RNIB Scotland response to the Scottish Parliament Education and Culture Committee call for evidence on the attainment of school pupils with a sensory impairment

1. About us

As Scotland’s leading organisation of blind and partially sighted people, RNIB Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence.

As a campaigning organisation, we fight for the rights of people with sight loss. Our priorities are to:

- Stop people losing their sight unnecessarily
- Support independent living for blind and partially sighted people
- Create a society that is inclusive of blind and partially sighted people’s interests and needs.

As this note of evidence outlines, there is a significant attainment gap between school pupils with a visual impairment and their peers. RNIB Scotland believes that this gap must be addressed and that doing so demands actions in four key areas:

- Early Intervention
- Effective service delivery for pupils with sight loss
- The accessibility of the curriculum
- Habilitation

We are identifying key areas of concern with a view to further discussion and would very much welcome the opportunity to give evidence directly to the Education and Culture Committee.

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2. Context

The majority of visually impaired children have either learning difficulties or other disabilities. However, we note that the Committee’s inquiry focuses solely on children with a sensory impairment and no other disabilities. A 2009 Visual Impairment Scotland (VIS) study considered the number of 0-16 year olds thought to have a visual impairment without additional needs to be around 975.

It is important to note that we do not have precise figures for the number of children affected by visual impairment in Scotland, whether they have other disabilities or not, and that services are using varying criteria to define what constitutes a visual impairment.

The National Statistics Publication for Scotland: Registered Blind and Partially Sighted Persons, Scotland 2010 showed that a total of 380 under-16s were registered blind and 615 in the 16-29 age group. A total of 442 under-16s were registered as partially sighted and 698 in the 16-29 age group. This gives a combined total of 2135 “young” people registered as blind or partially sighted. The figure is likely to under-estimate the numbers of young people with sight loss or those known to the statutory and voluntary agencies.

The Implementation of The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended): Report to Parliament 2013 reported the number of young people in education with a visual impairment as 3373.

There is a clear attainment gap. The Report to Parliament 2013 also provided an average tariff score of school leavers representing the overall qualifications a leaver has achieved while at school. The larger the average tariff score, the more the leaver has achieved. The average tariff score for pupils without additional support needs was 385 in 2009-10; 405 in 2010-11; and 433 in 2011-12. The average tariff score for pupils with visual impairment was 161, 234 and 249 respectively, reflecting the attainment gap.

This finding echoes the conclusion of the 2012 study, The Education of Children and Young People with a Sensory Impairment in Scotland:
"Unsurprisingly pupils with no Additional Support Needs (ASN) achieve better national qualifications than those with ASN. Pupils with a visual impairment are significantly more likely than those with a hearing impairment and some other categories of ASN to achieve no or low qualifications; however, around the same (low) proportion of pupils with a hearing or a visual impairment achieve Highers and Advanced Highers."

**Context recommendation**

1. More rigorous collection of statistics on pupils with visual impairment is essential along with an agreed definition of what is considered to constitute a visual impairment. This is important as it informs provision and practice.

**3. Early Intervention**

To ensure that blind and partially sighted children are provided with the best start there needs to be a significant shift in emphasis to delivering family support at the very earliest stage.

At the point of diagnosis of a visual impairment, the whole family needs to be scaffolded in a way that promotes a positive, aspirational approach to managing the disability and potential barriers that will emerge. Parents are looking for significant emotional and practical guidance on methods of care, nurture, play techniques, resources and welfare advice. This guidance is extremely variable across the country, with some statutory input from health visitors with no experience of dealing with visual impairment, or in some areas, not being addressed until a child is two years old by the Teacher of the Visually Impaired (VI teacher). Emotional support is almost non-existent in all areas.

The result of this minimalist approach is that visually impaired children are developmentally delayed, their movement is hindered and their interaction and understanding of the world is restricted. This affects attainment from the outset and they remain behind their sighted peers throughout childhood and adolescence.
Early Intervention recommendations

Families across Scotland should be supported in the early development of a blind/partially sighted child, whose needs are very different from sighted peers.

RNIB Scotland is just about to embark on an Identify, React, Intervene, Sustained Support (IRISS) project. This pilot early intervention project will cover 14 local authority areas in West and Central Scotland. Funded by the Big Lottery Fund, it will deliver direct early start emotional and practical support to 150 families over three years. As well as providing assistance, it will act as a bridge to relevant health, education and other professionals ensuring targeted support at the beginning of the sight loss journey.

Such models should be developed in all parts of Scotland.

4. Effective service delivery for pupils with sight loss

Lack of joint practice creates a number of issues that affect attainment. The Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) approach requires increased planning and delivery with a child-focused approach to service delivery.

Multi-professional collaboration

There is a need for all local and health authorities to commit to joint functional visual assessments of children to allow better, more informed practice. Parents also need to receive a fuller understanding of their child's visual ability to include them in future decision-making.

Education practitioners

The quality of staffing and training of qualified VI teachers and additional support needs assistants in schools is a barrier to educational attainment.
The Requirements for Teachers (Scotland) Regulations 2005 (Scottish Statutory Instrument 2005/355) came into force in September 2005. The Regulations state that where an education authority employs a teacher wholly or mainly to teach pupils who are hearing impaired, vision impaired or both hearing and vision impaired, then that teacher must possess an appropriate qualification to teach such pupils.

In Scotland, VI teachers have traditionally completed a postgraduate diploma at a higher education institute. However, the recent guidelines have advised that a more flexible approach to qualification is required, and competence-based routes to a postgraduate qualification are now available. It is expected that all teachers working with pupils who have a sensory impairment within Scotland will be appropriately qualified within five years of taking up post. This is not happening in all areas with inexperienced teachers delivering input to many pupils.

The 2012 study, The Education of Children and Young People with a Sensory Impairment in Scotland, reported that there were a total of 88 specialist VI teachers working across 27 authorities that responded to their survey. Nearly 60% of these were aged 45 or over. Funding, lack of time, commitment by staff, staff cover and distance from the provision were identified as key challenges in relation to ensuring that specialist VI teachers were fully qualified. There is also no financial incentive for teachers to obtain this additional qualification or to adopt this specialist role.

These challenges are more pronounced in today’s climate of austerity and local government cutbacks. Anecdotal evidence points to a tendency to replace retiring VI teachers with temporary teachers who may not be qualified alongside systematic use of unqualified classroom assistants. Whilst this may save hard-pressed local authorities money in the short run, there is undoubtedly a negative impact on the attainment levels of visually impaired pupils. Untrained, unqualified and inexperienced teachers are not best placed to close the attainment gap for our visually impaired pupils.

At the same time, in many local authorities, the introduction of a joint sensory approach has had the effect of diluting the focus on VI services. For example, there is a current trend to appointing joint sensory heads of service and towards merging the range of additional support needs under the umbrella of
"inclusion". The development needs of deaf and of blind children, for instance, are very different. Failure to address these differences may provide an explanation for the visually impaired attainment gap.

Effective service delivery recommendations

1. Local authorities should meet their statutory obligations to provide appropriately qualified staff.
2. There is a need for more qualified VI teachers and for recognition of the need for continuous professional development (CPD) of all staff to regularly update their professional skills.
3. The introduction of a joint sensory approach should not be to the detriment of VI services.

5. The accessibility of the curriculum

The Curriculum for Excellences aims to produce:

- Responsible citizens
- Confident individuals
- Effective contributors
- Successful learners

All pupils are supposed to aspire to these aims. However, a pupil cannot achieve the "four capacities" if they don't have appropriate resources and strategies in place to enable independent learning, personal independence and greater educational attainment.

In an educational climate where pupils increasingly rely on information technology (IT) to learn, many visually impaired pupils simply can't access on-line resources at the same time as their sighted peers. This is because in many local authorities, the schools network provider requires a user to sign in to download resources and notes, etc. A visually impaired pupil may be unable to enter a username and password as such schools systems are often inaccessible to them. Additionally, hand held portable technology such as Ipads or Braille-note taking devices are blocked out by the network provider, preventing learning from taking place.
Many learners with sight loss need specialist assistive technology such as Jaws or Supernova screen readers to access information. Often, when intranet systems are refreshed, such software becomes redundant and may take some time to be upgraded, creating huge disadvantage.

It is extremely hard to get the technology right but we have to try to future-proof the accessibility of our education systems. Corporate IT managers in local authority areas need to engage on a regular basis with VI teachers to guarantee access. The recently produced exemplar, Getting IT Right for Pupils with Visual Impairments - or ‘Eye Right!’ - was developed by VI teachers to outline the frustrations being experienced at a classroom level by pupils and those supporting them. More importantly, it demonstrated good practice as a guideline to those authorities failing our pupils.

RNIB Scotland is regularly called on to intervene on behalf of visually impaired children to ensure that local authorities are complying with their statutory obligations. Often parents are unaware that their child is failing or not being appropriately supported to access technology systems as VI teachers can't publicly challenge their local authority.

**Accessible curriculum recommendation**

1. It is vital that local authorities future-proof the planning and implementation of their information technology accessibility policy to include the needs of blind and partially sighted pupils.
2. Practical systems have to be developed in each authority with joint practice to guarantee access for all VI pupils at all times. This could include regular review of suitability for individual pupils; ongoing staff training in assistive technology, centralised procurement and maintenance of specialist devices.

**Habilitation**

Since 2004 there has been the presumption of mainstreaming in education. Most visually impaired pupils go to their local school. According to the 2012 report on VI education in Scotland, produced by the Scottish Sensory Centre, more than 70% of school-aged children with visual impairment were educated in mainstream primary and secondary schools; around 16% were placed in special schools and around 10% in specialist units.
Educational attainment is linked to the preparation for independent adulthood, future employability and economic resilience. However, the school curriculum is jam-packed with most emphasis on academic achievement and less on the promotion of well-being. Both are intertwined. There is no point in a blind learner leaving school with five Highers, but not having the capacity to lead a successful adult life. Similarly, many visually impaired young people are failing because they do not have the required skills that provide the tools necessary for successful attainment. A balance has to be struck. Time must be set aside within the mainstream curriculum for the development of "soft skills" such as communication, relationship building, personal awareness and self-care, body language and non-verbal clues, as well as movement, mobility, independent travel and living.

As well as accessing the school curriculum, blind and partially sighted pupils should be involved in the whole life of the school and the wider community. However, this level of social inclusion requires training by habilitation specialists.

Habilitation takes a holistic approach, with an emphasis on the early development needs of children with visual impairments. However, at the moment, habilitation provision is fragmented whilst it is also delivered in very different ways across Scotland. There are few qualified habilitation specialists with the two-year qualification in habilitation run only in London and Birmingham. There is no equivalent course on offer in Scotland at the moment.

The lack of a standardised habilitation service in Scotland is likely to have an impact on the educational attainment of visually impaired pupils.

**Habilitation recommendations**

1. There should be a focus on the development of independent living skills with qualified habilitation staff.
2. Current rehabilitation staff should be encouraged and supported in obtaining additional qualifications in habilitation.
Conclusion

RNIB Scotland is concerned about the availability of reliable data on visually impaired pupils, early intervention, the accessibility of the curriculum, the effectiveness of VI service delivery and quality of habilitation services.

We are identifying these key areas of concern with a view to further discussion and would very much welcome the opportunity to give evidence directly to the Education and Culture Committee.

For further information please contact:

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