Education Committee Inquiry on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Written evidence submitted by Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research,

Department of Disability, Inclusion and Special Needs,

University of Birmingham

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# Summary of evidence presented

Our research evidence focuses on the experiences of children and young people with vision impairment and draws upon an ongoing longitudinal study into the post-16 transition experiences of young people. Vision impairment in childhood is low incidence. As this group face unique challenges requiring intervention because of the role which vision plays in a child’s development and social interaction, it is important to consider their specific needs within educational policy.

# Overview of the importance of specialist educational support for children and young people with vision impairment

The majority of children and young people with vision impairment are educated in mainstream settings and receive specialist support in education through specialist teachers based at local authority educational support services. Importantly, the specialist qualification for teachers working with children and young people with vision impairment is a mandatory one, highlighting the significance of this role and the specialist input which these professionals bring to educational settings.

Qualified teachers of children and young people with vision impairment (QTVIs) have responsibility for delivering the ‘additional curriculum’: the term given to specific skills taught to students with vision impairment which are not part of the core curriculum. Components of the additional curriculum include use of assistive technology; mobility and orientation skills; independent living skills; self-advocacy skills and social skills.

In a recent paper, McLinden et al (2016) argue that the role of QTVIs is to promote a dual model of learning. Changes are made to the student’s environment to facilitate their learning in the classroom (e.g. provision of enlarged materials) and skills are taught to the student to enable them to become independent learners (e.g. use of assistive technology and touch-typing). In this dual model, gradually increased focus is given to developing skills for independent access to learning as the young person progresses towards adulthood. This model aligns with the objectives of the current SEND Code of Practice, for “successful *preparation* for adulthood, including independent living and employment” (p20).

# Evidence for consideration

## Area 1: Assessment of and support for children and young people with SEND

**Specialist workforce**

1. Evidence from a Freedom of Information request by RNIB of Local Authority Vision Impairment Services has found that specialist support for children and young people with vision impairment has become increasingly fragmented. This evidence shows that despite increasing caseloads and increased responsibilities in providing support until the age of 25, there has been a reduction in specialist staff at one in five local authorities. [They have also found](https://www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/FOI%202017%20Research%20Briefing%20final%20version.docx) that increasingly children and young people are receiving support in lessons from teaching assistants who do not have any specialist training in how to support children and young people with vision impairment. The FOI request also found that increasingly services are being managed by staff who do not have a specialist understanding of vision impairment, including services being “absorbed into larger services for children and young people with a range of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)” (p3). The implication of these cuts to services, combined with a lack of clear direction on the support which should be received by children and young people with vision impairment has led to a postcode lottery of provision.

**Importance of specialist support**

2. Findings from the [VICTAR longitudinal study](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/projects/reflections-of-transition-experiences.doc%29) into the post-16 transition experiences of young people with vision impairment have consistently highlighted the importance of young people with vision impairment being resourced through education with the specialist skills and knowledge needed for them to be able to work and live independently in adulthood (e.g.. Barriers to progression have been observed for participants who did not have key skills in place, while students who received consistent training in the additional curriculum have shared positive outcomes. This contrast in outcomes is illustrated in the following short case studies taken from the Longitudinal Transitions Study.

| Case study of Michael |
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| “Michael” is currently looking for employment opportunities in a small rural town, but will only consider jobs which are in his local area as he does not feel confident to travel to unfamiliar environments, even with transportation provided by Access to Work. He reports that he did not receive mobility training when in school as he was able to get around in his local area.  |

| Case study of Asha |
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| “Asha” recently completed a degree. Throughout the course she experienced problems with accessing course materials and with examination material which had not been modified appropriately. Tina did not have the self-advocacy skills to challenge this, while interviews with staff from the university found that they assumed she was not experiencing problems because she had not raised any issues with them.  |

| Case study of Heather |
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| “Heather” first received specialist educational support from her local authority when she was in nursery school, when they helped her develop tactile skills in preparation for learning braille. When she started in primary school she was able to quickly learn to read braille and started to learn to touch type and use a computer with a screen reader. During her time in school she had the opportunity to experiment with using a range of technology in the classroom. Once in higher education she felt very prepared for working independently as she had a range of skills and techniques to apply to different tasks.  |

## Area 2: The transition from statements of special educational needs and Learning Disability Assessments to Education, Health and Care Plans

**Reengaging with support at post-16**

3. We have concerns about the processes which are in place for older learners who wish to reengage with local authority educational support. [The Longitudinal Transitions study found](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/projects/reflections-of-transition-experiences.doc%29) that very few of the participants (who were aged 19-22 at the time) were aware of the introduction of EHC Plans and the fact that these plans extend to the age of 25 for those in education (other than HE) and training.

| Case study of Martha |
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| “Martha” was preparing to go back into further education sought to apply for an EHC Plan at the age of 21. She received support from a careers advisor which enabled her to reconnect with her local authority and to commence the process of applying for an EHC plan. The local authority were unclear about the type of support she was entitled to at the age of 21, meaning the assessment process took several months, at which point she had already withdrawn from the FE course having not had adequate support put in place.  |

## Area 3: The level and distribution of funding for SEND provision

**Funding challenges**

4. The introduction of the new SEND Code of Practice places more responsibility on local authority educational services to provide specialist support for young people with vision impairment in order to develop the key skills they require in order to reach their potential in adulthood. Evidence from the Longitudinal Transitions Study highlights how important a focus on outcomes for adulthood is for young people with vision impairment, and therefore we welcome these changes. However, [a FOI request from RNIB](https://www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/FOI%202017%20Research%20Briefing%20final%20version.docx) shows that many local authorities, despite having this larger remit, have experienced reductions in specialist staff. It is therefore difficult to see how specialist services can adequately support children and young people with vision impairment in developing the skills which they require to live and work independently in adulthood.

## Area 4: The roles of and co-operation between education, health and social care sectors

No response given

## Area 5: Provision for 19-25 year olds including support for independent living; transition to adult services; and access to education, apprenticeship and work

**Continuation of support into Higher Education**

5. We have particular concerns that EHC plans cease to take effect when the student moves into higher education. [Our findings from the Longitudinal Transitions Study](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/victar/transitions-into-higher-education-summary.doc) have identified very poor transition experiences for young people with vision impairment into HE. A key challenge here is a lack of specialist knowledge of vision impairment at the different stages of the transition process (i.e. when making initial applications in FE/Sixth form; when meeting with DSA assessors; and when meeting with disability support officers in HE). It is also important for young people with vision impairment to have access to specialist advice when preparing to transition from HE into employment, in order to provide guidance on key challenges these young people face, such as applying for Access to Work, declaring their vision impairment during the application process and negotiating reasonable adjustments. We suggest that QTVIs can play a vital role throughout the student’s time in HE, and the best way in which for QTVIs to be able to continue to provide this necessary support is for the continuation of ECH plans during the time the student is in higher education.

**Improving work experience and career opportunities**

6. [Young people with vision impairment have extremely poor employment outcomes, even in comparison to other disability groups](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/victar/transitions-february-2015.doc). The Longitudinal Transitions Study has identified that a significant barrier to these young people is the lack of opportunity for work experience. Work experience serves as both an opportunity to improve the young person’s CV and also as a valuable experience for the individual to learn about the adjustments that they might need in a work place and begin to understand how to advocate for these. There are many challenges to young people with vision impairment in obtaining work experience, including: unsuitable work opportunities for young people their age which they can access; prioritizing examinations over other aspects of the curriculum; logistical challenges such as independent travel and access to equipment. We argue that a commitment to helping young people obtain work experience placements should form a core focus of ECH plans.

7. A significant barrier identified by participants in the longitudinal study has been a lack of specialist guidance for career planning. Significant challenges have been faced by participants who have taken vocational courses which lead to careers which the young person has later found are unsuitable for them due to their level of vision impairment (for example childcare).

8. An important enabler for participants making the transition from being NEET to employment has been having specialist one-to-one support to help them navigate this process, including identifying jobs, applying for jobs, knowing how and when to declare their vision impairment, preparing for interviews and applying for Access to Work (Hewett et al 2018, forthcoming).

9. The Longitudinal Transitions Study has identified many barriers faced by young people with vision impairment when seeking employment. The complexities in moving for a new job for a person with vision impairment are illustrated in the following case study.

| Case study of Ryan |
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| “Ryan” graduated from university in October 2016. After a brief time spent moving house and travelling, he decided to start looking for employment opportunities. During this time Ryan drew upon a range of services, and had a quite mixed experience. These are explored in turn.When he started applying for roles, Ryan connected with the local Job Centre, where he reports not having a very positive experience as the person he spoke with did not have an understanding of vision impairment. More positively, the Job Centre referred him to a specialist organisation to help with job searching. He reports being apprehensive about going at first, because of the experience he had had through the job centre. They assisted with filling in applications and helping him update his CV. Having support for completing applications proved to be important as he found that some of the application forms were not accessible, even with assistive technology.Ryan was open to relocating to different cities in the UK, and prioritised the type of work that he was interested in over location. This illustrates the confidence that he had in his skills for getting around independently, especially since having a guide dog. After several months of job searching he was successful in securing a place on an internship scheme.The role which he was offered was based in a large city which he had not lived in before, and therefore he had to find accommodation before starting the role. This proved to be extremely challenging with a guide dog, and Ryan faced many refusals and negative responses. Due to the short amount of time available before he started the role, Ryan ended up living with a family member and making a very long commute each day to get to the office. Whilst it was challenging finding accommodation with a guide dog, Ryan also found that it would have been very difficult getting mobility support in time without the services attached to having a guide dog. However, through Guide Dogs he was able to receive the mobility support he required in time to start the new role.Ryan started the process of applying for Access to Work as early as possible. He found the form frustrating and felt that it was not very appropriate to his circumstances, and this frustration was extended when the application was not processed correctly. Once Ryan heard back from Access to Work, he was concerned as they wanted to schedule an appointment for two months’ time, but the programme he was on only lasted for three months. After he started the internship and all the equipment was put in place, Ryan had an extremely positive experience, which has since led onto another work opportunity.  |

# Our Recommendations

1. Specialist support for children and young people with a vision impairment should be overseen by a QTVI who has had specialist training to be able to understand the unique needs of this group.

2. DfE should work with key organisations such as VIEW and NatSIP to develop a statutory framework for the provision of support for children and young people with vision impairment to seek to eliminate the postcode lottery of support.

3. Teaching assistants who work with children and young people with vision impairment should have received appropriate specialist training in order to ensure they are able to facilitate the process of a child or young person becoming an independent learner.

4. Local authority sensory support services should be resourced appropriately to ensure that children and young people with vision impairment have access to the necessary educational experiences, equipment and training to enable them to develop the important skills and experiences they require to live and work independently in adulthood. We recommend a review of the allocation of funding for children and young people with high needs, low incidence disabilities such as vision impairment and a statutory framework of support to ensure that children and young people receive the support they require to obtain these broader outcomes.

5. Clearer procedures should be put in place to enable school-leavers to reengage with specialist support when required.

6. Education Health and Care plans should continue into higher education, to improve transition experiences both into HE and beyond.

7. Educational Health and Care plans should have clear target outcomes which ensure that young people with vision impairment are facilitated to plan for their futures, including planning for access to work experience.

8. Young people with vision impairment should have access to specialist support as they seek to enter the labour market, including specialist careers guidance and mentoring.

# The Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR)

[VICTAR](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/education/research/victar/index.aspx) is a Research Centre based in the School of Education’s Department of Disability, Inclusion and Special Needs, at the University of Birmingham.

VICTAR has a long record of leading innovative and influential UK and international research. Of particular relevance to this consultation is our [ongoing longitudinal study](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/education/research/victar/research/longitudinal-transitions-study/index.aspx) into the transition experiences of young people with vision impairment from compulsory education through to the labour market.

Since 2010 the study has tracked a group of 80 young people with vision impairment as they have left school and pursued a variety of pathways including further education, higher education, apprenticeships, employment and voluntary work.

VICTAR are also responsible for the delivery of the Mandatory Qualification for Teachers of Children and Young People with Vision Impairments programme. This course is undertaken by teachers who train to become Qualified Teachers of Visually Impaired children (QTVIs): providing specialist support and guidance for students with vision impairment across educational settings.

Our response draws upon both our research into the transition outcomes of young people with vision impairment and our professional experience in working with specialist educational services and voluntary sector organisations. Whilst our response to the consultation has a relatively narrow focus we would argue that it is important to give special attention to minority groups whose unique challenges may otherwise not be represented in a broader investigation. [Our secondary data analysis](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/victar/transitions-february-2015.doc) of the UK Labour Force Survey estimates that 42.8% of young people with vision impairment aged 16-24 are NEET, in comparison to 21.7% of young people in the general population. More broadly, [recent research by RNIB](http://www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/My%20Voice%202015%20-%20Full%20report%20-%20Accessible%20PDF_0.pdf) estimates that only 26% of people with a vision impairment in the UK are in paid employment.

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