# The importance of sensory support – vision impairment services

**January 2023**

This statement should be read alongside RNIB’s other

This statement should be read in the context of the Equality Act 2010, the Children and Families Act 2014, and the 2015 statutory guidance, [SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25).

This statement is supported by [VIEW](http://www.viewweb.org.uk), the professional association of the vision impairment workforce.

## What we think

Childhood vision impairment (VI) is a disability that has a significant effect on development and learning, requiring specialist support to teach fundamental skills that enable children to learn, socialise, look after themselves, and get around independently. These skills are defined in the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young people with Vision Impairment.

Two in every 1,000 children and young people up to the age of 25 in the UK are estimated to have vision impairment, meaning they are a numerically small - but very diverse – population. At least 50% have additional disabilities and/or special educational needs including many with profound and complex needs. There is considerable individual variation in the way that children with similar levels of vision may function, depending on other factors such as the existence of additional SEND.

With the right support, children and young people with VI have the potential to achieve at the same level as their sighted peers and to lead successful, independent lives.

There is strong research evidence (Dale N J, Sakkalou E, O’Reilly M A et al (2018) to support the importance of early intervention from a practitioner with specialist knowledge of childhood vision impairment and its effect on development and learning [1].

Specialist provision must be based on an assessment of need by appropriate professionals, including a qualified teacher of children and young people with vision impairment (QTVI) and a Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialist (RQHS)

Support to meet these needs must be designed to enable children to make maximum progress, not simply to achieve average outcomes - their long-term life chances are more highly dependent on positive educational outcomes than most other groups. While the nature of this support should change over time to promote skills of independent learning for transition to adulthood, vision impairment is a lifelong disability and for most learners the underlying need for ongoing specialist input will remain throughout their education so they can learn and develop the skills and understanding to achieve age appropriate outcomes in line with their sighted peers.

## What’s the current issue?

RNIB research shows that levels of support for children with vision impairment vary extensively. While some variation has always existed, the situation is becoming much worse. In England, a combination of financial pressure on local authority budgets, changes in the relationship between schools and local authorities, and changes to the SEND framework is threatening to erode the entitlement of many blind and partially sighted children to the specialist support that they need.

There is also increasing evidence that some local authorities are rationing the provision they make in order to keep within spending limits, and are looking to reduce support for children and young people who do not have a statutory entitlement through a statement or Education Health and Care Plan. This includes children who have a moderate level of vision impairment (which may or may not be combined with other special educational needs) and children with vision impairment in special schools.

RNIB’s 2021 research found that more than three quarters of local authorities have had budgets for specialist VI education support cut, or frozen, in the past four years [2]. This is despite an eight per cent increase in the number of children and young people accessing VI services since 2017, indicating that these services need more funding, not less [3].

RNIB’s research also found that in 2021 almost two thirds of local authorities in England reported a decrease or freeze in full time QTVIs. The research also showed that only one in five children on the active caseload in England (19 per cent) are receiving or waiting to be assessed for habilitation support to develop their mobility and independent living skills.

## Recommendations

It is vital that the support from specialists for children and young people with VI is maintained and protected. To ensure children and young people with VI have equality of opportunity in education, we are calling on the Department for Education to:

* Take immediate action to boost the numbers of Qualified Teachers of Vision Impairment 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 and retention of the current workforce.
* 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 vision impairment from 0-25. Financial pressure on local authorities must not be used as a reason to reduce or withdraw support from any group of children and young people with vision impairment, including those who do not have a statutory entitlementthrough a statement or an Education Health and Care Plan.

We also maintain that schools and local authorities should apply the following principles and practices:

* Educational provision for a learner with vision impairment should be based on a specialist assessment from a QTVI and an RQHS, as required by the SEND Code of Practice.
* All local authorities should adopt recognised criteria for support such as those recommended by NatSIP (National Sensory Impairment Partnership) and professional judgement of a QTVI used when applying these criteria.
* Local authorities should put monitoring systems in place to ensure that specialist provision is effective in enabling children and young people with VI to maximise their attainment and progress.
* Support must be designed to enable children to make maximum progress, not simply to achieve average outcomes.
* Local authorities should be transparent in their local offer about their policies for the allocation of resources to all children and young people with SEND, including those with vision impairment.

## What RNIB is doing

RNIB continues to work with partner organisations to campaign for better support for children and young people with vision impairment, so they can reach their full potential in adult life. Many of our policy priorities are reflected in the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI), which seeks to define, unify and embed best practice support for children and young people with VI.

## Contact

RNIB Policy and Campaigns on 0207 391 2123 or campaigns@rnib.org.uk

## References

[1] Dale N J, Sakkalou E, O’Reilly M A et al (2018) Home-based early intervention in infants and young children with visual impairment using the Developmental Journal: longitudinal cohort study. Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology, (DOI) – 1.1111/dmcn.14081

[2] Bhangoo, 2022. Still left out of learning: Education provision for children and young people with vision impairment in England, 2021. Available from <https://www.rnib.org.uk/left-out-learning>

[3] Ibid.

[4] NatSIP (2017) Eligibility Framework for Scoring Support Levels.National Sensory Impairment Partnership <https://www.natsip.org.uk/eligibility-framework/685-natsip-eligibility-framework-2015>