

Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

The early identification of special education needs and support for children and young people with SEN

**Presented by RNIB Cymru
February 2004**

1. Background

RNIB has been supporting the education of blind and partially sighted children in Wales for the last 20 years. Our Education Service mandate is to work with children who are blind or partially sighted, their families and the professionals working with them to promote good quality education and social experiences.

We believe our research and experience shows that early intervention means timely and relevant intervention with high quality support at all points of need. We have demonstrated the need for an increased working together of health, education and social services.

2. Early Years

RNIB Cymru has developed significant expertise in Early Years intervention during the past 3 years. The RNIB Cymru Starting Right Nursery recently passed the CSIW inspection, fully meeting all of the standards set. We currently have 11 young children aged 2-5 who have visual impairments and other related disabilities attending. Through carefully planned individual programmes and group activities we aim to give them the skills that they need to make a success of their school placements whether they enter mainstream or generic special schooling.

Our Starting Right Course, accredited by the University of Wales College Newport, is the only accredited specialist course in Wales for professionals in the Early Years sector.

Whilst recognising that devolution has meant greater flexibility in responding to Early Years issues, we are concerned that many of the initiatives currently promoting early intervention in England are not yet apparent in Wales:

- Together from the Start – the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Skills jointly issued practical guidance for professionals working with disabled children from birth to two years in May 2003. It gave key messages about effective multi agency family support such as involvement of parents in the planning and delivery of services and developing the role of key workers, better training to improve professional knowledge and skills and better networking between agencies and knowledge of what works well and where.
- The Early Support Pilot Programme was established by DfES with a £1 million budget as a resource to develop services for all disabled children under 3 and their families. It has recently been announced that further funding (£12 million) will be available to continue the pilot programme until 2006. Areas include: initial assessment of need, better information and access for families, improved professional knowledge and skills, service review and development and partnership across agencies and geographical boundaries. In England, RNIB has been involved in two projects which focus on visual impairment and we believe that this initiative – and funding – should be available for children in Wales.

3. School Years

Since 1994 RNIB Cymru has delivered the mandatory training for teachers of visually impaired children in conjunction with University of Wales College: Newport. There is a continued need for the training of specialist teachers – and for the training of mobility officers, who are vital in promoting the independence of young people with visual impairments.

RNIB Cymru welcomes the concept of the National Service Framework for Children and the Every Child Matters agenda which both support early intervention, family and carer support and integration of health, social services and education to provide for a co-ordinated multi-agency approach. Transitions, therapies, provision of equipment and support for children with disabilities and complex health needs must be linked to the individual child's ability to succeed at school.

In commitment to the concept of a multi-disciplinary approach to working with children with disabilities and their families, RNIB Cymru has appointed a Children's Low Vision Advocate – a post funded by the Welsh Assembly Government. The remit of this post will be to become a voice for children in obtaining an integrated low vision service, i.e. facilitating the prescription of Low Vision Aids (LVAs), low vision training and low vision therapy.

Whilst inclusive education settings are increasingly well supported and children with visual impairments tend to succeed academically, social inclusion is more of a challenge for them. The teachers of visually impaired children in Wales have highlighted this on-going need – and we have approached Children in Need to fund a post to address it.

An RNIB Cymru bid to the Lottery to fund a Development Officer: Emotional Health to train existing counsellors in every LEA in Wales recently drew nine letters of support from professionals across Wales and a commitment to joint working from the British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists. The need for timely emotional support by qualified counsellors who have skills in working with children who have disabilities and their families is becoming ever more evident.

4. Post-school

From Summer Term 2003, RNIB Cymru has been conducting some research, following 5 young people through the transition from school into their chosen further education settings. A preliminary report is in draft form at present, pending comments from the steering group, however the findings demonstrate that early, or timely, intervention is needed at the point of transition in order to facilitate a smooth continuation of educational experiences.

The case studies all provide examples of the importance of having ongoing support from a visual impairment specialist following transition. By intervening at an early stage, the specialist teachers were able to assist the mainstream subject teachers in dealing with issues to do with the students' access to the curriculum and provide in-service training to the mainstream staff. As a result, a number of issues and concerns emerged about access to the curriculum that might otherwise have gone unnoticed, or have been picked up later by which time the students may well have started to fall behind, or have suffered undue stress. Once these concerns had been highlighted the QTVI could work with the student, their teachers and where necessary their parents, to resolve any problems.

The case studies also demonstrate that transition is not only about access to the curriculum, but is about young people's social and emotional needs as well. Three students in particular, experienced initial difficulties in adjusting to the change of environment, and in the need to re-negotiate peer relationships. Whilst this was true of the sighted peers, it became a more pronounced difficulty for those students with visual impairments.

5. Conclusions

RNIB Cymru continues to promote good quality educational and social experiences for children and young people who have visual impairments. We believe that the major factors that will impact upon the success of this client group are:

- a) investing in Early Years provision by adopting the Early Support Programme being piloted in England and by targeting minority disability groups.

b) addressing the wider needs of both the child / young person and the family by providing timely social and emotional support.

c) investing in good quality training - ring fencing money - for Early Years professionals, specialist teachers for sensory impairments, mobility officers and teaching assistants. Also providing recognition for their commitment to training.

c) joining up education, health and social services as per the National Service Framework and involving the voluntary sector where it has relevant expertise.

e) ensuring a process for ongoing support for students moving into Further Education that addresses their emotional and ongoing educational support needs.

RNIB Cymru would be keen to work with the Welsh Assembly Government in order to address these issues and help to remove these barriers to achievement.

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