

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

THE SENIOR PHASE OF SCHOOL: HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE PURSUE THE RIGHT PATHWAY FOR THEM

SUBMISSION FROM Royal Blind

Submission from Royal Blind - The Senior Phase of School: Helping Young People Pursue the Right Pathway for Them

Royal Blind welcomes the chance to submit evidence into this short, but important inquiry by the Education and Skills Committee. Royal Blind is Scotland's largest vision impairment organisation, running services for children, adults and older people who are vision impaired. These services include the Scottish Braille Press, which provides supported employment opportunities, including to vision impaired people. The charity also runs the Royal Blind School, supporting both pupils at the school and in mainstream education, and so the attainment gap and employment gap for vision impaired pupils is of great concern for the charity.

Scottish Government statistics show that for 2015/16, 85.2% of pupils with vision impairment had a positive destination after secondary school, significantly lower for pupils without an additional support need where 93.4% had positive destination. Only 16.3% progressed to employment compared to 29.5% of pupils who did not have additional support needs. Royal Blind supports the Scottish Government's ambition to halve the disability employment gap in Scotland - the Scottish disability employment rate stands at 40.9%, while the non-disabled employment rate is 81.5% - and believes these figures indicate that progress in positive destinations for school leavers with disabilities will be vital in achieving that goal.

The Royal Blind School provides a range of work experience opportunities for its pupils, and this year placements for pupils include the Scottish Book Trust, the parliamentary office of an MSP and Virgin Money. The School works closely with organisations facilitating placements so that they can be accessible and productive for the pupils. A range of additional considerations have to be taken into account when arranging placements for vision impaired pupils, including ensuring that working environments are accessible and staff facilitating the placement are aware of what adjustments the pupil will need in working practices so that both the organisation and the pupils can benefit to the fullest extent from the placement.

It is vital that similar approaches are taken for vision impaired pupils in mainstream education, but Royal Blind is concerned at current levels of specialist provision in schools and welcomes the engagement the Committee has had with the issue of education for pupils with sensory impairment, both in this parliament and by its predecessor committee.

A lack of Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment makes it harder to ensure pupils who are vision impaired are given not only the

academic skills but the life skills they require to progress to tertiary education or employment.

Case Study 1

A pupil who is currently at the Royal Blind School had achieved two As and a B in his exams at his mainstream school to enable him to take up a place at the University of Stirling, but is now spending an additional year at The Royal Blind School so he can gain life skills he requires to take up his place at university. The pupil experienced a lack of specialist support at his mainstream school:

“There were one or two teachers that would go the extra mile to include me. Whenever my RMPS teacher drew on the board she would describe aloud what she was drawing, but it was rare that a teacher would make that extra effort. I was expecting to go to the University of Stirling to study Politics in September but I felt that I just wasn’t prepared because I didn’t have the right life skills.”

Early intervention is an essential key in enabling pupils to grow up to be as independent and confident as possible. Building confidence and success in our pupils is core to the Curriculum for Excellence and without the necessary support and training, pupils are going into a deficit model situation each day when others can do and they are unable to. This can result in embarrassment and/or retreating into oneself which in itself can lead to mental health issues. Richard this is a paragraph that I’ve done quickly but the essence is core.

Habilitation skills for vision impaired pupils, for example identifying objects by touch and skills in spatial awareness and long cane use, are also crucial if they are to progress in education and work. These skills must be part of the pathway set out in Recommendation 1 to achieve positive destinations for vision impaired pupils.

Royal Blind supports the committee’s Recommendation 2 which includes working with employers on careers guidance. We hope this will also increase awareness among businesses and other employers of the need to understand how pupils with disabilities can be given fair opportunities for work.

The Royal Blind School in conjunction with the Royal Blind Learning Hub is well placed to be of assistance in training and awareness raising for any work placements for those with vision impairment.

Case Study 2

A vision impaired member of staff at the Scottish Braille Press has spoken of the difficulties she had finding employment despite having secured a good degree in HR and Languages. After leaving university she was previously unable to find suitable permanent and full-time work, taking temporary jobs and doing voluntary work to build her CV, a cycle she found demoralising. However through supported

employment at the Scottish Braille Press, specialist advice and training has been made available to her.

There is currently a great deal of change taking place as the Scottish Government assumes new powers over employability, although this comes at a time of constriction in resource for these schemes at a UK level. As part of the Scottish Government's new activity around employability and as it sets out on its work to close the disability employment gap, it will be important to ensure that comprehensive and specialist support, training and advice is available to young people as they progress from school to employment or continuing education.

Enabling fairer access for disabled young people to tertiary education is also vital. Vision impaired pupils are only half as likely to progress to higher education as fully sighted pupils. We support the call by the disability campaign group One in Give who have made the case that disability should be considered as a contextual indicator for admissions to help identify an applicant's potential to succeed in Higher Education during the admissions process.

Royal Blind is also aware that there is a desire for more opportunities for Further Education for vision impaired pupils. While the charity's role is around the delivery of education through the Royal Blind School and supporting mainstream vision impairment education through our Learning Hub, we believe it would also be beneficial for more engagement with vision impairment issues to be taken forward in the Further Education sector as well. Royal Blind believes that could be an important step in securing more education and employment opportunities for vision impaired young people, and so it is important that Further Education institutions are accessible for students who are vision impaired, and that there is appropriate specialist provision in Further Education settings to support these students into employment.