Karen: My name is Karen Wilson, and I'm the Education Advocate in the Family Insight project. My role was really to help families navigate the education system. So, what that means is really just explaining to them what support was out there for their child, and also how to access that support. We know that early intervention is really important for children.

So quite often, children going into nursery with a vision impairment may not actually have statement in place. And rather it is kind of left to whenever they progress up to school. However, a lot of parents felt that they would rather the statement be put into place quicker. Cause we knew that it takes quite amount of time, or a substantial amount of time, six months, all being well, for the statement actually to be drafted and then to be implemented. I feel that there really needs to be a bit of a culture change in regard to parents, and how parents need to work in partnership with schools. And be understood, that they really are the expert, in their child.

So, I think there needs to be more positive dialogue between schools and other education professionals and the parents. Communication really is key in anything in life, but certainly when you have a child with special educational needs. It leads to the parent not feeling in any way shut out and feel like they are an equal partner. And with that comes a better understanding holistically of the child and therefore better support. Ultimately then, the outcomes for the child will improve.

Michelle: My name is Michelle, and I have a little girl called Elodie. She's 10 years old. She has got Microphthalmia, which means small eyes. And she also has condition called Coloboma. Elodie is, she's lots of fun. She enjoys meeting new people and learning new things. She loves, learning to do new things on her iPad and she's rarely without this. She loves to play games, make movies, and listen to her favourite audio books. We've had quite a journey, through healthcare, through early years, and into education. Sometimes that road isn't the easiest for parents to navigate.

When we need support, we find that through Angel Eyes, through Karen Wilson the educational advocate. She has supported us greatly, in Elodie's educational journey. She also helped Elodie use a refreshable braille display for the first time, and Elodie is a very proficient user of that and I think that's just put her on a trajectory, you know, in terms of education.

It's so important, in helping her, you know, do the same things as the other children in her class. Elodie learns braille, and she learns braille at mainstream school. Which was a first, I suppose, for the schools here. Elodie is a fantastic braillist. We're so proud of her. And I think braille is so important for her literacy To Elodie, that's not hard, to her, it's just learning to read. And, it's very important that she has access to the same, materials as everybody else.

Elodie: Hi, my name is Elodie. I am 10 years old. I like playing on my iPad drawing. I've started to make animations on an app called Flipaclip on my iPad. I'm really looking forward to secondary school because they have about four or five 3-D printers, which is gonna be really cool. I used to want to be an inventor, but now I really want to be a developer. I told my mum that I wanted to be a developer, and then she said, great, you can make apps for the blind. Then I go, no, I want to make apps that everyone can use, including blind people.

Karen: So with training, we can ensure that, resources are consistently adapted to meet the needs of the individual child. And that staff then are fully aware of how important that is and how to do it.

We have found as well, sometimes with classroom assistants, we would strongly advocate that they're not a fairy godmother. They're not there to sit at the side of the pupil. They are there to assist really with the resources as well as getting the technology used and used effectively.

Technology is another one from my work and through the data would really help, raise attainment for these children. Effective use of iPads, where the in-built accessibility features are used, where the different functionalities are used correctly, can really be revolutionary for children. These are skills that they not only need for now, for accessing the curriculum, but skills for life and for work.

Every parent aspires for their child to be a contributor to society, to have an equal role. And children and young people aspire to also do all of these things, to go to university with their peers, and to be able to have the same job opportunities. But these things, again, it's all about early intervention, early intervention with the statement, early intervention for training, early intervention then with the children as well, and acquiring the skills and knowledge and proficiency in using the technology.

Kathryn: My name's Kathryn Stevenson and I'm Head of Legal Services at the Children's Law Center. Our advice service is a free advice service for families and children and professionals. and a large number of inquiries we get are in relation to education. And a very large number in relation to special educational needs. A lot of issues would be in relation to access to services and resources in school, where maybe a child hasn't got a statement, but they need additional support without a statement.

One of the other issues is in relation to access to the curriculum and children maybe feeling that they're not getting that and then sometimes it, it becomes an issue really around disability discrimination because those children are not equally accessing the education system the way their peers are. You need to have the documentation prepared in advance. You need to have the assistant trained and aware of the child's needs, and you need to be able to deliver the best quality service to that child. And one of the other areas that is very significant is technology Access to technology. I know from talking to people in the project that only 13 percent of children, currently with visual impairments, have a laptop or an iPad.

So, there are big gaps in terms of children accessing the correct technology. There are also gaps in getting the right software. And then the other major thing is that even when a child does have a laptop or an iPad, particularly, the functionality isn't being used to the maximum. And I think that training is needed for teachers, for classroom assistants, and for children to ensure that all of those great functions, that could be used to assist learning are utilised every day to best effect. And I think parents need to learn as well. I mean, children have to go home and do homework, and if the parents don't know how to use the, the devices either, then they can't really assist as much as they might like too otherwise.

I absolutely believe that an advocacy service for children with visual impairment is crucial. It's absolutely critical. The knowledge that has been built up in terms of advocacy support for these children has been over a period of five and six years now. And I think it is absolutely critical that we continue to have that type of advice and advocacy support for families. There is plenty of room for lots of advisors. In fact, we are overwhelmed at the Children's Law Center in terms of the level of education advice and support needed.

Karen: So, I would absolutely welcome continued support and funding, statutory funding, for that provision. Trans-disciplinary working is extremely important. We know through the Children's Corporation Service Act, that voluntary organisations, as well as statutory bodies, it is important for them all to come together and work collaboratively for the better outcome of the child. So, working at grassroots level with the parents and with the families, the voluntary orgs are able to really lend a therapeutic ear and hear what some of the issues are.

These are the kinds of issues that need to be then filtered right up, back into high level. It's very important that we have opportunity to engage with and meet, with the Minister for Education, Department of Education, the Education Authority, and really be able to bring to life how policies made at that strategic level percolate down and translate on the ground.

Kathryn: One of the other major challenges that we have seen throughout lockdown is that children have become very, very anxious, been very anxious about returning to school. There may be additional learning support needs for recovery for building back better for children and ensuring that they can re-engage in education and can continue to learn. Certainly from our learning in the Children's Law Center, one of the key things is to listen to the young people themselves and to ensure that the services that they receive and the provision that they receive is what they want and it's what they know will work best to serve their needs.

Voiceover: [logos]Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, Family Insight is a five-year project, led by RNIB Northern Ireland, working in partnership with Angel Eyes NI, supporting families in living and learning.