



17 January 2024

Dear Sarah

We are writing as Third Sector members of the Wales Partnership for Children and Young People with a Vision Impairment.

We work together with the shared aim of improving access to education and life skills for those children, from birth and through transition to higher education and adult life.

We have received an update to the Senedd Children Young People and Education Committee's inquiry into access to education and childcare for disabled children and we note a final session with the Advisory Group will take place this month.

In the written and oral evidence to the inquiry submitted by RNIB and Guide Dogs, we highlighted areas of great concern, but we are writing now to seek your reassurance that our evidence clearly reflected the issues which amount to a crisis in the educational process in Wales for young vision impaired people.

RNIB and Guide Dogs explained this in detail in our evidence to the Committee, but we wish to further highlight our specific concerns about the shortage of Qualified Habilitation Specialists (QHS) and Qualified Teachers of Vision Impaired (QTVI), both essential for learning and development inside and outside the school gates.

There is only one local authority in Wales where habilitation support is provided for vision impaired children by a Vision Rehabilitation Specialist, who is qualified to work with children and paid for from within social care. Habilitation Specialists are employed within education, but it is critical that vision impaired children are referred to them at the earliest possible age so



that parents and families can be shown how to support their child's development.

A child with sight learns by observing others, but spacial awareness, physical co-ordination and daily living skills such as eating with cutlery, dressing and moving around safely have to be developed through teaching and learning. Habilitation specialists support this development.

It is critically important that a vision impaired child is 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.

The RNIB's FOI research (2023, (1), reflects a patchwork of specialist support -

- VI services providing support across 12 local authorities reported having no strategic lead with the mandatory qualification for QTVI or a lead QTVI. This represents provision for over half the local authorities in Wales.

Children and young people in some areas are missing out on vital support.

The level of specialist support available varies widely across authorities:

- Ten local authorities confirmed having over fifty children or young people with a visual impairment per QTVI.
- The ratio of QTVI to children and young people ranges from 1:13 to 1:85.
- The time between referral and an initial visit from a QTVI ranges from 2 weeks to 2-3 months.

Habilitation



- The percentage of children and young people on VI service active caseloads who are accessing habilitation support ranges from below 9% to 48%.
- Waiting times for habilitation support vary from 1 week to 12 months.



We note that a meeting with stakeholders was held as part of the enquiry on 27 September and that the National Deaf Childrens Society raised this lack of specialist support. We did not have that opportunity so we very much hope you will include this representation in evidence.

We have a best practise model in Wales which could be extended into a regional working approach rather than the postcode lottery we have now. A South East Wales regional service offers specialist support to families and vision impaired children and young people from birth through school years, as well as those vital skills for everyday life. They are managed by an experienced Vision Impairment Specialist, support is matched to the child and family's needs, in the classroom and outside school. This service works across five local authorities who provide regionally funded support.

It is our experience that Regional Partnership Boards have a poor understanding of the importance of specialist support for vision impaired children of any age. This, along with a failure to take a long-term robust approach to recruiting and training a specialist work force has led to a critical shortage. The Welsh Government's commitment to future generations and the rights of the child requires us to find strategic solutions which directly address this without further delay.

Recommendations

That the Committee commissions evidence of the gaps in specialist support currently available for children with a vision impairment and multi-sensory impairment across Wales; (this could include children who are deaf or have hearing impairments)

That when Regional Partnership Boards conduct the next Population Needs Assessment, they are required to assess what specialist support is needed.



- That immediate action is taken to boost the numbers of Qualified Teachers for Vision Impairment (QTVIs) and Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialists (RQHSs). This should include a clear and fully funded plan of action to improve recruitment and opportunities to qualify into the profession.
- To ensure that there is adequate and protected high needs funding for local authorities to develop effective VI team structures and deliver a consistent level of specialist education services across Wales to meet the needs of children and young people with VI no matter where they live.

1. RNIB Freedom of Information Report, Wales, 2023
[Freedom of Information Reports | RNIB](#)

Signatories

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