1. Introduction

The Scottish Council on Visual Impairment (SCOVI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Education and Culture Committee’s inquiry on improving the attainment of young people with a sensory impairment.

SCOVI is a small umbrella organisation linking and supporting statutory and voluntary services for and of visually impaired people in Scotland. Our charity’s mission is for blind and partially-sighted people throughout Scotland to lead independent and included lives.

We work towards this goal by informing and supporting our members, promoting member activities, encouraging collaboration and raising awareness to improve opportunities, rights, equality and inclusion of visually impaired people in Scotland.

Our submission to this inquiry is based on consultation with our members including discussion within SCOVI’s Children & Young People’s Subgroup, results of an online questionnaire inviting contributions and key points from individual submissions of members. The following represents recurring themes from the process.

2. Concise Suggestions for Improving Attainment

2.1 Holistic Approach.

A holistic approach, in line with the eight outcomes of Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) presents the best chance to improve the overall health and well-being of a visually impaired child. We urge the committee to promote culture and practice where attainment is regarded in the context of the child’s whole life, not just at school. It must involve a partnership of all those who support and enable them to achieve their potential, with the child at the centre.
2.2 Teaching and Schools.

There are insufficient, experienced Qualified Teachers of the Visually Impaired (QTVI) in Scotland to provide the necessary leadership, curriculum and practice design, modelling and direct teaching to meet the learning and attainment needs of visually impaired pupils, both in mainstream and specialist schools. There is a particular concern regarding the lack of teachers able to instruct in contracted Braille, a vital medium for learning of blind children.

We encourage the committee to consider measures to increase investment in the profession and in staffing levels, more flexible core and ongoing learning opportunities and promotion of QTVI as a career.

In addition, increasing the understanding and awareness of all staff who engage with visually impaired pupils (e.g. managers, learning support assistants, etc.) will underpin an accepting, inclusive learning culture, conducive to the attainment of visually impaired young people. All have a role to play in planning, delivering and evaluating work with the young person.

We also recommend reflection on the concept of inclusion of visually impaired pupils – that this goes beyond co-location within the same facility. For example, instead of offering separate provision for visually impaired young people, consider refashioning teaching practices, the choice of sports and social settings to ensure these are fully inclusive. This will enable young people to feel more included and valued.

2.3 Habilitation.

Habilitiation involves helping visually impaired children develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to undertake activities of daily living and be as independent as possible as they grow into adulthood. Ideally, habilitation support should start as early as possible, be delivered by a qualified, experienced practitioner and include building the skills and confidence of parents/carers to enable ongoing support for their child.

Evidence indicates that building independent living skills, including those required for self-management and employment, reduces the cost of financial and care support to the individual.
Scotland has a severe shortage of qualified and experienced habilitation workers. This means the level and quality of provision varies greatly across the country and is not provided at all in some areas.

We recommend the following measures:

- **Workforce.** That the shortfall in the Habilitation Specialist workforce be addressed with further investment in core and ongoing training, the establishment of flexible competence-based training for Habilitation within Scotland, registration of the profession and promotion of habilitation as an attractive career to potential entrants.

- **Assessment.** Follow the recommendations of the Visual Impairment Network for Children and Young People (VINCYP) recommendation that every sight impaired child or young person receive an assessment from a Qualified Habilitation Specialist.

- **Standards.** We recommend the Committee consider steps towards adoption of “Quality Standards for Habilitation,” developed from the Department of Children, Schools and Families in England. This framework will ensure high standards and consistency in practice.

- **Holistic Approach.** Many examples were given through the consultation of effective collaboration between Habilitation workers in schools and those in the community (employed by public, voluntary or private sector providers.) Elsewhere, however, steps to cascade good practice could reduce cultural and structural barriers between school-based and community-based habilitation work to promote effective delivery based on the holistic needs of the young person.

### 2.4 Technology

Technological advances in recent years present an excellent opportunity for enabling visually impaired pupils to engage with learning. However “one size does not fit all” for children affected by visual impairment. Consideration must be given to the right system for each pupil, ensure it remains compatible with other technology used for teaching and that all those involved in working with the young person understand its use.

Examples were given through our consultation of solutions that are appropriate for some children and not others as well as technologies that work well, but may not be compatible with school IT systems. Where
such issues arise, there must be measures to **resolve them swiftly** so the visually impaired pupil does not fall behind or feel left out.

2.5 **Emotional Well-Being and Social Acceptance.**

Considerable evidence points to the importance of addressing the social and emotional needs of young people with visual impairment in order to promote their well-being, self-esteem and best chance of achieving their full potential. ¹

Being unable to undertake activities in the same way sighted children do, possibly having a different appearance and/or the use of different technology or teaching methods can all set visually impaired children apart from their peers. This can lead to a sense of embarrassment and isolation.

We recommend that **attention to the emotional and social needs** of children and young people including a focus on inclusive activities, learning methods and support for independent living skills through habilitation form an integral part of the “package” of support and learning for visually impaired young people. Fundamentally, **young people and their families** must be supported and fully included in the design and developing of all learning and support interventions.

Kim Smith  
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¹ Mhairi Thurston (2014) “They Think They Know What’s Best for Me”: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Experience of Inclusion and Support in High School for Vision-impaired Students with Albinism”, _Vol. 61, No. 2._  