Education and Culture Committee’s, Short inquiry: Attainment of school pupils with a sensory impairment

Blind Children UK welcomes the focus of the Committee’s investigating how attainment levels of school pupils with a sensory loss can be improved.

About Blind Children UK

Blind Children UK Scotland is a charity specialising in services to sight impaired children and young people. We help children, young people, and their families tackle and overcome the challenges of young sight loss, developing skills and tools for independent living, building confidence, and supporting families.

Blind Children UK became part of the Guide Dogs family in 2013. Between Guide Dogs and Blind Children UK, we have over 50 years of experience working with children and young people. We have combined all this knowledge and expertise into a single support package for children and their families.

The Report to Parliament 2013 on the Implementation of The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended), found that there are 3,370 children and young people with sight loss in primary, secondary, and special schools. Out of this 95% are educated in mainstream school settings.

Attainment of School Pupils with a sensory impairment

In 2013 at the National Conference on Children and Young People with Sight Loss, John Ravenscroft, head of the University of Edinburgh’s Institute for Education, Teaching and Leadership, believed “habilitation services” are key to fixing the “huge and significant” divide between exam grades and employment prospects.

The National Performance Framework of Scotland aspires that our children and young people grow into being successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.

We agree with the Scottish Government in wanting each child and young person to have an education that encourages them to be the most successful they can be and provides them with a full passport to future opportunity.
Whilst we are aware of the requirements of sight impaired children and young people in gaining equitable and necessary access to the curriculum, for example books in accessible formats, having accessible equipment, and knowledgeable staff that demonstrate inclusion of sight impaired children and young people in all aspects of school activities, our focus within Blind Children UK’s response will be on the levels of Habilitation service provision within education.

Habilitation services were identified in The Review of Community Eye Care 2006 as in need of improvement both in the teaching of Habilitation skills at an early stage, and in the employment of specialist staff. Whist there has been modest increases in the deployment of Habilitation specialists, further significant improvements are required.

**Habilitation Services**

A child, who can see, typically develops a range of independence skills as they grow up, based on what they see others do on a daily basis. Imitating what they have seen, practising and adapting, until skills are automatic. Children who are sight impaired cannot observe and develop these skills in the same way as their sighted peers. As a result many key background skills may be missed without additional help and support.

Habilitation services involve training children and young people with a sight loss in personal mobility, navigation and independent living skills. These skills involve using other senses, and balance to interpret the world around them.

Habilitation skills should be taught pre-school, throughout schooling including at key transition stages, and beyond schooling into final destination such as, employment, training, or further education.

This year Guide Dogs undertook a survey to explore past and present experiences of children and young people and families in accessing and receiving Habilitation training, and includes how future delivery of Habilitation could be improved. Initial findings show that since a greater degree of competence in Habilitation skills / tools is generally achieved when training happens at an early age, the most intensive and sustained period of Habilitation training and support should occur during primary school; these ‘foundation’ skills can then be developed and consolidated at key transitions through education and employment.

A likely survey recommendation is that future Habilitation services should follow a holistic approach, offering a flexible and individualised programme of training and support that meets the needs of each child or young person at different stages of development and periods of life. To this end, service providers should actively engage with children and young people and their families to plan suitable Habilitation training. This approach should deliver a better experience for children and young people and their families, based on greater choice and input, making the transition from school to further study, employment and independent living in adulthood a positive and manageable undertaking.
How these services are helpful to young people in becoming successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens is best expressed in the 2014 Research compiled by Liverpool University, *Habilitation services for children and young people with vision impairment in the UK: an exploratory study*. This research found that, “Where comprehensive services were more accessible, particularly from an early age, a greater degree of competence in Habilitation tools was generally achieved. By the time these children become young adults, depending upon their other needs and circumstances, there is much better scope for them to live independent, fulfilled lives, as not only will they have enhanced these skills over time, but the data suggests that they are also less likely to develop counter-productive strategies and to reject offers of support, training and equipment.”

**Quality Standards for Habilitation**

The Quality Standards (QS) specify the knowledge, understanding, practical skills and strategies, ways of professional working, and standards of professional practice to be demonstrated by Habilitation workers. These standards developed out of the Mobility 21 Project funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in England and published in 2011. Whilst not mandatory they are widely used within the Habilitation profession.

There is synergy between these Quality Standards and GIRFEC and SHANARRI well-being outcomes, of which Blind Children UK Scotland Habilitation staff work to and demonstrate effectiveness of interventions.

Quality Standards help in three ways, they outline for users what they can expect from services, providers know what they need to provide and resource for, and inspectors know what they should be inspecting against.

**Visual Impairment Network for Children and Young People (VINCYP)**

VINCYP is a Scottish Health funded and led project which started in 2014, to develop a National Managed Clinical Network focussing on improving services for children and young people with visual impairment. Although led by Health it has Scotland wide involvement from education, social and third sector organisations.

The project is ongoing, a Pathway has been developed which states that every sight impaired child or young person will have an assessment from a Qualified Habilitation Specialist. Whilst we welcome this there needs to be a workforce to carry out the assessment and then lead on the Habilitation intervention programmes.

**Workforce**

Out of the 32 local authorities, as far as we are aware, 8 directly employ qualified Habilitation Specialists who are based in education setting to solely work with sighted impaired children and young people. Blind Children UK Scotland currently has 3 to fulfil its 2 local authority permanent contracts, and various adhoc pieces of work. The Royal Blind School employs staff to work with the pupils in term time. Other local authorities may have agreements with their social work department to deploy staff who ordinarily work with sight impaired adults and similar arrangements.
are found in some third sector adult service organisations. The 2006 Review of Community Eyecare stated “the working group emphasised the need to recognise the particular needs of visually impaired children, rather than treating them as small adults.”

Training courses for Habilitation Specialist is via a 2 year (part-time) Graduate Diploma: Specialist Qualification in Habilitation and Disabilities of Sight (Children and Young People).

Moray House School of Education, in Edinburgh, ran this course in 2010 with the last intake being in 2012. Since then there is no Scottish based training facility. The nearest, and now the only, provider for this course is University College London.

**Recommendations**

To improve the education experience and outcomes for sight impaired children and young people enabling them to take control of their futures we recommend the following.

The Quality Standards be applied across Scotland as a framework of comprehensive services, to aide planning, and for measurement of impact of services.

Education takes the responsibility to apply the principles from VINCYP in that an assessment on every sight impaired child and young person is carried out by a qualified Habilitation Specialist, and that work identified is carried out. Every sight impaired child and young person should have ongoing access to Habilitation services.

Education Scotland finds a way to effectively measure schools’ ability to provide effective Habilitation services, using the Quality Standards as well as GIRFEC SHANARRI outcomes.

That the low levels of employment of this specialist workforce, including training opportunities, be addressed.