**Education provision for children and young people with vision impairment in Northern Ireland, 2023**

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Research and Insight Team, RNIB

CYPF and Education Team, RNIB
RNIB Northern Ireland Team

**Contents**

[Foreword 3](#_Toc1283228808)

[Glossary 4](#_Toc153245067)

[Executive Summary 5](#_Toc866196835)

[Key findings 5](#_Toc1461486106)

[1 Introduction 6](#_Toc1871924442)

[2 Method 6](#_Toc1646525668)

[3 Findings 7](#_Toc621420833)

[3.1 Organisation and Funding 7](#_Toc1831006154)

[3.1.1 Funding arrangement 7](#_Toc221569597)

[3.1.2 Service structure and changes to provision 7](#_Toc1076437183)

[3.1.3 Budget 7](#_Toc1035785852)

[3.2 Number of children and young people with VI receiving support 8](#_Toc459020087)

[3.2.1 Children and young people with VI by key stage/year group 8](#_Toc1364985617)

[3.2.2 Number of children and young people with VI by statement category 8](#_Toc954446751)

[3.2.4 Criteria for allocating support levels 9](#_Toc75680846)

[3.2.4 Braille users 9](#_Toc1359156668)

[3.3 Teachers and support staff 10](#_Toc1974228388)

[3.3.1 Service provision 10](#_Toc1468157438)

[3.3.2 QTVI posts 10](#_Toc2007109599)

[3.4 Habilitation 10](#_Toc1450076043)

[3.5 Curriculum Framework for children and young people with Vision Impairment (CFVI) 11](#_Toc730566309)

[4 Conclusion 11](#_Toc1085857789)

# 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.

According to the findings of this report, the proportion of pupils with vision impairment who are statemented has increased by 7%. Additionally, the number of children and young people with vision impairment receiving specialist support has risen to 867 with no accompanying increase in staffing.

We note that the Education Authority’s Sensory Service is being reviewed as part of the SEN Transformation plan. We hope that the plan provides the funding and resources to allow children and young people with vision impairment to access an appropriate level of provision across Northern Ireland. We believe that the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive provides an opportunity to support the long-term planning for delivery of this vital specialist service.

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.

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 highlights that, without adequate funding for specialist VI services, or a clear strategy for the delivery of habilitation support, there is a real risk that some children and young people with VI in Northern Ireland are not receiving the support they need to access learning and achieve appropriate levels of independence.

## Key findings

**Demonstrating best practice - adoption of the Curriculum Framework for children and young people with Vision Impairment (CFVI)**

In line with current best practice, the Education Authority VI service is in the process of embedding the CFVI in normal working practices.

**Budget - need for adequate and sustainable funding**

The budget for the Education Authority VI service shows significant variation over the last three years.

**High caseloads - putting pressure on specialist services**

* Specialist teachers for vision impairment and multi-sensory impairment have average caseloads of 59 or more children and young people with VI.
* The proportion of children and young people with VI who are statemented has risen by 7% in the last year.

**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 and young people 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 and young people with VI, RNIB Northern Ireland has decided to issue an annual FOI request to the Education Authority.

# 2 Method

In October 2023, RNIB Northern Ireland contacted the Education Authority in Northern Ireland and Jordanstown Outreach Service 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 continues to be centrally funded for specialist support for all pupils with VI in the financial year 2023/24.

### 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 Education Authority Sensory Service is currently being reviewed as part of the Special Educational Needs Transformation Programme.

### 3.1.3 Budget

Table 1 below shows the overall VI service budget across three years: 2020/21, 2021/22, 2022/23 and the budget to date for 2023/24 (the latter does not represent the whole year budget/actual spend).

Note: these figures do not include funding for the services of 2 FTE QTVIs from the Jordanstown Outreach Service.

**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  | 710,944 |
| Spend for 2023/24 (to Oct 2023 only)  | 449,596 |

This table highlights a fluctuating budget between 2020 and 2023. Having a budget that is stable in real terms over timewould be beneficial for the VI service to be able to plan and deliver a sustainable level of support for the children and young people with VI in Northern Ireland.

## 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 867 children and young people with VI are on the VI service active caseload, including those supported by Jordanstown Outreach service. 32 of these children and young people have multi-sensory impairment. A further 45 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 key stage (inclusive of the 45 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 | 59 | 6 per cent |
| Foundation Stage | 67 | 7 per cent |
| Key Stage 1 | 118 | 13 per cent |
| Key Stage 2 | 180 | 20 per cent |
| Key Stage 3 | 189 | 21 per cent |
| Key Stage 4 | 103 | 11 per cent  |
| Years 13 and 14 | 90 | 10 per cent |
| Not specified | 61 | 7 per cent |
| Attending Jordanstown School | 45 | 5 per cent |
| Total  | 912 | 100 per cent |

An additional 419 children and young people are known to the Education Authority VI service but are not on the active caseload.

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

The total number of children and young people on the VI service active caseload is 867. 66 per cent of these are statemented and 34 per cent do not have a statement. This represents a 7 per cent increase in statemented pupils in the last year which is significant as a higher level of specialist support is likely to be needed for those with statements.

The Education Authority VI service in Northern Ireland continues to support 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)

### 3.2.4 Criteria for allocating support levels

The Education Authority VI service uses criteria based on the NatSIP Eligibility Framework for allocating support levels, but they shared that this system is currently under review. A move away from a standardised framework could raise concern over objectivity and potentially 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 7 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).

### 3.3.2 QTVI posts

The EA told us that the VI service has 8.6 FTE teachers for vision impairment and one for multi-sensory impairment. One teacher is in a Lead QTVI post and three are in training; there is a 0.4 FTE vacancy currently unfilled. In addition, two QTVIs who are part of the Jordanstown Outreach Service provide peripatetic support for children and young people with VI in Northern Ireland.

On average, there are 59 children and young people with VI for every specialist teacher working for the Education Authority VI team. For each QTVI providing support from the Jordanstown Outreach Service, there are 151 children and young people with VI.

High caseloads put pressure on services and can lead to children and young people not receiving the level and type of support they need. In addition, variations in provision can potentially result in different children receiving different levels of support.

## 3.4 Habilitation

Over the last year, the proportion of children and young people receiving habilitation support funded by the Education Authority has remained at 2 per cent. 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.

We do not have information on habilitation for pupils supported by Jordanstown Outreach service.

A total of 15 of the 45 CYP attending Jordanstown School were receiving habilitation at the time of the FOI request, which is 33%.

Habilitation services are spot purchased with commissioning and delivery being the responsibility of

* both Children and Family Social Care services and
* Education services.

When made available, habilitation services can be delivered to children and young people in settings including:

* Home
* Mainstream school
* Specialist school/Jordanstown school
* Community settings
* During school holidays

Referrals for an initial assessment of habilitation are accepted from parents/carers, medical professionals, QTVIs, and other education professionals. Upon receipt of the referral, a Habilitation Officer at NI Guide Dogs Children's Services carries out the initial assessment of habilitation needs.

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.

### 3.5 Curriculum Framework for children and young people with Vision Impairment (CFVI)

The Education Authority VI service is incorporating aspects of the CFVI in normal working practices and is actively involved with the CFVI project as a reference group member and resource reviewer. It also uses the following frameworks or curriculums to support children and young people with VI:

* NatSIP Learner Outcomes Framework
* Developmental Journal (DJVI)
* A bespoke programme designed in house

## 4 Conclusion

Specialist support for children and young people with VI is vital to enable them to access education and the wider world fully and 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 CFVI in SEN policies, guidance and documentation including any new SEN legislation.
* Provide adequate, protected and sustainable 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 a strategy for delivery of specialist support for children and young people with VI that will ensure equity of provision, and an appropriate level of provision, across Northern Ireland.
* 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.