Fife Council: Education and Children’s Services
Improving attainment for learners with a visual impairment

There is a strong commitment in Fife across services and agencies to work together on a shared vision for improving outcomes for children and families, raising educational attainment and reducing educational inequality.

Positive and effective links, which promote sharing of information in relation to the learner’s visual condition and likely impact supports effective joint planning between all who are involved with the learner to ensure educational experiences are accessible and learning environments are inclusive. Improved links and sharing of information at point of referral and subsequently throughout the learner’s educational journey, with Parents, Education and Children’s services, the Hospital Eye Services and Third Sector agencies will contribute to improved attainment levels and positive outcomes across Curriculum for Excellence, for learners who are blind or have a visual impairment.

Our aim is to support learning by facilitating effective and inclusive learning opportunities which will help individuals to realise and achieve their full potential. Teachers for Children with a Visual Impairment work with schools, pupils, parents and staff in a collaborative and advisory capacity to support pupils with a visual impairment to achieve their potential, while developing the motivation, resilience, confidence and independence of the learner.

With the appropriate support and guidance and a common shared view, learners who are blind or visually impaired should be able to attain and achieve as their sighted peers.

Accessible school environments offer positive experiences and contribute to building confidence and independence for the learner. Effective school buildings address inequality and promote learning. In Fife the Building Fife Future programme has involved the project management team having early and ongoing discussions/consultation with the Sensory Support Service around making all new school buildings accessible for blind and visually impaired in terms of interior design, layout, lighting, signifiers, signage, interior decoration: colours etc. Ongoing links with Fife Access Officer for environmental audits and adaptations to existing buildings as required is also in place. Documents such as RNIB’s “Building Sight” and RNIB “Exploring Access” guidance have been used. Additionally blind and visually impaired learners, often being more reliant on their other senses, are benefitting from the advice and involvement of the Educational Audiologist in advising on optimum acoustics in the learning environment for schools and new builds.

This good practice should be encouraged, nationally so that schools buildings are accessible providing an equal foundation for achievement and improving attainment for all learners.

The focus of the current Scottish Government supported initiative, VINCYP, Visual Impairment Network for Children and Young People is looking to develop guidance to promote and strengthen partnership links locally. Fife is currently part of the pilot project looking at a shared database.

Awareness training and support in the implementation of the VINCYP guidance, when produced, would help ensure ongoing improvements across all sectors.

On-going support of the Scottish Sensory Centre (SSC) by the Scottish Government will help maintain and develop the required knowledge, skills and competences for Teachers for Children with a Visual Impairment, provide access to Braille Competency Courses and specialist training for Pupil Support Assistants. This would help maintain suitably trained and skilled staff to empower advise and collaborate, allowing learners to achieve and attain to their potential.

Scottish Sensory Centre and Education Scotland could gather and promote good practice, in supporting blind and visually impaired learners' achievement and attainment.
The following are some of the strategies currently used in Fife schools to improve access and attainment for learners with a visual impairment:

- In the early stages, think ahead to the longer term, identifying what skills, equipment, strategies will be needed for learners to be successful and achieve their potential.
- Discussion and a clear plan of the learner’s journey and aspirations for their learning, shared with all staff, highlighting priorities for focus at each stage.
- Additional support planned with sensory support service, schools and families to ensure blind and visually impaired learners can develop the specific skills and strategies required in order for them to access the full curriculum alongside their sighted peers. Teachers for Children with a Visual Impairment and trained Pupils Support Assistants are available to support this.
- Empowering parents and learners to ensure pupils’ educational aspirations are realised
- Advice and training offered for all staff who will be involved with the learner.
- Specialist staff support the teaching and development of skills and strategies for learners to be successful. This may include teaching of braille and use of specialist equipment.
- Adaptations are made/advised to make learning materials and activities accessible.
- Teachers for Children with a Visual Impairment advise and work with IT colleagues and blind, visually impaired learners to make use of specialist equipment and software available, training them how to use the equipment and software.
- To allow some visually impaired learners to access materials independently. Sensory Support will provide and train learners in the use of electronic magnification devices and screen readers with Word talk.
- Use of electronic braille equipment, allows work to be shared in text format with teachers ensuring immediate feedback.
- Teaching and developing competence in Touch typing, using programmes such as Doorway online, supports writing programmes and spelling, allowing blind and visually impaired learners to keep pace with their sighted peers. Touch typing reduces the need for learners to look down at the keys and speeds up word-processing.
- Learner’s laptops have a range of accessibility settings set specifically to support them. Word is set up in a way which allows easy word-processing access, font sizes can be pre-set within Word etc. Use of ICT helps make learners as independent as possible in their learning, especially for extended writing work as it will cut down on redrafting.
- Ensuring that equipment and resources are available for learners when required. Sensory support staff encourage schools to ensure that all resources are available for learners ahead of lessons, so that they can be adapted into the preferred format for the learner to use at the same time as class peers. Government support to encourage publishers to provide educational materials in a format which will allow for adaptation of learning resources would be helpful.
- Co-operative teaching, TVIs sharing teaching to include groups with VI learners e.g. reading groups.
- Discussion and sharing of inclusive teaching methods and strategies e.g. looking at creative ways to present information rather than an over reliance on smartboards.
- Flexibility within the curriculum to provide specific independence training in mobility, orientation and life skills; and to allow for consolidation of learning, teaching of specialist skills such as braille, use of specialist equipment.
- Supporting revision and preparation for examinations include use of accessible revision / study aids e.g. MP3 format for summary revision of subjects and study aids, electronic format (and text format) of enlarged text, as appropriate, of summary revision notes for exam preparation - to cut down on fatigue from the amount of reading required and keep learner engaged.
- Exam preparation and revision support in the form of timetabled blocks/classes, especially during study leave.
- Networking with colleagues across Scotland to ensure needs of learners with a visual impairment are considered when new initiatives are planned/implemented e.g. GLOW
- Advice from Teacher for Visual Impairment (TVI) to learner and parents to promote continuation of learning at home, see following example:
A P3 pupil with a visual impairment
Pupil is in the top reading reading group which TVI takes on a Monday. As TVI became very aware that pupil’s reading ability was starting 'to slip' TVI felt it important to intervene as soon as possible. Consequently, TVI set up a home reading program for pupil which TVI feels is very successful. In short, it involved pupil receiving books in N36 electronic format. Pupil asked to read around three pages per day - 10 minutes worth, Monday to Thursday. In the first instance Wordtalk (with a Scottish voice) installed on pupil’s own laptop reads out the three pages to pupil and then pupil reads the same three pages. The screen-reader approach is designed to reduce eyestrain by supporting reading of the pages first time round. Pupil has a little log which he fills in and brings in to the school every Monday. Also, Wordtalk has been set to key command mode and this allows pupil to use this program within Word without having to pull down menus which would be difficult for pupil to read. This programme has been running from January. Just before Easter pupil told TVI that pupil had seen a marked improvement in their own reading. TVI too has noticed this improvement.