**Underfunded, under resourced and under pressure**

Gaps in Educational Support for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment in England (2022)

**March 2023**

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# Foreword

**Our call for sufficient numbers of specialist education professionals and funding**

This year’s RNIB’s annual education Freedom of Information (FOI) survey conducted in Autumn 2022, yet again shows some concerning trends and shifts in education provision across England's 152 local authorities. We run the survey every year to give the education sector invaluable information, data, evidence and trends pertaining to local authority (LA) vision impairment (VI) services in England.

The Curriculum Framework for children and young people with vision impairment (CFVI), which we launched last year, clearly defines the specialist skills that a child with vision impairment may require access to during their time in education. Yet our FOI survey shows that the specialists needed to teach and support the development of specialist skills are under increasing pressure in terms of time and resource.

Data shows us there are more children and young people requiring and accessing specialist support, yet many services have experienced inconsistent funding - with budgets fluctuating year-on-year - making planning and provision increasingly problematic. As provision becomes ever more stretched, we remain concerned that access to vital specialist support is being reduced, impacting not only children’s education but also opportunities in later life.

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

**Caireen Sutherland**

Head of Education, RNIB

# Glossary

Here we explain the acronyms used in this report with their definitions. For ease, we have used some terms - such as teaching assistant - but we acknowledge different terms are used both across England and elsewhere. There are two columns in this table. The first column contains the acronym, and the second column contains the definition.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **CFVI** | Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment |
| **CYP** | Children and Young People |
| **DfE** | Department for Education |
| **EHCP** | Education, Health, and Care Plan |
| **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 |
| **QTMSI** | Qualified Teacher of children and young people with Multi-Sensory Impairment |
| **QTVI** | Qualified Teacher of children and young people with Vision Impairment |
| **SEN** | Special Educational Needs |
| **SEND** | Special Educational Needs and Disabilities |
| **TA** | Teaching Assistant |
| **ToD** | Teacher of the Deaf |
| **VI** | Vision Impairment |

# Executive Summary

**Inconsistent support is letting children and young people down**

Specialist support for children and young people with VI is vital, and there is clear evidence that this service has become increasingly under-resourced in recent years. Unfortunately, the latest data confirms this trend. Our FOI request to local authorities shows that the specialists needed to teach and support the development of specialist skills are under increasing pressure.

Despite a greater demand for services, there is a variation in service structures, practices, and budgets across English local authorities.

This patchwork of inconsistent support has the potential to leave some children and young people without the support they need to access education.

Those that miss out, also miss all the opportunities childhood development and learning has to offer.

**Key findings**

**Caseload and capacity - rising caseloads**

* Total number of children and young people on active vision impairment service caseloads, or known to services, is 30,453 across 137 LAs in England.
* 61 per cent of LAs have reported a decrease or freeze in the number of QTVIs over the last year despite rising caseloads. This is likely to affect support for almost half of all CYP accessing VI specialist support.
* There are a total of 584 FTE posts for QTVIs across 137 local authorities; this figure is inclusive of those in training or due to begin training.
* Of the authorities that provided data, the total number of CYP that use braille as their sole or main literacy medium across England is 652, a 6 per cent increase over the past five years.

**Service provision – nearly half of budgets have had real term cuts**

* 42 per cent of authorities have seen their budgets cut or frozen over the last year.
* The number of LAs that have seen budget cuts has increased by 12 per cent since last year.
* In the past five years, 29 authorities have seen their budget cut at least once, which represents a quarter of local authorities.

**Habilitation – waiting for assessment**

* Of the total children on the LA VI service active caseload, 16 per cent are receiving or waiting to be assessed for habilitation support.
* 4,221 CYP are currently on active habilitation caseloads, with 563 CYP waiting to be assessed. This is a 7 per cent increase from last year.

# Introduction

Provision for specialist educational support for children with a vision impairment (V I) is essential to ensure they are not disadvantaged in their education.

In October 2022, 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. Since the start of the pandemic, we have chosen to issue this FOI request in October rather than earlier in the year.

We got an overall response rate of 90 per cent as 137 of the local authorities responded, or had a response provided from a consortium. This is down two per cent from 2021.

The FOI request to the local authorities covered the following:

* Organisation and funding of Education Vision Impairment (VI) Advisory service
* Structuring of services
* Number of CYP on the VI service caseload and support available
* VI service staffing
* Habilitation support
* Registers
* Curriculum Framework for Children/Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI)

# Findings

## Service provision and organisation

### Funding arrangement

Of the 137 local authorities that responded to the FOI request, 91 per cent said specialist support for pupils with vision impairment was centrally funded. Only four per cent said they partially delegated their funding, while no respondent said they fully delegated funding to individual schools who purchase specialist support under a ‘traded services’ arrangement.

Authorities were given an option to provide additional comments regarding their funding arrangements. The most common theme was around commissioning external agencies to provide support and funding from the Delegated Schools Grant and High Needs Budget agreed by their directorate. Two authorities also stated that there is no designated VI budget as funding is taken from an overall service budget, or funding is considered on an individual basis.

### Changes to provision

In the last 12 months, 30 per cent of authorities have made changes to the way provision for children and young people with vision impairment is funded or organised, whereas 69 per cent said no changes were made.

Of the local authorities that had actively made change to provision over the last 12 months, 31 per cent provided additional details.

Changes amongst half of these local authorities were largely positive, with 18 local authorities increasing their budget to allow for hiring additional QTVIs and qualified habilitation specialists in order to deliver services efficiently and meet demands. In many cases, local authorities were able to successfully recruit for positions that were previously vacant.

Two authorities stated a restructure that created a new role leading to an increase in service delivery. Another has set out budget for specialist equipment for special needs students.

"One FTE Higher Level Teaching Assistant (Vision Impairment) has been employed from January 2022. Habilitation Support has slowly increased since end of March 22 again to full time position. Habilitation Specialist has returned from long term absence on phased return. Post was covered by temporary member of staff who ensured statutory duties and EYs were being met."

In contrast, five local authorities have experienced a loss of specialist staff or have ongoing vacancies that have yet to be filled.

"The senior carried a 0.4 caseload, but we could not recruit a person to the post with the same quals, despite two attempts.”

"Currently have a part-time QTVI fulfilling the role until a permanent member of staff can be secured."

In 2021, we asked how many CYP had their service reduced due to service capacity, or restructure of delivery model, in the last 12 months; only seven LAs provided an answer, with a total of 155 children and young people having their support directly reduced.

However, when we asked the same question this year, we again had seven authorities that provided a figure (NB. not the same seven authorities), but the total number of children and young people that had their service reduced was 293.

Several authorities stated that they do not currently collect this data so are unable to provide an accurate figure. However, several authorities did provide extra information. For several of them, staffing continues to be an issue alongside the continuous increase in the number of children and young people on active caseload. The continuous pressure on specialist staff and authorities will likely have a negative impact on their ability to provide adequate support to those who need it.

"Capacity continues to be an issue due to a steady increase in numbers of students but also braille users."

"There are increasingly significant pressures upon service delivery and decisions made to adjust provision have been based upon an individual basis."

### Proposed changes to provision

When asked if local authorities had any current or proposed reviews of the VI service that will affect the way it’s organised, managed and funded, 76 per cent said no, 18 per cent said yes and 6 per cent said they didn't know or did not provide an answer for this. No local authority provided any additional information despite the option to provide this.

## Budget

In the 2022 FOI request, we asked authorities to provide the service budget across three separate years, 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23.

Out of the total 137 authorities that responded, 91 per cent have provided budget information. Not all local authorities were able to provide all the years requested and not all were able to separate the service budget for vision impairment services from the overall sensory support budget or other combined budgets. Despite this, we can see a four per cent decrease in the number of LAs that provided budget information compared to the previous year, meaning we are unable to paint as accurate a picture of service provision budgets in England as we would like.

### Short term funding trends

Around 114 authorities provided budget figures, and it was possible to analyse trend data for 97 individual authorities. 42 per cent of authorities have seen their budgets being cut or frozen over the last year. If we compare these figures to the year before, we can see that the overall number of LAs that have seen budget cuts has increased by 12 per cent.

The number of LAs that have seen a budget increase has also dropped three per cent since last year. Among the authorities that had their funding cut over the last year, figures show just over £13 million has been lost from service budgets.

Of the 63 local authorities that saw an increase in budget in 2021, 46 per cent saw further budget increases in 2022, while 22 per cent of authorities saw budget cuts. Similarly, of the 22 local authorities that had their budgets cut in 2021, 23 per cent saw their budgets being cut further in 2022.

### Long term funding trends

With the picture for service funding being so unpredictable at an individual local authority level, it's important to consider the long term trends. The analysis below is taken from 112 local authorities that provided some budget data for the past five years.

In the past five years, 29 authorities have seen their budget cut at least once, which represents over a third of local authorities (35 per cent). These authorities with unstable funding provision support a total of 5,729 of the total number of children and young people with VI.

Worryingly, one local authority identified in the analysis has seen its budget decrease for three years in a row, which has led to the budget of this particular LA being cut by 10 per cent.

### Impact on support to CYP

A steady increase in children and young people using VI services means local authorities are having to make their budgets stretch further, which is likely to leave less funding available per head and for those requiring the highest level of specialist input. While some local authorities are recognising the importance of the VI specialist services, others are not making the required investment to maintain service levels.

The evidence of budget cuts, alternated with budget increases, suggests that service budgets are unpredictable and not secure from one year to the next. However, with the increasing number of children on active caseload, the reason for fluctuating budgets is not entirely clear and is likely to be managed differently in each local authority.

### Regional trends

Comparing regional trends in funding, more than half of authorities in the North West and South East regions have had budgets frozen or cut in the last year. Whereas the South West have the lowest proportion of local authorities with budget cuts or frozen at 20 per cent.

However, not all authorities provided budget data and the local trends across over 55 authorities remains unknown. The proportion of LAs with a budget freeze or cut by region is presented in table 1 below. These regional trends may vary if all authorities had provided accurate budget data.

Table 1: Regional budget trends, 2021/22 to 2022/23

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Region | Total number of LAs | Number of LAs providing budget data | Proportion of LAs with budget freeze or cuts |
| North West | 23 | 14 | 57% |
| South East | 19 | 13 | 54% |
| London | 33 | 20 | 45% |
| East Midlands | 9 | 7 | 43% |
| Yorkshire and The Humber | 15 | 13 | 38% |
| West Midlands | 14 | 11 | 36% |
| North East | 12 | 6 | 33% |
| East of England | 11 | 8 | 25% |
| South West | 16 | 5 | 20% |

## Children and young people supported by the service

### Caseload

The total number of children and young people aged 0-25 on vision impairment service caseloads, or known to services, is 30,453. This represents a 5 per cent increase since 2017, with 1,496 more children and young people compared to five years ago. However, the true figure is likely to be higher as 20 authorities either did not respond or failed to provide a figure due to data protection in 2022.

25,836 CYP were recorded on active service caseloads with a further 4,617 CYP known to services. The split in caseload and CYP known to the service across different support levels is detailed in table 2 below.

Table 2: Proportion on active caseload by group

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Support level | Proportion on active caseload |
| Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) | 49% |
| Special Education Need (SEN) Support | 40% |
| Not yet assessed | 6% |
| Other | 3% |

### Braille users

The total number of CYP supported across the 137 local authorities that use braille as their sole or main literacy medium is 652. It is important to note that this question only asked about their main/sole medium; if we were to consider dual media users then this number would likely be much higher. It is also difficult to get a true picture of the number due to the low number of authorities providing figures: particularly where LAs have answered ‘less than five’ or ‘less than 10’, these have not been included in the counts.

If we look at a wider five-year trend, figures indicate a six per cent increase in the number of CYP using braille as their sole medium across England. In the context of stretched staffing resource, this is significant - a braillist requires the highest amount of specialist support and training.

### Register of blind and partially sighted people

Our FOI request also found that the responsibility for registration of a certificate of vision impairment (CVI) varies greatly across England. We asked local authorities which team was responsible for holding the register for children and young people who are sight impaired (SI) or severely sight impaired (SSI). More than half (58 per cent) of the responding LAs said it was held by the Social Care Children’s disability team. 19 per cent said it was held by the education/SEND/sensory teams, 11 per cent said it was held by a local society for blind people/sight loss or sensory society on behalf of the local authority.

There was an option to provide more information and the most common response was the Adult Sensory Team/ Adult Rehabilitation Team.  The findings highlight that CYP are under-represented on registers.

There are 10,145 CYP aged 0 – 17 registered as blind or partially sighted in England (2020), representing just a third of the children and young people aged 0-25 on vision impairment service caseloads or known to services. We understand that definitions for registration may be narrower than definitions used for CYP to access support from the VI education services. This and differences in the age ranges between the two datasets may be responsible for some of the gap.

Despite this, the existence and accuracy of children’s registers for vision impairment remains a source of considerable concern due to the inconsistent recording and lack of accurate data.

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

When asked about the criteria used for allocating levels of support, local authorities were able to select multiple answers. Of 137 authorities, 83 per cent said the NatSIP Eligibility Framework was used, 19 per cent used NatSIP Learner Outcomes and 23 per cent said they used criteria which were locally developed.

A further 20 per cent (28) of authorities said they made other arrangements. When asked to provide more information, 16 authorities (57 per cent) indicated that elements of their framework were taken from the existing NatSIP Eligibility Framework. A further half a dozen authorities are using ‘professional judgment’; however no further explanation was provided as to who was responsible for carrying out this assessment or what criteria it was based on. Despite the majority of local authorities using the NatSIP Eligibility framework, adjusting to local criteria has resulted in a lack of standardisation across the country.

83 per cent of responding local authorities are meeting the statutory criteria by conducting EHCP assessments based on a child’s individual needs.

Worryingly, 22 per cent of authorities stated CYP must meet a specific level of severity/ visual acuity, nine per cent said CYP must be failing to make the expected level of progress, four per cent said they are expected to attend a special school and a further two per cent said they must have additional SEND.

We also provided an option for authorities to provide any extra information on assessment criteria, 22 per cent of authorities provided this information. The majority of the authorities that responded stated that CYP must have a medical diagnosis, involvement of an ophthalmologist or a Certificate of Vision Impairment.

The wide variation across authorities in criteria used to assess for an EHCP could lead to very different levels of support being provided to CYP with VI who have similar needs but live in different authorities.

## Teachers and support staff

### QTVI posts

There are a total of 584 FTE posts for QTVIs across 137 local authorities; this figure is inclusive of those in training or due to begin training. There are also an additional 19 FTE QTVI vacancies currently unfilled.

Of those working as specialist VI teachers, 78 per cent of QTVIs hold the mandatory qualification in VI; 15 per cent are currently in - or due to begin training; four per cent hold QTMSI; and only three per cent hold both the QTVI and QTMSI qualifications.

61 per cent of LAs have reported a decrease or freeze in the number of QTVIs over the last year despite increasing caseloads. This will likely affect support for over 14,000 CYP accessing VI support. Only 39 per cent of LAs have reported an increase in full time QTVIs.

As caseloads and the demand for support continues to increase, many authorities are either maintaining or decreasing their resource levels, resulting in support becoming increasingly stretched.

### Teaching assistants

52 per cent of responding authorities said they employ a teaching assistant (TA), this is a five per cent increase compared to the year before. The total number of TA posts (headcount of both full-time and part-time) across these authorities is 280. Despite this being a 16 per cent increase from 2021, the overall number of TAs employed by local authorities has dropped by 83 per cent since 2017.

Most TAs are employed directly by schools as opposed to sensory services, therefore, gathering an accurate picture of the TA workforce across the country would be very difficult. This move away from LA specialist TAs risks children with VI receiving support from less specialist, skilled TAs.

## Habilitation

A total of 4,201 pupils are currently on active habilitation caseloads, with a further 563 waiting to be assessed. This is a nine per cent increase in active habilitation caseload from last year.

Of the CYP on LA VI active caseload, 15 per cent are currently receiving or waiting to be assessed for habilitation support, which represents one in five CYP on active VI caseloads.

Just under a quarter (21 per cent) of authorities provided habilitation support for fewer than 10 children or young people. 44 per cent of authorities supported between 11- 20 CYP and 35 per cent of authorities supported more than 20 CYP.

When asked how habilitation services are delivered, well over half of authorities (60 per cent) said they employ a habilitation specialist; 28 per cent said an external organisation is commissioned to deliver the service; and one per cent said services are spot purchased.

There was also an option for LAs to provide more information regarding service delivery. The most common organisation used to deliver habilitation services was Guide Dogs. Several authorities stated that habilitation support was delivered by QTVIs and specialist practitioners. There were also several authorities that highlighted ongoing vacancies for habilitation specialists. In the interim support was being delivered by a QTVI. This once again raises issues around the lack of suitably qualified staff available to provide adequate specialist support in an education environment.

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

We asked local authorities what existing frameworks or curriculum they used to support CYP with VI. Authorities were able to select more than one option.

* 86 per cent used Developmental Journal (DJVI)
* 65 per cent used Quality Standards for Habilitation
* 56 per cent used NatSIP Learner Outcomes Framework
* 38 per cent used a bespoke programme designed in house
* 25 per cent used Steps to Independence – the mobility and independence needs of children with vision impairment
* 18 per cent used Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) – USA
* 18 per cent used Guide Dogs’ Habilitation programme

Authorities were given an option to provide an alternative answer or provide extra information, the majority of authorities stated they were either moving from ECC to CFVI or are already using the CFVI.

When asked if LAs were aware of the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI) 91 per cent said yes, which is an increase from last year; only four per cent said no.

Authorities were asked if they incorporated any aspects of the CFVI in their normal working practices; the majority of authorities said they use both the criteria and resources in assessment, planning and reports.

"We have begun to use the CFVI rather than ECC to move from assessment to programme planning to delivery (in a plan, do, review cycle). We have also started on resources for staff to use under CFVI headings."

"We have the CFVI as one of our service priorities and looking at developing training sessions for schools with high need CYPVI."

For those who said yes, we asked if they had any active involvement with the development of the CFVI, 11 per cent participated in consultation, 10 per cent said they were resource providers, five per cent were reference group members and four per cent said they were resource reviewers.

# Conclusion

Specialist support for children and young people with VI is vital, and there is clear evidence that this service has become increasingly under-resourced in recent years. Unfortunately, the latest data confirms this trend.

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 Department for Education to:

* Recognise and reference the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment in SEND policies, guidance and documentation including any new SEND legislation.
* Provide adequate and protected high needs funding for local authorities to deliver specialist education services which meet the needs of children and young people with VI from 0-25.
* Take immediate action to boost the numbers of Qualified Teachers for Vision Impairment (QTVI) and Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialists (RQHS). This should include a clear and fully funded plan of action to improve recruitment and opportunities to qualify into the profession.
* Support the skills development, and retention of the current workforce through investment in specialist training and career development opportunities.