# Education provision for children and young people with vision impairment in Scotland, 2023

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Research and Insight  
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RNIB CYPF team

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# i. Glossary

The following table is a glossary containing acronyms used in this report and their definitions. For ease, we have used some terms, such as pupil support assistant, but acknowledge different terms are used both across Scotland and elsewhere. There are two columns in the table below. The first column contains the acronym, and the second column contains the definition.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **ASN**  **CFVI** | Additional Support Needs  Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment |
| **CYP** | Children and Young People |
| **DJVI** | Development Journal |
| **FE** | Further Education |
| **FOI** | Freedom of Information |
| **FTE** | Full-time Equivalent |
| **LA** | Local Authority |
| **NatSIP** | National Sensory Impairment Partnership |
| **PSA** | Pupil Support Assistant |
| **QTVI** | Qualified Teacher of children and young people with Vision Impairment |
| **RNIB** | Royal National Institute of Blind People |
| **RQHS** | Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialist |
| **TVI** | Teacher of children and young people with Vision Impairment |
| **VI** | Vision Impairment |
| **VINCYP** | Visual Impairment Network for Children and Young People |

# Foreword

Every child has a right to an education that gives them the opportunity to maximise their potential, allowing them to develop as an individual. Over recent years, concerns over the educational attainment of Scotland’s children and young people with a vision impairment (VI), as compared to the general school population, continue to surface.

This report sets out information provided to us by 31 of the 32 Local Authorities (LAs) in Scotland.

The total number of children and young people with VI reported to be on active service caseloads in 2023 is 2,482. However, the true number is likely to be higher as five LAs either provided no data, or provided inconsistent data, when asked about caseload numbers.

Specialist support for children and young people with VI is vital to enable them to access education and the wider world with as much independence as possible. Yet our report’s key findings show:

* Over one third of all local authorities (LAs) across Scotland have seen the budget that funds the VI service cut or frozen at least once over the last three years.
* Over half of LA VI services in Scotland do not have a Qualified Teacher of children and young people with VI (QTVI) in the role of team lead or as the strategic lead for the service.
* There is a patchwork of provision in the level and type of support available across the country.

It is the responsibility of society, and government, to ensure children and young people with VI the best possible educational experience.

The Third Sector, including RNIB Scotland, seeks to collaborate with partners to keep education firmly on the agenda of decision makers.

James Adams

Director, RNIB Scotland

# 1. Introduction

Provision for specialist educational support for children and young people with vision impairment (VI) is essential to ensure they are not disadvantaged in their education. To better understand and monitor the provision of VI specialist education services, RNIB Scotland has conducted its annual survey of local authorities across Scotland. This report summarises findings from the Freedom of Information (FOI) survey in Spring 2023.

To ensure children and young people with VI have equitable access to education, provision needs to be delivered consistently, through adequate and protected funding.

# 2. Key findings

### Service provision - budget cuts

Over one third of all local authorities (LAs) across Scotland have seen the budget that funds the VI service cut or frozen at least once over the last three years.

### Team structures - need for specialist lead teachers

Over half of LA VI services in Scotland do not have a Qualified Teacher of children and young people with VI (QTVI) in the role of team lead or as the strategic lead for the service.

### Patchwork of provision

There is wide variation in the level and type of support available across the country:

* The ratio of Teachers of children and young people with Vision Impairment (TVIs) to children and young people with VI varies significantly across Scotland from 1:11 to 1:68.
* For almost one in ten local authorities the waiting time between referral and an initial visit from a QTVI fails to meet the standard set by VINCYP.
* Specialist VI support for young people in FE is not offered by VI teams in five LAs.

### Habilitation

* Two LAs do not offer habilitation support at all.
* For the LA VI services which offer habilitation support the percentage of children and young people on the service active caseload who are receiving support or on a waiting list ranges from two per cent to 100 per cent.
* Waiting times for habilitation support range from one week to three months.

# 3. Method

In February 2023, RNIB Scotland contacted the 32 LAs in Scotland, asking a range of questions about current and future education provision for children and young people with VI.

31 of the 32 LAs in Scotland responded giving an overall response rate of 97 per cent. Not every Local Authority answered all questions.

The FOI requests covered the following:

* Funding arrangements
* Changes to provision
* Budget
* Caseload
* Support settings
* Staffing arrangements
* Additional and support staff
* Habilitation support

# 4. Key findings

## 4.1 Budget and Service Structure

### 4.1.1 Budget

Budget information was requested for the financial years 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23. Responses showed that eleven LAs have had the budget that funds the VI service cut or frozen at least once over the last three years; this affects over one third of all VI services which provide support to over 40 per cent of all children and young people with VI in the country.

One LA VI service had a reduction in budget over three consecutive years; another saw a worryingly high budget cut of 20 per cent between 2021/22 and 2022/23. Finally, three LA VI services had their budgets frozen for all three years; taking inflation into account, this represents real term budget cuts.

Seven LAs did not provide budget information to allow us to understand budget patterns over the years requested.

### 4.1.2 Service structure

Nine LAs shared that there have been changes in the last 12 months, or there are current or proposed changes to the way that provision for children and young people with VI is funded, organised and/or staffed. Only one authority stated that these changes are expected to impact positively on the children and young people.

One LA told us that the budget for specialist resources and equipment, for example, braille notetakers, production of large print resources, is held by schools but in all other LAs this budget is held centrally and/or by the sensory service.

When asked if there is specialist provision for children and young people with VI within their LA, 17 responded that there is and that it is funded centrally; the funding for one other is held by the school offering the provision with unspecified aspects of the provision being centrally funded. Eleven LAs have no specialist provision.

## 4.2 Children and young people supported by local authority VI services

### 4.2.1 Caseload

The total number of children and young people with VI reported to be on active service caseloads is 2,482. However, the true number is likely to be higher as five LAs either provided no data, or provided inconsistent data, when asked about caseload numbers; for this reason, it is not possible to make a valid comparison with the total active caseload figure from the 2022 FOI report.

The ratio of TVIs to children and young people with VI on active caseloads varies significantly across Scotland from 1:11 to 1:68 with two VI services having 50 children or more per TVI. With high caseloads, the specialists needed to teach and support the development of specialist skills are under significant pressure in terms of time and resource. One authority told us:

“There has been an increase in the number of referrals to the Service, so we have prioritised 0-5, and children in settings where staff have little to no experience of VI”.

Encouragingly, the majority of children and young people with VI in Scotland have to wait no longer than four weeks, the VINCYP standard, to be seen by a QTVI following a referral to the VI service. However, two LAs report a wait of six weeks and one authority reports that children and young people wait as long as a term. Any delay to initial assessment and subsequent implementation of provision to meet ASN impacts on access to learning for the individual which can lead to poorer outcomes in the short and long term.

The table below illustrates the breakdown of CYP on active caseload by age group.

There are two columns in the table below. The first column gives the school year group, and the second column contains the proportion on active caseload.

**Table: Proportion of CYP on active caseload by school year group**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| School Year Group | Proportion on active caseload |
| 0 – 3 years | 4 per cent |
| Early years/ pre-school (aged 3 to 5) | 8 per cent |
| P1 – P3 | 16 per cent |
| P4 – P7 | 23 per cent |
| S1 – S3 | 19 per cent |
| S4 – S6 | 16 per cent |

In addition to those on active caseloads, 97 children and young people with VI are known to their LA VI service but not actively receiving support, down from 243 in 2022. The majority of these are categorised as “advice on request” category (68 per cent); the rest are in out of local authority area placements (13 per cent), home educated (12 per cent), educated at a specialist school (4 per cent), or educated at a grant aided school (2 per cent). Whilst the decrease in the number of children and young people not actively receiving support is significant, the underlying reason is not evident from the FOI responses.

### 4.2.2 Support settings

All LAs stated that they provide early years support within the child’s home, in pre-school/early years settings and in school settings. Only 12 LAs provide support in settings where the child is cared for by a childminder outside of the home.

Five LA VI teams report that they do not provide support for students in further education which would suggest that young people living in these areas could be missing out on specialist VI support that is available elsewhere in the country.

### 4.2.3 Braille users

From responses, the total number of children and young people that use or are expected to use braille is 36. The true number is likely to be higher as not all LAs provided data and responses of “less than five” cannot be included. This is worth noting as a braillist requires the highest amount of specialist support and training.

### 4.2.4 Criteria for allocating support levels

When asked about the criteria used for allocating levels of support, LAs were able to select multiple answers. Just over half of LAs said that they used locally developed criteria, either alone or in conjunction with other criteria. A fifth of services used the NatSIP Eligibility Framework in its standardised form. Three VI services reported using only VINCYP criteria to allocate support levels and an additional three services reported using VINCYP alongside professional judgement.

Lack of consistent use of a standardised framework to allocate support levels raises concerns and could result in children and young people with VI in some areas of Scotland not getting the level of support they require.

## 4.3 Teachers and support staff

### 4.3.1 QTVI posts

Only 12 LAs reported that the strategic manager of the VI service holds the specialist qualification for a teacher of children and young people with VI or that the team has a QTVI in a lead role. Not having a lead QTVI could potentially impact on the professional development, experience, specialist support and supervision of the team.

In addition to the seven strategic leads who are QTVIs, responses indicate 98.1 full time equivalent (FTE) posts for QTVIs. Of these, 22.7 FTE are in training or due to begin training within the next two years. It is encouraging that there is only one 0.8 FTE vacancy for a QTVI unfilled. However, the fact that 4.7 FTE teachers for children and young people with VI do not hold the specialist qualification for the role and are not due to begin training within the next two years raises concerns as it could lead to the children and young people they support not receiving the specialist teaching that they are entitled to that will enable them to access learning and achieve their potential.

### 4.3.2 Support staff

Specialist support staff play a vital role in the effective service delivery of an LA VI team. Responses indicate a total of 37.5 FTE pupil support assistants (PSAs) are employed by LAs, although in six authorities none of these hold a qualification in either uncontracted or contracted braille. Providing support for a child or young person to access learning is a specialist role requiring high level training to develop the necessary knowledge and skills.

The table below shows additional staff in specialist roles.

There are two columns in the table below. The first column contains the staff role, and the second column contains the number of FTE posts.

**Table: Numbers of specialist support staff across Scotland**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Staff role** | **Number of FTE posts** |
| Habilitation specialist | 15.4 |
| Habilitation assistant | 1 |
| Trainee habilitation worker | 0 |
| Specialist Braille support staff | 8.8 |
| Resource technician | 4.3 |
| ICT support technician | 3 |
| Dedicated early years staff | 0 |
| Family support workers | 1 |
| Admin/secretarial | 2.5 |

Four LA VI services employ no specialist support staff, and one other only has additional support for admin, which risks children and young people with VI relying on PSAs in schools who may not have the requisite level of specialist knowledge and skills.

## 4.4 Habilitation

There are a total of 448 pupils currently on active habilitation caseloads, with a further 137 waiting to be assessed; in one authority, it is noteworthy that of the children and young people identified as needing habilitation support, all are on a waiting list for assessment, and none are actually receiving input. Four authorities did not supply this information.

The percentage of children and young people on LA VI service active caseloads accessing, or on a waiting list to access, habilitation support varies enormously across authorities ranging from two per cent to 100 per cent with the waiting time from referral to an initial visit ranging from one week to three months (the VINCYP standard is four weeks). Most concerningly, two authorities stated that they do not offer habilitation support at all and these two LAs support 52 children and young people with VI.

When asked how habilitation services are delivered, 48 per cent of LAs said they employ a habilitation specialist, whereas 42 per cent said an external organisation is commissioned to deliver the service; most commonly Guide Dogs but additionally Sight Scotland provide this support. A small number of authorities use agency staff or the LA Social Care team which raises possible concerns around the lack of suitably qualified staff available to provide adequate specialist support in an education environment.

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

When LAs were asked whether they were aware of the CFVI, 26 said that they had heard of the framework. Although the framework launch was only just over a year ago, two LA VI services are already using it to support their children and young people with VI. Two LAs said they were not yet aware of the CFVI and three did not give an answer.

We asked LAs what existing framework or curriculum they used to support CYP with VI. LAs were able to select more than one option. Responses tell us:

* 74 per cent used Developmental Journal (DJVI)
* 65 per cent used The Oregon Project
* 58 per cent used a bespoke programme designed in house
* 29 per cent used Guide Dogs Habilitation programme
* 26 per cent used Quality Standards for Habilitation
* 19 per cent used NatSIP Learner Outcomes Framework
* 16 per cent used Expanded Core Curriculum (EEC) – USA

# 5. Conclusion

Specialist support for children and young people with VI is vital to enable them to access education and the wider world with as much independence as possible.

To ensure that children and young people with vision impairment now, and in the future, can access the support they need to thrive we are calling on Scottish Government to:

* Recognise and reference the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment in ASN policies, guidance and documentation including any new ASN legislation.
* Provide adequate and protected high needs funding for local authorities to develop effective VI team structures and deliver a consistent level of specialist education services, that meet criteria set out in the VINCYP standards, across Scotland to meet the needs of children and young people with VI no matter where they live.
* Take immediate action to boost the numbers of Qualified Teachers for Vision Impairment (QTVIs) and Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialists (RQHSs). This should include a clear and fully funded plan of action to improve recruitment and opportunities to qualify into the profession.
* Implement a clear, fully funded strategy to ensure appropriate access to habilitation services for children and young people with VI across Scotland.
* Support the skills development, and retention of the current workforce through investment in specialist training and career development opportunities.