

Unlocking education for all

Curriculum Framework for Children and Young
People with Vision Impairment in Northern Ireland



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Unlocking education for all

We too often hear stories from children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), their parents and carers and from those that support them about things going wrong. Getting the right support in place is too often a fraught experience for all. The impact of this on those individuals with SEND can be significant. More needs to be done.

It is vital that for low incidence disabilities, such as vision impairment (VI), there is a shared understanding of the needs of the child or young person (CYP) being supported. The Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI) provides much needed definition and shared language of the specialist skill development required for CYP with VI.

The CFVI will help children and young people with VI and specialist educators along with education professionals in all sectors, parents and carers, to navigate the complexities of specialist support for VI education within the context of the broader life skills required. It will enable better partnership working and importantly puts the CYP at the centre of their pathway to adulthood. For VI specialists it provides a more consistent approach and for non-specialists it helps to demystify specialist skill development to enable more effective inclusive learning practices.



nasen works to ensure the workforce is fully equipped to meet the needs of learners with SEND. The CFVI will support professionals to deliver the best for the CYP they support. Used in the right way, the CFVI can transform lives; this is why we are calling for the CFVI to be formally recognised as a vital resource in supporting policy across the UK.

Annamarie Hassall MBE,
Chief Executive Officer, National
Association for Special Educational
Needs (nasen)

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Introducing the CFVI: A framework for unlocking education

Accessing education and support for children and young people (CYP) with vision impairment (VI) can be complex. Evidence shows that the current system is failing; a lack of support can prevent CYP from developing the skills needed to achieve their potential in adulthood.

The Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI) for the first time offers a UK wide framework for specialist and non specialist practitioners, CYP with VI and their families and carers to unlock and navigate necessary support and education.

The CFVI helps by addressing the many issues experienced by CYP with VI, including:

- The attainment gap between CYP with VI and the general population
- Poor employment outcomes, including high vulnerability of becoming long term NEET (not in education, employment or training)
- Poor social inclusion, mental health and wellbeing
- Inconsistent provision of specialist support
- Lack of joined up working between specialist and non-specialist professionals.

The framework has been developed in consultation with professionals, CYP, parents and carers. The Delphi method was used, which involved

repeatedly returning to a panel of experts until consensus was achieved. It has been extremely well received within the vision impairment education sector, with 95 per cent either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with the final framework [1].

The CFVI offers a transformative contribution to UK policies and practices in ensuring CYP with VI can navigate complex education systems and secure equitable access to the services to which they are entitled. Its implementation can lead to a more inclusive education.

To succeed, we are calling for the CFVI to be:

- Recognised and referenced in Northern Ireland SEN policies, including any new SEN legislation.
- Embedded in Education Authority service delivery frameworks.
- Followed by all educational settings supporting children and young people with vision impairment and their families, in partnership with vision impairment specialists.
- Embedded within quality standards for teachers of children with vision impairment and habilitation specialists across the UK.

How the CFVI is implemented in each of the UK nations will vary, there are separate reports setting out the evidence and asks for Wales, Scotland and England.

Succeeding by working together

Vision impairment is a high need, low incidence disability and the support needed will differ greatly between individuals. For many CYP with VI, navigating the complexities of education is hugely burdensome. This does not need to be the case. Mainstream teachers and other professionals involved in education are likely to have little or no experience of supporting CYP with VI. Use of the CFVI can improve understanding to ensure that there is fair and equitable access to education, as well as the right support to maximise independence and prepare CYP with VI for adulthood.

Access to learning and learning to access

In order to get the most out of education, CYP with VI need specific support, guidance and specialist teaching to access the curriculum. The CFVI sets out 11 areas of learning and example outcomes. These take a holistic approach and consider the developmental, educational, social and wellbeing needs of CYP with VI. This includes the use of technology, for example the ability to touch type and read back using a screen reader for revision; accessing learning materials; habilitation, such as the ability to use mobility and orientation skills to move between lessons; literacy, for instance the development of braille literacy to access all core curriculum areas; and preparation for adulthood, such as career planning or transitions into assisted living placements. An overview of the CFVI is provided in Figure 1.

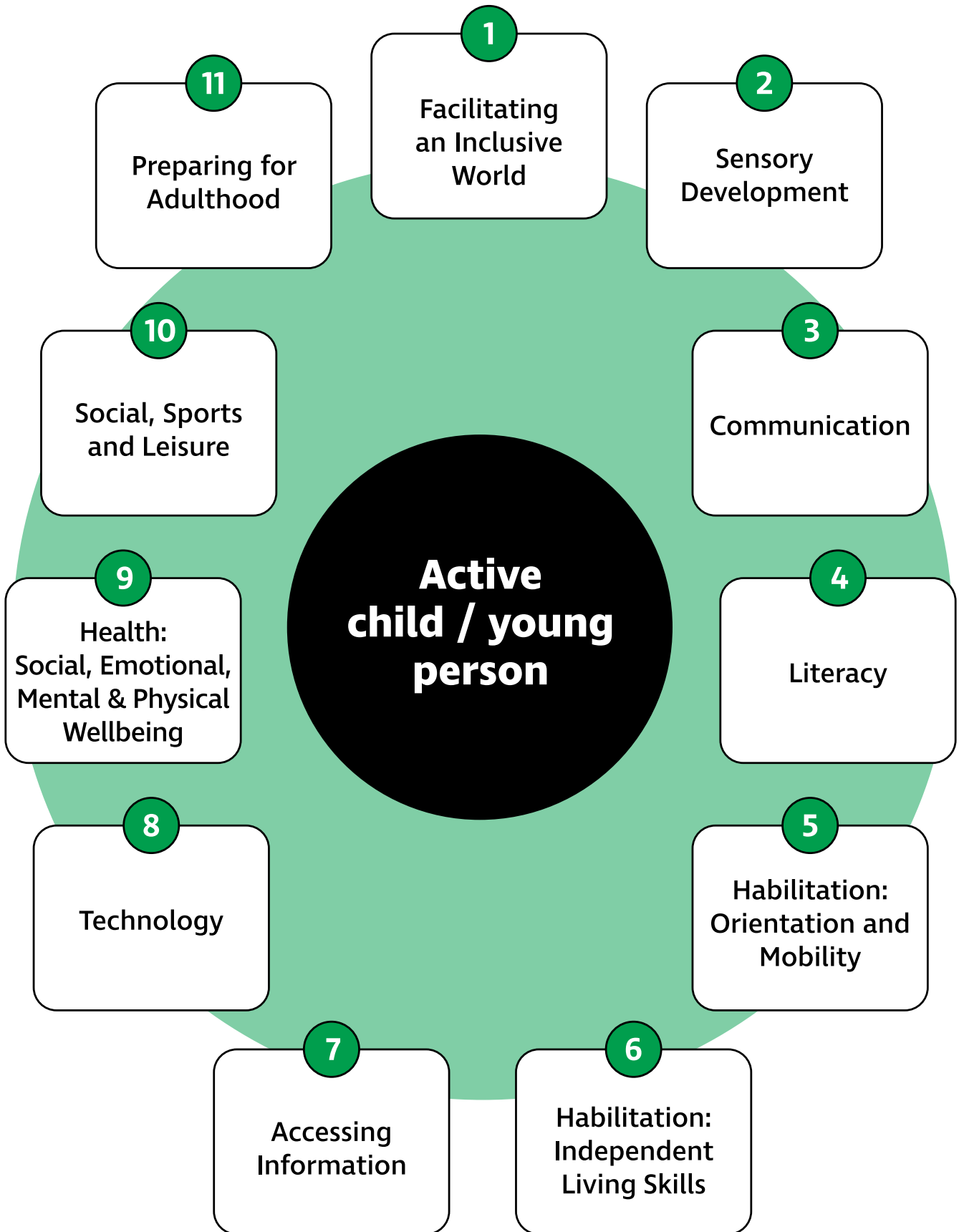
The framework helps CYP to develop a broad range of specialist skills, acquire the information and experiences needed in preparation for leaving education, and supports social and emotional development.

Central to this approach is the dual access model, known as **'access to learning'** and **'learning to access'**. This is the acknowledgement that inclusive education is promoted by balancing universal inclusive practice with specialist skills-based interventions. This ensures CYP with VI have fair access to a shared curriculum and education system while developing the specialist skills to develop personal agency and increase independence.

This philosophy is true for all CYP with VI – young or old, with or without additional and complex needs – and the CFVI promotes this by setting high expectations of education at all levels in all settings.



Figure 1: Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI)

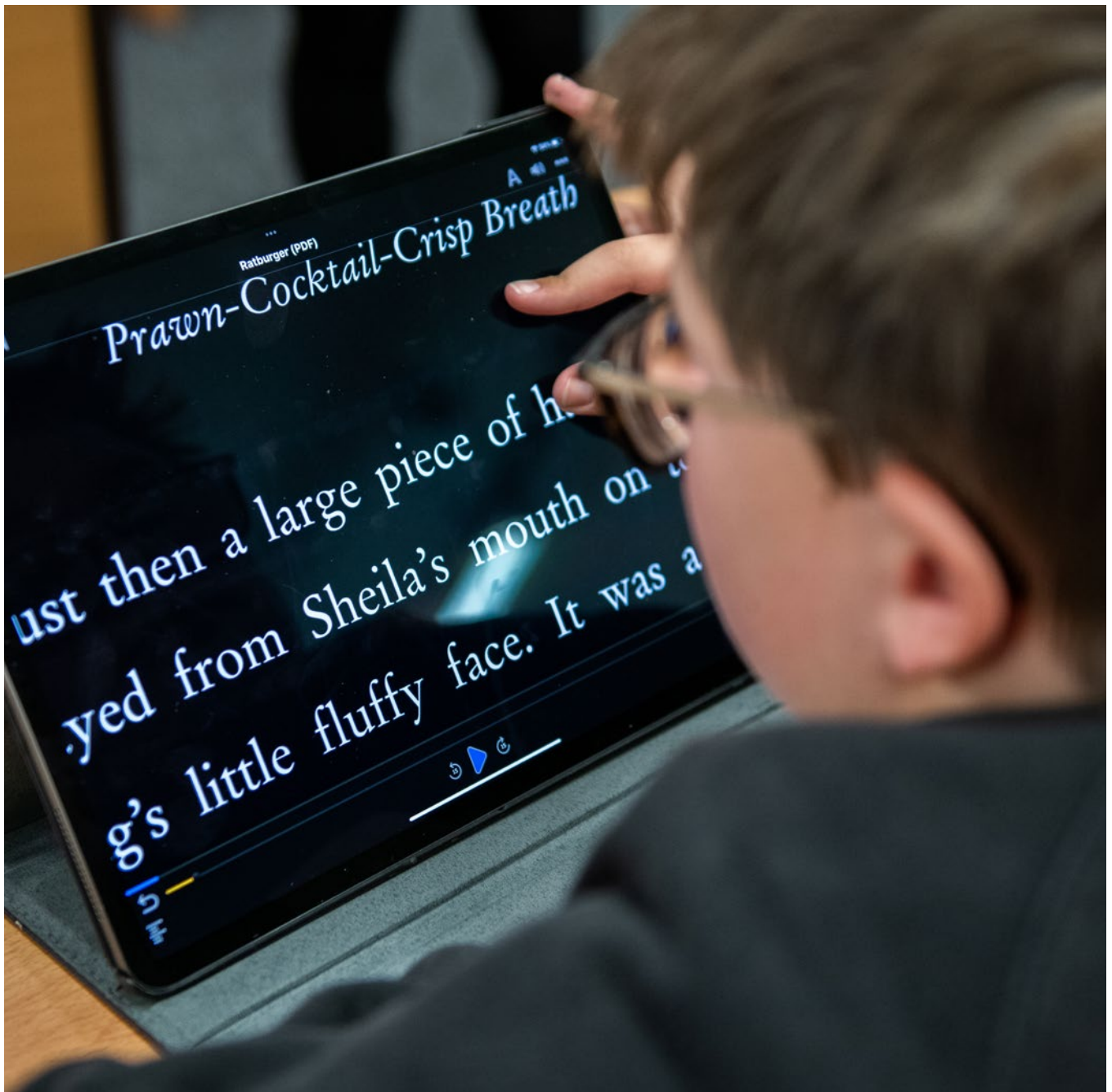


The value of specialist education

CYP with VI need to be taught a range of specialist skills, by specialist educators that promote independent learning, mobility, everyday living and social communication. Teaching and support is provided by Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (QTVIs), Registered Qualified Habilitation

Specialists (RQHSs) and specialist trained Teaching Assistants (TAs). Their role is to support the development of skills needed to live independently as adults, succeed and participate in education, enter employment and advise non-specialists and families on how best to facilitate this.

The CFVI provides a shared language and agreed approach for both specialist and non-specialist education professionals to collaborate and support CYP with VI.



Case study: Stephen Porter, QTVI

Stephen Porter is a senior Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (QTVI) in the Education Authority for Northern Ireland's Sensory Support Service.

I think today is an exciting day for us in Northern Ireland, seeing this curriculum coming into place. One of the important things is that it's UK wide, one joint language, and the collaboration across the four nations is really exciting. I see this curriculum as something that I've longed for since I started working in the sector over 24 years ago.



It fits very much with Northern Ireland government strategies and initiatives, particularly the Children & Young People's Strategy with its goals to reach out and make things better for all young people in our society. I feel really strongly that this curriculum framework will give us a basis for doing that for children with a visual impairment.

Also, in relation to our Northern Ireland curriculum, we have an emphasis on cross curricular themes, learning skills and personal capabilities. This helps children beyond just the formal curriculum. They can develop these skills for learning and for life, and this curriculum framework very much fits into that. The whole emphasis on 'learning to access' very much fits in with the NI curriculum.

"I think it'll be good for us working with other professionals, like Habilitation Officers. It provides us with a common language that means that health, education and voluntary sector professionals can support each other."

Hopefully this language will enable us to give more sustained support to the children and young people. Ultimately, the goal is that there's equitable education for every child across Northern Ireland.

The importance of specialist support

CYP with VI are not all being given access to the specialist support they need to participate and thrive in education. Specialist support ensures that CYP with VI have the best opportunity to progress academically and to continue to live as independent a life as possible.

The RNIB Northern Ireland Freedom of Information (FOI) report 2022 highlights issues impacting on the delivery of specialist support to CYP with VI [2]:

- The lack of a lead QTVI within the VI team structure.
- The lack of an agreed specific funding stream and strategy for delivering habilitation support.

These issues have the potential to leave some CYP without the support they need to access education.



Case study:

A parent and young person's experience

Cherie Coyle is the mother of 13-year-old Freya. Freya has Albinism and is in her second year in secondary education.

Freya's support in secondary school has improved from what she got at primary school. They treat her like part of the class. She has a Classroom Assistant, but she is more independent.

I think Classroom Assistants should take a step back and allow the pupil to be more independent from Primary 5 onwards. Freya found it hard to have an assistant in the later years of primary school. She wanted to sit with her friends rather than with her CA. Although the Habilitation Specialists tried to advise her primary school on how



to let her be more independent, the school put insurance/health and safety first. The Classroom Assistant would bring her out to the playground and out to meet me after school, which Freya didn't like.

In preparation for secondary school, the Habilitation Specialist took Freya to the school for three orientation visits. Because she is confident in getting around the school, she took on a role on school open day as ambassador for the French classroom. This really increased her confidence.

Freya also had bus training with the Habilitation Specialist before she started secondary school. This is ongoing and has really helped her independence.

"Freya and I feel that she really needs more support with her social skills. She does have friends but could do with more support in this area. She also needs to be included in PE. Freya finds technology difficult and Freya needs more help with finding her friends and classmates in the school canteen."

It would be good for services and parents to work together to address issues before they build up.

Locked out of post-16 education

The inconsistency in support can be an issue in post-16 education. For many young people, the support drops off when they leave school. In Northern Ireland, QTVIs support students in mainstream schools who remain in formal education (years 13 and 14). If a pupil moves to a local further education college, it is the college's disability service that holds the budget to provide the support. As vision impairment is a low incidence disability, it is possible that FE college disability services will lack knowledge of specific needs of this group of students. RNIB's 2022 'Eye Work with You Too' report highlighted the need for greater awareness in society about the abilities and skills of young people with vision impairment to combat negative attitudes. [3]

Locked out of the workplace

RNIB's 'Eye Work with You Too' report found that in Northern Ireland, specialist VI professionals are often not included in conversations relating to transition planning and career preparation. This means that guidance received by CYP with VI is often not adequately considering their disability. The report recommended that there should be better links between mainstream careers advisors, the Education Authority's Specialist Transitions Officers for young people aged 14 plus with a statement of SEN, and the VI Service. [3]

The CFVI can assist qualified specialist VI educators to raise awareness of the need for CYP with VI to be taught skills that enable access to the curriculum and their community as independently as possible. It also helps to ensure that CYP with VI receive tailored information and guidance to make decisions about their future. The formal adoption of the CFVI can establish equitable access to services across Northern Ireland and across the UK to support a collaborative way of working.

When it goes wrong

Whilst there is evidence demonstrating how specialist education can improve outcomes for CYP with VI, there is also consistent evidence highlighting what can go wrong when denied access to the support they need.

Attainment gap

There is a consistent and significant attainment gap between CYP with VI and their peers without a special educational need or disability across the UK. In Northern Ireland, the 2022 government attainment figures of pupils with vision impairment were too low to be of statistical significance. However, the percentage of pupils with SEN in Northern Ireland who achieved 5 GCSEs A*-C (including English and Maths) was 42.4% versus 83.6% for pupils with no SEN. [4]

Vulnerability to becoming long-term NEET

A 2022 report from Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) found that amongst young disabled persons (aged 16-24) over one in three (34%) are not in education training or employment (NEET), compared to only 7% of non-disabled persons. That is, a young disabled person is almost five times more likely to be NEET than a non-disabled person. The NEET rate for disabled people in NI is among the highest across all UK regions. [5]

Several factors can risk a CYP with VI becoming NEET such as attaining lower levels of qualification, not being able to access education, limited opportunities for work

experience and a lack of tailored careers guidance.

In RNIB's 'Eye Work with You Too' report one young person recalled unhelpful advice from the mainstream careers service at school.

"And this careers officer told me that, I should go to Tech because university wasn't for, "people like me", and that's a quote... I was fuming!! It's just sort of fuelled me to go and prove them wrong!" [3]

Limited independence

A high proportion of CYP with VI are unable to access habilitation support to enable them to develop the orientation, mobility and independent living skills that they need for both education and in young adulthood. RNIB's 2022 FOI found that only 2% of pupils with vision impairment were receiving habilitation support funded by the Education Authority. [2]

The impact on social inclusion can be significant. For example, young people with VI are unlikely to apply for jobs in unfamiliar locations if they lack the confidence to travel independently.

Wellbeing gap

CYP with VI report lower wellbeing and poorer mental health than their fully sighted peers. At age 17 CYP with VI were five times more likely to 'feel depressed all or most of the time' [6].

There is added pressure on CYP with VI, with them having to deal with inaccessible systems, needing to repeatedly advocate for necessary adjustments and feeling socially excluded. [6]

Getting the funding right

To succeed the CFVI needs a system that is able to respond to the needs of CYP with VI. As already highlighted, the ineffective structure and lack of permanent funding in place for the Education Authority VI team, makes sustainability difficult. Without a clear strategy for the delivery of habilitation support, there is potential for some children and young people with VI to be unable to receive the appropriate level and type of support they need at the right time to ensure access to education.

As a low incidence disability, there is simply not the economies of scale for post-16 FE settings to recruit their own specialist workforce. There needs to be centralised funding for services that can support CYP with VI in their chosen education setting once they leave school.



What needs to happen next

The SEND Transformation Programme in Northern Ireland provides an opportunity for these issues to be addressed. We are calling on Government to ensure that:

The CFVI is recognised and referenced in Northern Ireland SEN policies, including any new SEN legislation.

The inequities in education provision and support available for CYP with VI cannot continue. The CFVI shares the ambition of the SEND Transformation Programme and provides the evidence base on how to support CYP with VI.

The CFVI is embedded in Education Authority service delivery frameworks.

It is not enough for professionals to opt into the use of the framework on a voluntary basis. For equality of access, it must be adopted across the Education Authority.

The CFVI is followed by all educational settings supporting children and young people with vision impairment and their families, in partnership with VI specialists.

For children and young people in education, support must be available across all education settings, from nursery to further education.

The CFVI is embedded within quality standards and professional training for teachers of children with vision impairment and habilitation specialists across the UK.

The clarity provided by the CFVI will resolve confusion over what support CYP with VI need and who is responsible or qualified to deliver this.

There is adequate and protected high needs funding to deliver specialist education services which meet the needs of children and young people with VI from 0-19.

We need to ensure that there is consistent, sustainable provision so that young people, their families and carers and educational professionals can be supported by a specialist workforce.

Conclusion

CYP with VI should have equitable access to opportunities in life, however evidence tells us that their education is currently failing to deliver this. The CFVI provides an opportunity for a consistent approach throughout education. Formal adoption of the CFVI will enable the framework to have the greatest impact, allowing the potential of CYP with VI to be fully realised.

For further information

You can read more about the CFVI at: rnib.in/CFVI or email us at: CYPF@rnib.org.uk



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Contact details



cypf@rnib.org.uk



www.rnib.org.uk/cfvi