**What we know about the education and development of children with vision impairment**

## Introduction

Education is one of the known social determinants of health. School doesn’t only provide education, but helps with social, personal and technology skills that are used in employment, and everyday life.

Without quality specialist support and services children and young people with a vision impairment (VI) will experience a disparity of opportunity and be placed at risk of poorer educational attainment, development, and wellbeing outcomes, compared to their fully sighted peers.

This report summarises the key things we know about the education, wellbeing and broader development of children and young people with a VI.

## Summary

* VI is a low-incidence, high-need disability, and there are distinct sub-populations with differing needs.
* Children with VI have lower educational attainment than children without a special educational need or disability.
* There is a large wellbeing gap between teenagers with VI and their fully sighted peers.
* Progression of young people with VI beyond education is not on a par with fully sighted young people.
* Children with VI are not getting the help and support they need and require a holistic support package.

## VI is a low-incidence, high-need disability, and there are distinct sub-populations with differing needs

* Across the UK we estimate there to be around 41,000 children and young people aged 0-25 with a VI. This is likely to be an underestimate as it excludes those children with a mild VI and potentially those with additional disabilities and an undiagnosed/unrecognised VI [1].
* VI in children is recognised as a low-incidence, high-need disability – the potential lifetime impact of the right support and intervention to those in this age group is profound, setting them up for better long term life outcomes [2].
* The population of children with VI can be thought of as two distinct sub-populations: those with and those without additional needs. Wellbeing and educational outcome measures are markedly different for children with a VI as their sole disability compared to those with VI and additional disabilities [3].
* Around half of children with a VI have an additional Special Educational Need and Disability (SEND) [1].
* The majority of children (around 70 percent) with VI attend mainstream schools, where they may be the only child with a VI. Only two per cent are educated in specialist schools for vision impairment [2].

## Children with VI have lower educational attainment than children without a special educational need or disability

* Children with a primary SEND of VI have lower attainment compared to children without a SEND, although children with a primary SEND of VI are one of the highest performing SEND groups.
* This attainment gap is present at Foundation Stage and continues through to GCSEs. For example, at Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 the attainment gap is 32 and 33 per cent, respectively.
* There has been little or no change in the attainment gap over recent years.
* The available data is limited:
* The attainment data presented above [4] only relates to children with VI as their primary SEND. There is no way to split the attainment data by VI only pupils and VI plus an additional SEND.
* The data above also only relates to England. However, previous research indicates that the situation is broadly the same across the UK [5, 6, 7]. We are exploring the collection of attainment data in the rest of the UK with a view to being able to provide a more comprehensive picture

## There is a large wellbeing gap between teenagers with VI and their fully sighted peers

There is a consistent pattern of lower wellbeing and poorer mental health reported by the parents of children with VI at age 14, and by the children with VI themselves at age 17.

### At age 14:

* More than twice as likely to often be unhappy, downhearted or tearful (46 per cent vs. 20 per cent).
* More than twice as likely to have many fears or easily scared (57 per cent vs. 25 per cent).
* More positively, there is little difference in overall life satisfaction, and there is no difference in feeling they can do as well as other children [8].

### At age 17:

* More than six times as likely to say they feel hopeless all or most of the time (46 per cent vs. 7 per cent).
* Five times as likely to say they feel depressed all or most of the time (50 per cent vs. 9 per cent).
* As with 14-year-olds, there is little difference in overall life satisfaction. However, they are nearly four times as likely to never or rarely be optimistic about the future (58 per cent vs. 15 per cent) [9].

## Progression of young people with VI beyond education is not on a par with fully sighted young people

* Young people aged 16-25 with a VI are almost twice as likely as the general population to be in neither employment, education or training (20 per cent vs. 12 per cent) [10].
* Young people aged between 16-25 with a VI are more likely to be students than the general population, and appear to be more susceptible to ‘churning’ – staying in education and doing additional courses rather than transitioning to employment [10, 11].
* This likely contributes to the underrepresentation of working age blind and partially sighted people in employment, which is only one in four of those registered [12].
* Blind and partially sighted people with a degree or higher still only have the same chance of getting a job as someone with no qualifications in the general population [12].
* In terms of reversing these trends, young people with VI would benefit from person-centred careers advice from advisors that understand VI, more joined-up services between specialist VI practitioners and careers advisors, and work experience placements [13].
* Other enablers and positive interventions include support from employment professionals, supportive managers and colleagues, the Access to Work scheme, specialist employment programmes with support from an advocate, peer support and mentoring and better awareness of VI across society [13].

## Children with VI are not getting the help and support they need and require a holistic support package

* RNIB’s most recent Freedom of Information (FOI) research found funding for specialist VI education services is not stable and children and young people face a postcode lottery for the specialist support they need.
* **Three quarters** of English local authorities have cut or frozen VI education services budgets at least once in the last four years (despite a 10 per cent increase in the number of children recorded as having a VI SEND).
* **One in eight** children and young people who require essential support to help them to develop independent living or mobility skills are not receiving that support and are on a waiting list [14].
* The findings above relate to local authorities in England, where we have been running yearly FOI requests since 2008 and can therefore track changes in provision. A recent FOI request to local authorities in Scotland suggests a varied pattern of specialist service delivery leaving some children and young people without the support they vitally need [15]. FOI requests for local authorities in Wales and Northern Ireland are planned and we will report findings in 2023.
* **Children and young people with VI require a range of specialist skill development, interventions and support that are considered to be essential and which promote equity, inclusion and personal agency. This encompasses not only literacy, mobility and independent living skills and also includes other areas such as technology, accessing information and mental and physical wellbeing [16]**.

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

The CFVI has been developed to support children and young people with VI access an appropriate and equitable education. It clarifies and defines the essential elements of specialist skill development, interventions and best practice and provides a common language to be used by children and young people, their families and professionals in the UK who work with them.

**Find out more and get your copy of the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment:**

[**www.rnib.org.uk/cfvi**](http://www.rnib.org.uk/cfvi)

## About RNIB’s research

RNIB is a leading source of information on sight loss and the issues affecting blind and partially sighted people.

Our Knowledge and Research Hub contains key information and statistics about blind and partially sighted people including our Sight Loss Data Tool, which provides information about sight loss at a local level throughout the UK. You’ll also find research reports on a range of

topics including employment, education, technology, accessibility and more. Visit [Knowledge and Research hub | RNIB](https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/health-social-care-education-professionals/knowledge-and-research-hub/)

## References

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