# Underfunded, under resourced and under pressure: Gaps in educational support for children and young people with vision impairment in England 2022RNIB's logo

**March 2023**

## Summary

* This briefing outlines the results of RNIB’s 2022 Freedom of Information request (FOI) into local authority specialist educational support for children with vision impairment (VI) in England.
* In England, there are more than 35,000 children and young people supported by local authority Vision Impairment (VI) specialist education services.
* Children and young people with VI require specialist support to access education and learn skills which other children pick up incidentally by observing others and visually taking on information.
* RNIB’s new FOI research found that 61 per cent of authorities are decreasing or only maintaining the number of specialist teachers they employ. This is despite a gradual increase in children and young people using VI services, meaning local authorities are having to make their budgets stretch further.
* Funding for specialist VI education services is also not stable. Over the past five years, more than a third of local authorities’ VI education teams have had their budget cut at least once.
* As provision becomes 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, we are calling on Claire Coutinho MP, Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing, to provide more funding to local authorities to deliver this vital service and ensure there are enough specialists to provide the support children and young people with vision impairment need.

## Introduction

## Children and young people with VI require specialist support to learn on equal terms with their sighted peers, enabling them to develop the skills they need to succeed at school, eventually live independently as adults, and enter employment.

Low incidence of vision impairment means that most mainstream teachers will have relatively few opportunities to develop an awareness of the impact of VI on learning, let alone develop and maintain skills for working effectively with children and young people with VI. Therefore, learners with VI need direct, high quality specialist teaching and support from:

* Qualified Teachers for Vision Impairment (QTVIs)
* Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialists (RQHSs)’ and
* trained Teaching Assistants (TAs)

These roles can enable children and young people to learn specialist skills that are not covered by the mainstream curriculum but are necessary for accessing learning and developing independence.

## Key findings

Our annual Freedom of Information request (FOI) shows, yet again, that underfunded and under resourced specialist support is letting children and young people with vision impairment (VI) in England down.

RNIB’s FOI survey found that the specialists needed to teach and support children and young people with VI to develop specialist skills are under increasing pressure in terms of time and resource. Despite more children and young people requiring and accessing specialist support, 61 per cent of local authorities reported a decrease or freeze in the number of specialist VI teachers over the last year.

This is likely to affect support for almost half of all children and young people accessing VI specialist support.

On top of this, nearly half of local authority VI education team budgets have experienced real term cuts, with 42 per cent cut or frozen over the last year.

As provision becomes increasingly stretched, we remain concerned that access to vital specialist support is likely to be reduced. This could impact not only a child or young person’s education and childhood, but also potentially their later life, including their ability to find employment.

## The research

RNIB contacted all 152 local authorities in England, asking a range of questions about current and future specialist services for children and young people with vision impairment. 137 of the 152 local authorities in England responded or had a response provided from a consortium, giving a response rate of 91 per cent.

The research found:

* VI service budgets are not secure, with 42 per cent of authorities having their budgets cut or frozen over the last year. The number of local authorities facing budget cuts has also increased by 12 per cent compared to the previous year.
* Over the past five years, a quarter of local authorities have seen their budget cut at least once.
* The total number of pupils aged 0-25 on vision impairment service caseloads, or known to these services, was 30,453. This is likely to be an underestimate as not all local authorities responded; however, it still represents a 5 per cent increase since 2017, with 1,496 more children and young people compared to five years ago. This highlights these services need more funding, not less.
* The number of children and young people using braille as their sole medium also increased by 6 per cent over the past five years. In the context of stretched staffing resources, this is significant - a braillist requires the highest amount of specialist support and training.
* Local authorities are having to make their budgets stretch further in response to increasing VI service caseloads, particularly where caseloads include greater numbers of those requiring high levels of specialist support.
* Despite increased need, 61 per cent of local authorities reported a decrease or freeze in the number of specialist VI teachers over the last year. This is likely to affect support for almost half of all children and young people accessing VI specialist support.
* Only 15 per cent of children on the active caseloads of VI services are receiving, or are waiting to be assessed for, habilitation support to develop their mobility and independent living skills.

## Recommendations

Specialist support for children and young people with VI is vital, and the latest data confirm that this service is becoming increasingly under-resourced. Below a parent describes the importance of specialist support:

“Without the support of the sensory teacher's team (QTVIs and habilitation specialist) I wouldn't have the skills and knowledge to support my son as I do, and neither would his teachers and I'm absolutely convinced he'd be a completely different child, with very limited horizons. The QTVIs ensure he's making correct developmental progress, meeting targets and most importantly accessing all his learning at school. Without this specialist continuous support, he wouldn't be able to have the same learning opportunities as everyone else, and would not gain independence.”

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 Claire Coutinho MP, Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing to:

1. Recognise and reference [the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment](https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/health-social-care-education-professionals/education-professionals/curriculum-framework-for-children-and-young-people-with-vision-impairment/) in SEND policies, guidance and documentation, including any new SEND legislation.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. Support the skills development, and retention of the current workforce through investment in specialist training and career development opportunities.

For more information, or to request parliamentary questions on this issue, please contact PublicAffairs@rnib.org.uk

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| About RNIBThe Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) is one of the UK’s leading sight loss charities and the largest community of blind and partially sighted people. Every day, 250 people begin to lose their sight. We want society, communities and individuals to see differently about sight loss. In our 150th year, RNIB renewed our focus on creating a world where there are no barriers to people with sight loss. |