**Education provision for children and young people with vision impairment in Northern Ireland, 2022**

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# Foreword

Children and young people with vision impairment in Northern Ireland deserve equitable opportunities to thrive in education and beyond, alongside their sighted peers.

We were prompted to request information on the structure, organisation and funding of the Education Authority Vision Impairment Advisory Service, current caseloads, habilitation services, and understanding of the new Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI). This is to examine whether some children and young people in Northern Ireland are currently unable to receive the level and type of support they need to develop their independence, access education, and realise their potential.

RNIB would like to thank the following organisations for their assistance with this Freedom of Information Request: Guide Dogs Northern Ireland and Jordanstown School. We also thank the Education Authority for Northern Ireland for their response.

Following the key findings from the report, highlighted in the Executive Summary, we believe SEN Transformation is urgently required, alongside adequate funding and resource, to create a sustainable structure for the VI (Vision Impairment) Service.

We look forward to working together to raise aspirations, attainment, and the ability to meet the needs of our children and young people with vision impairment in Northern Ireland.

**Robert Shilliday**

Director, RNIB Northern Ireland

# 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 Northern Ireland 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 |
| **DJVI** | Developmental Journal |
| **EA** | Education Authority |
| **FOI** | Freedom of Information |
| **FTE** | Full-time Equivalent |
| **MQ** | Mandatory Qualification |
| **MSI** | Multi-sensory Impairment |
| **NatSIP** | National Sensory Impairment Partnership |
| **QTMSI** | Qualified Teacher of children and young people with Multi-Sensory Impairment |
| **QToD** | Qualified Teacher of the Deaf |
| **QTVI** | Qualified Teacher of children and young people with Vision Impairment |
| **SEN** | Special Educational Needs |
| **SEND** | Special Educational Needs and Disabilities |
| **TA** | Teaching Assistant |
| **VI** | Vision Impairment |

# Executive Summary

Specialist support for children and young people with vision impairment (VI) is vital to enable equitable access to education.

Our Freedom of Information (FOI) request to the Education Authority highlights some of the challenges in delivering specialist input and support.

Without an effective structure and funding in place for the Education Authority VI team, to ensure sustainability, and further 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.

## Key findings

**Team structure – need for a specialist lead teacher**

* The Education Authority VI team structure does not include a lead QTVI post.

**Allocating support levels – a non-standardised approach**

* The Education Authority uses locally developed criteria, based on the NatSIP Eligibility Framework, for allocating levels of support.

**Habilitation support – lacking in educational settings**

* Only 2% of children and young people with VI on the Education Authority active caseload are reported to be accessing specialist habilitation services in their educational setting.

# 1 Introduction

Provision for specialist educational support for children with VI is essential to ensure they are not disadvantaged in their education. In order to better understand, monitor and track trends over time in the provision of specialist education services for children with VI, RNIB Northern Ireland has decided to issue an annual FOI request to the Education Authority.

# 2 Method

In October 2022, RNIB Northern Ireland contacted the Education Authority in Northern Ireland asking a range of questions about current and future education provision for children and young people with VI.

The FOI request to the Education Authority covered the following:

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

# 3 Findings

## 3.1 Organisation and Funding

### 3.1.1 Funding arrangement

The Education Authority confirmed that provision is centrally funded for specialist support for all pupils with VI.

### 3.1.2 Service structure and changes to provision

The service structure is a centralised specialist service.

There had been no changes made in the last 12 months to the way provision for children and young people with VI was funded. However, the authority stated that *“the SEND Transformation Programme is under way. This Programme will review all Support Services*”. As part of this, the way the VI service is organised, managed, and funded will be reviewed.

### 3.1.3 Budget

Table 1 below shows the overall VI service budget across three years: 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23. Additional spending in 2021/2022 was to fund three staff to train for the QTVI mandatory qualification.

**Table 1. Overall VI service budget across three years**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Overall VI service budget (including staff, equipment, and training)** | **Budget (£)** |
| Budget for 2020/21 | 608,725 |
| Budget for 2021/22 | 734,521 |
| Budget for 2022/23 | Data unavailable |

Data for 2022/23 was unavailable as the request was made part way through the current financial year

## 3.2 Number of children and young people with VI receiving support

### 3.2.1 Children and young people with VI by key stage/year group

A total of 756 children and young people with VI were on the VI service active caseload, including those supported by Jordanstown Outreach service. A further 43 children attend Jordanstown School, which is a specialist setting for children and young people with sensory impairment.

**Table 2: Proportion of CYP with VI by age group (inclusive of the 43 CYP that attend Jordanstown School)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Key stage/year group** | **Number of CYP with VI receiving support** | **Proportion of CYP with VI receiving support** |
| Pre School | 71 | 9% |
| Foundation Stage | 88 | 11% |
| Key Stage 1 | 109 | 14% |
| Key Stage 2 | 179 | 22% |
| Key Stage 3 | 170 | 21% |
| Key Stage 4 | 119 | 15% |
| Years 13 and 14 | 63 | 8% |
| Total | 799 | 100% |

### 3.2.2 Number of children and young people with VI by statement category

The total number of children and young people with VI receiving support is 799. 59% of these are statemented and 41% do not have a statement. 455 additional children and young people are known to the Education Authority VI service, 37% of whom are statemented and 63% not. The children and young people with VI known to the service but not on the active caseload include those who receive advice on request, those who are home educated and those who attend independent schools.

The Education Authority VI service in Northern Ireland supports early years children within a variety of settings, these include:

* Within the child's home
* In pre-school/ early years settings (including private creches)
* School settings (e.g. nursery class in mainstream or special school)
* In settings where the child is cared for by a childminder (outside of their home)

### 3.2.3 Criteria for allocating support levels

The Education Authority VI service uses locally developed criteria for allocating levels of support. They stated that the current criteria used is based on the NatSIP Eligibility Framework, but that this system is currently under review. This move away from a standardised framework raises concerns over validity and could result in children and young people with VI not getting the level of support they require.

We asked if children and young people with VI were required to meet any specific criteria before they are considered for assessment for a Statement. The Education Authority stated that the decision is made based on individual needs, no further information was provided.

The Education Authority stated that the only group of children and young people with VI that are not currently supported by the VI service are those in further education. The Education Authority is not commissioned to cover further education provision, specialist services currently stop with young people with VI at the age of 19.

### 3.2.4 Braille users

A total of 9 children and young people that use braille as their sole or main literacy medium are supported across the Education Authority.

This is worth noting as a braillist requires the highest amount of specialist support and training.

## 3.3 Teachers and support staff

### 3.3.1 Service provision

The individual responsible for the strategic management of the sensory service (including VI) is a Qualified Teacher of the Deaf (QToD) and holds an MSc in Educational Audiology.

### 3.3.2 QTVI posts

There is a total of 12 full time equivalent QTVIs providing peripatetic support to children and young people with VI in Northern Ireland (10 are part of the Education Authority VI service and 2 are part of the Jordanstown Outreach team). This figure is inclusive of those currently studying for the mandatory qualification (MQ), and current vacancies. Of the posts that are filled, 8 are by teachers who hold the mandatory qualification and 3 by those in training for the MQ. The EA shared that one of the teachers in the team is an MSI teacher who will begin training for the QTMSI mandatory qualification in September 2023.

Within the team, there is no Lead QTVI, which could potentially impact on the professional development, experience, specialist support and supervision of the team.

### 3.3.3. Support staff

We asked the Education Authority to provide details of any other staff employed by the VI service, this included staff who are employed directly, externally commissioned or bought in from another team within the Education Authority. Table 5 below gives details.

**Table 5: The number of other full time equivalent staff and their roles.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **FTE of other staff** | **FTE number of staff** |
| Habilitation officers | 0 |
| Specialist Braille support staff | 0 |
| Resource technicians FTE (for production of accessible materials) | 2 |
| ICT support technicians FTE | 0 |
| Dedicated early years staff FTE | 0 |
| Family support workers FTE | 0 |
| Admin/secretarial FTE | 0.5 |

Teaching assistants (TAs) are employed directly by schools rather than the VI service which risks children with VI receiving support from less specialist, less skilled TAs.

## 3.4 Habilitation

Of the 756 CYP on the active caseload, only 17 are reported to be receiving habilitation support funded by the Education Authority, which represents a worryingly low 2%. This suggests that a significant number of children and young people with VI are not getting the specialist support they need to develop their independence to fully access education.

14 additional children and young people with VI are receiving habilitation support in Jordanstown School.

Habilitation in the community is funded through a number of routes, including:

* Guide Dogs funded through the Strategic Planning & Performance Group (formerly the Health & Social Care Board)
* The ‘Our Futures’ project (RNIB in partnership with Guide Dogs), funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. Due to finish at the end of 2024.

No data was collected on the numbers of children and young people with VI accessing habilitation support in the community as this falls outside the remit of this report.

The authority stated that referrals for an initial assessment of habilitation were accepted from any medical professionals, Qualified Teachers of Children with Vision Impairment (QTVIs), other education professionals and carers/parents.

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

The Education Authority uses the following frameworks or curriculums to support children and young people with VI:

* NatSIP Learner Outcomes Framework
* Developmental Journal (DJVI)
* Guide Dogs Habilitation programme

The Education Authority VI team is familiar with the CFVI and is actively involved with the CFVI project as a reference group member. The Education Authority VI team stated that they are currently working on reviewing support offered to incorporate the CFVI. This will be part of the Northern Ireland SEND Transformation Programme.

# 4 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 VI now, and in the future, can access the support they need we are calling on Department of Education to:

* Recognise and reference the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment in SEN policies, guidance and documentation including any new SEN legislation.
* Provide 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.
* Use the SEND Transformation Programme to implement an effective structure for the Education Authority VI service which includes roles for a lead QTVI and specialist teaching assistants.
* Agree a habilitation specific funding stream, increase funding, and implement a clear strategy to ensure appropriate access to habilitation services for children and young people with VI.