# Freedom of Information (FOI) questions on local authority education provision for children and young people with vision impairment in England: 2018

January 2019

**Emma Edwards,**

**Insight Analyst**

## Introduction

RNIB is concerned that local authorities, faced with significant cuts to funding, have reduced the quality of their provision for children with vision impairment across England. To better understand the situation, we asked all local authorities in England to provide information about their provision for children and young people with vision impairment. This briefing summarises findings from the most recent Freedom of Information survey in July 2018.

Key findings include:

* Around one in three local authorities who responded had reduced their budget for services for children and young people with vision impairment between 2016/17 and 2017/18.
* Over one-third of local authorities who provided comparable data saw a decrease in the number of Qualified Teachers of Vision Impairment (QTVIs) they employed.
* Around 700 pupils with vision impairment had their level of support reduced between 2016/17 and 2017/18.

## Method

In July 2018, 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. 113 of the 152 local authorities in England responded, a response rate of 74%.

Possibly due to the timing of the FOI request during the summer months, a lower response rate was achieved than in previous years (97% in 2017). For this reason, the analysis cannot directly compare findings with previous years, particularly around the total numbers of teachers or pupils.

## Findings

Unless otherwise stated, the percentages refer to the proportion out of the total number of authorities that responded to the survey, 113.

### Service provision

* Just under 20% of local authorities had made changes to the way provision for children and young people with vision impairment is funded or organised over the past 12 months. Of those, one-third had reduced their capacity or service.
* Around one in three local authorities had reduced their budget for services for children and young people with vision impairment between 2016/17 and 2017/18.
* Just over a third had increased their spend and for just under a third, the spend remained the same.

### Children and young people supported by the service

* The total number of pupils aged 0-25 on vision impairment service caseloads, or known to these services, is around 19,500. However, this cannot be compared with previous years due to the lower response rate to the FOI request.
* For local authorities who responded to both the 2017 and 2018 FOI, the total number on their records has decreased slightly by 7% in 12 months. Three in five local authorities recorded an increase and the remainder recorded a decrease so it is a mixed picture across England.
* Overall, 97% of local authorities had one or more braillists who they supported. The total number of braillists across 110 local authorities was 706. However, many authorities stated a figure of ‘less than five’ due to data protection, and those have been treated as one in the final sum, so the total number of braillists is likely to be higher than this figure suggests.

**Reduction in support**

* Around one-third of local authorities had reduced support for some children and young people with vision impairment in the past 12 months.
* At least 700 pupils had their support reduced in the past 12 months.
* For seven local authorities, the reason for that reduction in support was due to a reduction in staffing levels or the staffing level to caseload ratio.

### Teachers and support staff

* There were 323 FTE posts for QTVIs or Teachers of vision impairment (TVI) across 102 local authorities. The total active caseload was 17,300, which resulted in an average caseload ratio of 54 pupils to every one FTE teacher. However, 13% of teachers, across 26 local authorities, had an active caseload of over 100 pupils per one FTE post. This is considerably higher than the dozen authorities with similar caseload levels in 2015.
* Just over one third of the 87 local authorities providing comparable data recorded a decrease in FTE QTVI posts over the past year, which is of real concern. However, it is not clear that the QTVI FTE numbers are directly comparable for all authorities due to differences in the data collection methods used.

**Training**

* Overall, the majority of local authority VI services provided awareness raising and training days to mainstream teachers, special school teachers, early years nursery staff and school-employed TAs providing direct support to pupils with vision impairment.
* A smaller number of local authorities bought in external training for these groups as well.

**Habilitation**

* Habilitation is support and training in orientation, mobility and independent living skills. The total number of pupils on the active caseload for habilitation across 103 authorities was over 3,300. Of these, at least 500 were awaiting assessment.
* In just under half the local authorities, habilitation was provided by a qualified habilitation officer employed centrally by the VI service.
* Around one-third of local authorities commissioned an external qualified habilitation specialist.
* Most authorities had less than one FTE habilitation post.

## References

Keil (2016) Freedom of Information (FOI) questions on local authority education provision for children and young people with vision impairment: 2015. Final Report. RNIB <http://www.rnib.org.uk/knowledge-and-research-hub-research-reports-education-research/vi-service-provision-2015>

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