

# **Cross Party Group on Vision**

## **Notes of the meeting 11 February 2015**

**Conference Room 21, Ty Hywel, 12pm**

### **In attendance**

Sandy Mewies AM (Chair),  
Matt Harris (Sandy Mewies' support staff)  
Ceri Jackson (RNIB Cymru),  
Nicola Crews (RNIB Cymru)  
Peter Jones (Guide Dogs Cymru),  
Andrea Gordon (Guide Dogs),  
Jonathan Mudd (Guide Dogs),  
Owen Williams (Wales Council for the Blind),  
Lissa Gomer (Sight Cymru)  
Nicola Davis-Job (Royal College of Nursing),  
Mike Hedges (AM)  
Janet Finch-Saunders (AM),  
Rhodri Glyn-Thomas (AM),  
Emma Sands (RNIB Cymru)  
Jackie Radford (Aled Roberts' support staff)  
Tom Davies (Angela Burns' support staff)  
Ioan Bellin (Simon Thomas' support staff)

### **Apologies**

Eluned Parrott (AM)  
Catrin Edwards (Sense Cymru),  
Sharon Beckett (Sight Cymru)  
Chris Blyth (UHB Ophthalmologist)  
Marcela Votruba (School of Ophthalmology)  
Julie Thomas (BridgeVis)

#### **1. Minutes of the last meeting, 8 October 2014**

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed. It was agreed to come back to the issue of Active Travel guidance in Any Other Business.

#### **2. Are children with visual impairment being left behind?**

Nicola Crews (NC), RNIB Cymru's Head of Education and Children's services presented a short paper on the numbers of qualified teachers for children with visual impairment in Wales. Paper attached at appendix A.

NC started by giving her background as a teacher and outlined the key issues children with a visual impairment will face in education if the numbers of teachers with a specialist qualification do not increase over the next few years.

The main issues needing to be addressed included the numbers of teachers leaving the profession, and the recycling of teachers across local authorities. Universities in Wales are currently not providing the statutory qualification and the only course in the UK is being delivered in Birmingham which is currently over-subscribed.

NC stated that some local authorities were good at working together in consortia. If there were to be a course initiated in Welsh universities it would be 2019 before the first teachers would be ready to teach in schools. Educational attainment of visually impaired children is currently lower than that of their sighted peers. The issue of bilingualism also needs to be addressed.

A discussion about the paper and the issues followed.

Key issues raised were:

- The impact on a visually impaired child of not receiving the right support in their education
- Welsh medium teaching for children with a visual impairment
- Why newly qualified teachers aren't studying the specialist qualification
- The cost of the course for specialist teaching
- Special Educational Needs legislation being brought forward
- Mike Hedges raised the possibility of the development of a sensory loss teaching qualification
- AMs raised the possibility of writing to local papers across Wales to raise the issue. This was put on hold until the agreed actions have been completed

### **3. Agreed actions**

- Chair to write to the Minister to highlight short and long term issues in relation to workforce planning
- Chair to write to the Vice-Chancellors of Welsh Universities to highlight the issues and find out if they would consider running the course
- Chair to write to Local Authorities Directors of Education and Councillors to ascertain what the situation is in their local authority presently and what they are doing to ensure it improves
- Review progress at next meeting

#### **4. Future agenda items**

- Lissa Gomer stated that certification of children at a young age by hospitals and highlighting the number of children entering the system to local authorities could help with capacity planning
- Janet Finch-Saunders raised the sensory loss poverty inquiry taking place in North Wales and navigating and signposting the support that is available
- Andrea Gordon asked that the group might discuss what a visually impaired child and their parents might expect from their education
- NC talked about the children's vision strategy and the 20/20 pathway which may be amalgamated into a Wales Young Persons' pathway
- Ceri Jackson suggested discussing opportunities for the group in the Future Generations Bill and other legislation such as Planning, the built environment and the Active Travel Bill

#### **5. AOB**

- Sandy Mewies said that any member of the group could put forward agenda items for the meetings
- Janet Finch-Saunders asked if there might be more regular meetings
- Diary dates will be circulated via email for the next 12 months

# Appendix A

## Are children with visual impairment being left behind?

This paper aims to supplement the oral presentation given at the Cross Party Vision Group Meeting on Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> February. The focus is the current situation for learners with visual impairment in Wales and the crisis in support due to the reducing levels of Specialist (Qualified Teacher) support for Visual Impairment across the Local Authorities. It concludes by addressing the need for a joined up approach between Education, Health and Social Services and the need for qualified education and habilitation specialists to be in place to support a clearly defined pathway for services to prevent children with visual impairment being left behind.

### The statistical evidence:

The Vision 2020UK (2015) Key Facts about Vision Impairment in Children and Young People states that:

- Two in every 1000 children and young people up to the age of 25 have a vision impairment (0.2%) according to the WHO international classification of childhood vision impairment
- Included in this total are the five in every 10,000 children up to the age of 16 who are severely sight impaired (0.05%)

Research by RNIB Cymru (May 2014) 'State of the Nation Educational Provision for Blind and Partially Sighted Learners' found that

- Heads of LEA Visual Impairment Services in Wales reported 1,675 visually impaired children on their caseloads in April 2014. This has not changed substantially.
- In Spring 2014 there were 35.7 fte specialist teacher (QTVI) posts plus 2 fte posts in training.

By tracking the movement of QTVIs across the Local Authorities we know that:

- In Spring 2015 there are 28.8fte QTVI posts plus two in training, with more retirements scheduled this year.

## **Left behind in Education?**

Research by Jenny Chanfreau and Andreas Cebulla 'Educational Attainment of Blind and Partially Sighted Pupils' (sponsored by RNIB and published by NatCen in 2009) found that visual impairment does make a difference to educational attainment, but even more so when the pupil had other, additional special educational needs.

Children with visual impairment learn differently – through what they experience and what they are directly taught. They are not able to learn incidentally and need specialist input to acquire skills for learning, social interaction, independence. Not only is it an equal opportunities and human rights issue, it makes sense that by investing early in the lives of children and young people we will enable them to engage with society as independent, contributing adults.

To do this, we must address two issues:

### **Staffing –**

- The age profile of QTVIs is such that many have retired or are due for retirement. In the last year there has been a drop of 6.9 qualified teachers and 1 further qualified teacher has announced her retirement as of the end of this term.
- The existing qualified staff are being 'recycled' in what could be likened to a game of musical chairs: A QTVI in Bridgend retired, one from Carmarthenshire took her place, one from Swansea took her place ...
- Most local authorities, where there are sufficient qualified staff, are just managing their caseloads and one blind child, with significant support needs, moving into the LEA would create a crisis.
- Morale is low in the profession with at least one QTVI seriously considering leaving and going back into school where 'the head teacher can take responsibility and there is some support and structure'.

### **Training –**

- The mandatory qualification (MQVI) has been written into the Code of Practice in England and we would advocate maintaining parity of the qualification in Wales.

- The only course currently running is based at the University of Birmingham and it is over-subscribed.
- The University of South Wales considers a specialist course not financially viable without a regular cohort of 15 students – this is unsustainable. UK problem – no spare capacity.

## **Left behind in social and independence skills?**

It is more than providing a good quality education – it is essential that the emotional, social and independence needs of children, young people and families are met. Key to this is habilitation, defined as “the acquisition of mobility, orientation and other independent living skills in relation to children and young people born with vision impairment or who acquire it during childhood”. The role of habilitation is crucial in enabling people with sensory loss to live independently and promoting their wellbeing.

## **Investing for the future**

It is imperative that we work together to enable children and young people with visual impairment to become autonomous, competent and independent who are able to make a smooth transition from education into adulthood, where they are contributing members of the community with the same opportunities, rights and responsibilities as their non-disabled peers.

This demands a holistic service with better linkages between Health, Education and Social Services. It requires a standard approach with Certificates of Visual Impairment being recognised by Social Services Departments, underpinned by a Pathway that guarantees access to services in an individually tailored and timely way. The Vision 2020 UK Children and Young People’s Pathway provides a framework for this and should be consulted on and adopted across Wales.

## **Recommendations:**

In order for children with visual impairment NOT to be left behind, we need to work together to address:

- Early Intervention – pre-school work with babies, young children and their parents (Movement matters).

- A standard approach across Wales based on the Vision 2020 UK Children and Young People's Pathway from the time of diagnosis to adulthood.
- An integrated approach from Health, Social Services and Education with an emphasis on delivering co-ordinated and timely interventions
- A joined up journey from birth to employment with support during the periods of transition.

These are fundamentally underpinned by maintaining a qualified professional support service – urgently addressing and prioritising the employment, training, and continuous professional development of specialist teachers and habilitation services.

Nicola J. Crews  
Head of Education and Children's Services  
RNIB Cymru