

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i'r [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#) ar gyfer yr ymchwiliad: [A oes gan blant a phobl ifanc anabl fynediad cyfartal at addysg a gofal plant?](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) for the inquiry: [Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare?](#)

AEC 62

Ymateb gan: Cŵn Tywys Cymru

Response from: Guide Dogs Cymru

Guide Dogs ambition is a future where every person with sight loss has the confidence and support they need to live their lives to the full. Our values are rooted in the needs of people with sight loss. We aspire to listen to and work with others and share our expertise and experience with anyone who can benefit from it. Guide Dogs is passionate about our life-changing work and will challenge everything that prevents people with sight loss living full and rewarding lives. We aim to help shape an inclusive society. Our policy and campaigning work strives for a world where people with sight loss can take a full and active role in everyday life and where streets, public spaces, services, and buildings are designed with the needs of everyone in mind.

Guide Dogs employs and provides training and professional support for a team of Habilitation Specialists working with blind and partially sighted children across Wales under contract to a few local authorities. We work directly with service Commissioners and alongside local authority (LA) habilitation officers and qualified teachers of the vision impaired (QTVIs).

Guide Dogs is a member of TSANA (Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance), and this response builds on the oral evidence we gave to the committee in June. As well as incorporating answers to the questions posed by the committee in our response, we have noted barriers to accessing education that are identified by families, children and young people with a vision impairment and the service providers who support them and include recommendations how these barriers can be overcome.

Background

there are 1,663 children and young people with vision impairment (CYPVI) known to local authorities in Wales. (1) Although it is a low incidence disability, there may only be one child with a vision impairment in the setting, pupils with a vision impairment have the same right to thrive in education and beyond, as their sighted peers. There are no special schools for CYPVI over the age of 11 in Wales -

all are taught within mainstream schools. 80% of learning is through vision and as mainstream teachers have little or no experience of providing differentiated learning to children with a vision impairment, they provide universal support only. Schools may think that a child with low vision is managing if e.g. they are provided with information in a larger font. However, the lack of specialist support could mean that they are not fulfilling their potential.

Early years and habilitation

The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act covers ages 0 to 25. As mentioned earlier, 80% of learning is through vision so parents need support from a qualified habilitation specialist to support their child's development. Learning to move and walk is, in reality, very complex. A child with vision can wave their leg around, automatically grab their foot and realise that it is part of them. However, a child with a vision impairment must be taught this and how to move around. Habilitation specialists can therefore introduce games which develop the brain such as encouraging a child to move their left arm and right leg etc.

To help children learn these skills and give help to families in a comparable situation and support each other, Guide Dogs are rolling out specialist Time to Play sessions for children with a vision impairment across Wales where these skills can be taught.

Without specialist support, a child with a vision impairment will find it difficult to orientate themselves and integrate into a childcare setting. A qualified habilitation specialist will teach staff how to develop a child's independent skills which include fine and gross motor skills, body awareness, where they are in a room and how to move around.

In Wales there is a shortage of specialist habilitation officers and in some Welsh Local Authorities some children and young people with a vision impairment receive no habilitation support. The RNIB Freedom of Information Report (2023) (1) found that a total of 312 pupils are currently on active habilitation caseloads with a further forty-three waiting to be assessed. Two local authorities did not supply this information. The percentage of children and young people on LA VI service active caseloads accessing, or on a waiting list to access, habilitation support varies from below 9% to 48%, while waiting times for habilitation support vary from 1 week to approximately 12 months.

Figures provided by the chair of The Wales Association of Vision Impairment Educators (WAVIE) in January 2023 showed that there were 11.4 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) with three local authorities not employing any habilitation

specialists themselves. However, they do have a contract with Guide Dogs to provide a service for a small number of children.

The lack of habilitation not only affects a child's early years but education and adulthood too. The impact on social inclusion can also be significant. For example, young adults with vision impairment often do not apply for jobs in unfamiliar locations because they lack the confidence to travel independently. Intervention from qualified habilitation specialists is therefore vital for the child to thrive in education and beyond and this patchwork of inconsistent support must stop.

A good practice example of support from a habilitation specialist is from Gwynedd. Nell, who has vision impairment and uses a long cane, has been featured in Guide Dog adverts counting the classroom doors in her school, until she opens the right door and is greeted by Branwen Jones, a habilitation specialist employed by Guide Dogs. The support she received from Branwen meant that she could access the classroom herself, locate her chair and go to the toilet independently. As well as independent living skills, Branwen supported Nell to learn social skills and make and maintain friendships.

Support for Mainstream Teachers

Guide Dogs has recently helped write the unit on children with a vision impairment for the [Understanding different types of learning difficulties or disabilities - Hwb \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales/guides/understanding-different-types-of-learning-difficulties-or-disabilities-hwb). This provides basic information but makes the point that once a vision impairment is diagnosed, a referral should be made to a vision impairment support service. Many children will have high needs and the support they require will vary between individuals. It is therefore important that they are assessed by a qualified teacher of children with a vision impairment (QTVI) who will recommend individual strategies which will support the child to access the curriculum. Guide Dogs is concerned that research from RNIB's FOI request in 2023 (1), shows that 12 local authorities in Wales have no QTVI and the ratio of QTVI to child ranges from 1:13 to 1:85.

Guide Dogs is aware of one child, named Ryder, who lives in a local authority which is unable to employ a specialist QTVI. He was falling behind in his schoolwork which understandably caused his parents' concern. If he lived 2 miles away, he would get support from the gold standard [Sensory & Communication Support Service \(SenCom\)](#)

which covers 6 local authorities in southeast Wales. To quote his mum "Why should he suffer because he is vision impaired and doesn't live in the right local

authority". To solve this issue, Guide Dogs are calling for more regional working and for the SENCOM service to be replicated across Wales.

A teaching assistant (TA) provides 1:1 support to a child with a vision impairment and will put the strategies recommended by the QTVI into operation.

Guide Dogs questions the calibre of TAs and their ability to provide support to children with a visual impairment. We therefore recommend that TAs must receive training. VIEW, an organisation which represents the interests of children with a VI and promotes the specialist VI education sector, offers training courses including [The Partners in Learning Advanced certificate course](#). This course teaches knowledge and skills to provide a high level of education for children with a vi. Several LA in England have made this a mandatory qualification for teaching assistants employed in their visual impairment support services and we recommend that this is done in Wales.

Curriculum Framework for Vision Impairment

The Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI) has been developed to improve professionals understanding of the needs of children with a vision impairment, and ensure they have a fair and equitable access to education. Stakeholders from Wales contributed to its development and Guide Dogs and RNIB believe it presents an approach for addressing many of the issues we include in this response. ([Read the Wales report here](#))

We ask that the CFVI is: -

- Endorsed by the Welsh Government and recognised and referenced in Additional Learning Needs policies.
- Embedded in local authority service commissioning and delivery frameworks.
- Followed by all educational settings supporting children and young people with vision impairment and their families, in partnership with VI specialists.
- Embedded within quality standards and professional training for teachers of children with vision impairment and habilitation specialists in Wales.
- Resourced via adequate centralised funding for local authorities so they can support their local VI populations.

Digital Skills

It is important that a child with a VI acquires good digital skills to access the curriculum, if this does not happen, they can feel excluded. Digital skills must be

taught by a specialist teacher who understands how to engage with the technology and accessibility features e.g. a child with a VI may not be able to use a mouse while others will require screen magnifying software. The Welsh Association of Vision Impairment Educators is looking at barriers to accessing and learning technology in schools and is working with Stewart Powell, the digital lead for education in Welsh Government on this issue.

Children with a vision impairment are keen to access education at the same time as their sighted peers. A parent of a child with VI told us she wanted her son to use technology which mirrored the classroom whiteboard. Initially the local authority didn't allow this, citing security. An alternative method was found which gave him the same classroom experience as his peers. This meant that he did not experience discrimination because of his disability. Unfortunately, this inclusive approach does not happen for all children and young people with a vision impairment.

To overcome the issues around accessing technology, Guide Dogs propose that they have access to a centralised digital support service which can be accessed by TAs who are coached how to support the child. This can be done remotely. The coach could be visually impaired themselves. The centralised digital support service will be helpful to anyone who has digital access needs.

Attainment Gap

The lack of specialist support means that there is a significant attainment gap between CYP with VI and their sighted peers. At Key Stage 4, (2) GCSE results show a gap of greater than 26% for pupils achieving Level 2 (equivalent to 5 A* to C) including English/Welsh and maths, which needs to be addressed. One way of doing this is to ensure that children with a vi have a local authority owned Individual Development Plan which clearly specifies what additional specialist learning provision they require.

Mental health and Well-being

Guide Dogs is concerned that secondary analysis of the Millennium Cohort by RNIB in 2022 (3) showed that CYP with VI report lower wellbeing and poorer mental health than their fully sighted peers. At age 17 CYP with VI were five times more likely to 'feel depressed all or most of the time' It also showed that children and young people with a vision impairment faced added pressures as they must deal with inaccessible systems, repeatedly advocate for necessary adjustments, and feel socially excluded.

We understand that well-being teams are being set up by the LAs. The needs of children with a vision impairment, however, are distinct and teams require training to support them. We suggest that people with a vi could receive training to join a team and / or children with a vision impairment are signposted to a support service such as [LOOK – Supporting Visually Impaired Young People to ...](#) thrive. They have a helpline which provides advice, emotional support, and information for young people with visual impairments and their families.

Further Education

Some young people with a vision impairment will attend Further Education Institution (FEI) within their local authority when they leave school. Prior to the, The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act, the Welsh Government used to fund post 16 education for young people with a disability. As a result, a college often said they could not meet a young person's needs, resulting in them accessing further education out of county. However now the local authority funds the placement and develops a service level agreement with services. Guide Dogs recommends that a national arrangement is put in place to ensure that a student's needs are met. Without this happening, a student can appear to be coping in college but is unable to fulfil their full potential because the support provided is insufficient. The funding available can be used to purchase equipment but not to provide training to a teaching assistant. We therefore recommend that the equipment should be loaned by a vision impairment service and funding used to train a teaching assistant could be trained to support a student with a vision impairment if required.

Employment

Guide Dogs is concerned that young people with a vision impairment are vulnerable to being long term NEET (Not in education, employment, or training). The Welsh government report "The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training between April 2020 and March 2021" (4) show disabled children and young people aged 16-18 are over twice as likely to be not in employment, education, or training than their non-disabled peers. This rises to over four times as likely for those aged 19–24. Similarly, research published by RNIB "Employment for blind and partially sighted people in 2019" shows there are only 1 in 4 blind and partially sighted people of working age who are in work. (5) Several factors can risk a child or young person with vision impairment becoming NEET such as attaining lower levels of qualification, not being able to access education, limited opportunities for work experience and a lack of tailored careers guidance. This can result many people with a vision impairment living in poverty.

Conclusion

In conclusion we would like list our recommendations which if followed would help ensure that children and young people with a vision impairment have a more equal access to education and achieve their potential.

- A regional working model – similar to SenCom which will help alleviate the shortage of specialist providers in some local authorities
- Teaching assistants supporting children with a vision impairment must hold a mandatory qualification such as [The Partners in Learning Advanced certificate course](#).
- The Curriculum Framework for Vision Impairment is the CFVI is:
 - a) Endorsed by the Welsh Government and recognised and referenced in Additional Learning Needs policies.
 - b) Embedded in local authority service commissioning and delivery frameworks.
 - c) Followed by all educational settings supporting children and young people with vision impairment and their families, in partnership with VI specialists.
 - d) Embedded within quality standards and professional training for teachers of children with vision impairment and habilitation specialists in Wales.
 - e) Resourced via adequate centralised funding for local authorities so they can support their local VI populations
- A centralised digital support service is established in Wales which can be accessed by TAs who are then coached how to support a child with a vision impairment .
- Children with a vision impairment have a local authority owned Individual Development Plan which clearly specifies what additional specialist learning provision they require.
- People with a vision impairment receive training to join a local authority well-being team and / or children with a vision impairment are signposted to a support service such as [LOOK – Supporting Visually Impaired Young People to... thrive](#).
- A national arrangement rather than individual service level agreements is put in place to ensure that a student's needs is met in further education.

References

1 Education Provision for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment in Wales (2023) RNIB [Freedom of Information Reports | RNIB](#)

2 Key Stage 4 indicators by year and SEN (Special educational need) type, Welsh Government [KS4 indicators by year and SEN \(Special educational need\) type \(gov.wales\)](#)

3 Secondary analysis of the Millennium Cohort Survey RNIB 2022 [Secondary analysis of the Millennium Cohort Survey: Sight impairment at ages seven and eleven | RNIB](#)

4 Proportion of young people not in education, employment or training, by characteristic, Welsh Government [Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\): April 2020 to March 2021 | GOV.WALES](#)

5 Slade, Edwards and Crawley (2020) Employment for blind and partially sighted people in 2019. RNIB.

We are happy for this response to be shared