, 7% held a QTMSI MQ and 28% held a ToD MQ. Please note that these figures may not equal 100% as a single manager may hold more than one qualification. These figures were last reported in 2015 where 65% of service managers held a QTVI MQ and 5% held a QTMSI MQ. The changes indicate that over the past four years, more services have moved to a more generic management structure where those responsible for senior leadership do not hold QTVI or QTMSI specialist qualifications.

Of the 147 local authorities that responded, 74% of people responsible for strategic management of the VI service, held at least one of a QTVI MQ, QTMSI MQ, or ToD MQ. 12% held none of these but held other relevant qualifications (such as post-graduate degrees in education) and 14% held no MQ and listed no other SEND qualifications.

There were 442.9 FTE additional posts for staff that are employed directly by and support the VI service across 128 local authorities. This includes resource technicians, ICT support technicians, dedicated early years staff, family support workers, admin and secretarial staff, and teaching assistants, as well as other roles. This does not include QTVIs and QTMSIs. Teaching assistants (TAs) made up 57% of these roles, representing 254.1 FTE.

**Teaching assistants**

The total number of TA posts (headcount of both full-time and part-time) across 128 local authorities is estimated to be 1,152. Of this number, 31% are directly employed by the VI service (23% centrally-based/peripatetic and 8% school-based), while 60% are employed directly by schools and supported by the VI service. Just 8% are employed directly by schools with no support from the VI service.

Of the 147 local authorities, 46% recorded a decrease in the number of TA posts over the past two years. 34% recorded an increase in the number of TA posts, while 20% recorded no change.

There are likely to be a number of TAs employed by schools that the local authorities surveyed were not aware of. 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.

As such, the number of TAs and their employment arrangements are an estimate and not an exact figure. Of the 147 local authorities that responded to the FOI request, 72 stated that they are aware of other TAs that the VI service does not hold information on, including TAs employed by schools. The actual number of TAs employed directly by schools is likely to be much higher than our estimates. With a lack of data, it is not clear whether there has been any change in TA numbers in recent years.

### Habilitation

In summer 2019, Thomas Pocklington Trust issued a FOI request to local authorities to collect information on habilitation provision for children and young people with vision impairment. Thomas Pocklington Trust and Vision UK will be releasing the findings in autumn 2019.

## 4.4 Redress and registers

We asked services about the number of complaints relating to the VI service entering the local authority’s formal complaints process. Almost all authorities had no complaints to note, with just seven authorities stating a complaint had been raised.

Authorities were also asked who in the organisation holds the register for CYP who are registered sight impaired or severely sight impaired. In 43% of authorities, the register was held by the adult social care sensory team. In 23% of authorities, the register was held by the social care children’s team. Across 7%, a local vision impairment society/organisation held the register. The remaining 27% named different teams, most commonly adult social care or other similar teams within the local authority. The lack of consistency in where responsibility for holding the register lies raises questions about whether the data is maintained consistently across local authorities. It could also lead to difficulties in extracting the data and reporting consistently at a national level in the tri-annual publication of registers of blind and partially sighted people by NHS Digital (NHS Digital, 2017).

# 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. However, whilst this research has identified pockets of good practice, overall, the findings show a system of specialist provision under significant pressure.

Despite more children and young people accessing specialist provision, QTVI roles have been lost and caseloads have increased. VI service budgets are being stretched; just under half of local authorities have cut or frozen their budgets over the last two years. The effect of this is reduced staffing or reduced support, impacting the education of children, which can potentially cause longer-term impacts in later life (RNIB, 2016). There could also be further cuts in the pipeline with a quarter of LAs reporting there are current or proposed reviews of the VI service that will affect the way it is organised, managed or funded. It is also extremely concerning that in some authorities young people above the age of 16 are still not offered support in line with the entitlements set out in the SEND Code of Practice.

The variation in service structures, practices and budgets across local authorities presented in this report, point to a postcode lottery leading to some children and young people not receiving the support they vitally need to participate in education and all the opportunities childhood has to offer and fulfil their potential in life.

# 6. References

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**END**