

Royal Blind

Royal Blind is Scotland's largest visual impairment organisation. We support people living with visual impairment of all ages - babies and toddlers at our early years support group; children and young people at the Royal Blind School (including residential support) and Kidscene after school club; and young adults through our residential services and respite care. Royal Blind provides outreach support to pupils with visual impairment in mainstream schools, including working in partnership with East Lothian Council on a ground-breaking project to ensure mainstream education staff are properly equipped and skilled to support pupils with visual impairment.

Vulnerable children in the Coronavirus pandemic – are there practical issues you have encountered that should be considered at a national level?

Royal Blind welcomes the decision of the Education and Skills Committee to prioritise the wellbeing of vulnerable children and young people during the Coronavirus outbreak as one immediate focus for its work. We are pleased to be invited by the Convener to share insights based on our experiences on particular challenges that could benefit from being highlighted at a national level in order to improve support for vulnerable children and young people. As a charity which provides education and care services for young people with visual impairment, we are pleased to have this opportunity to share experiences and views on some of the impacts the Coronavirus pandemic has had for the children and young people we support.

We are aware that the Committee will have a wide range of areas to consider so we have focused on three of the areas the Committee has identified as being of concern for vulnerable children: access to food; the level of provision for children and young people with complex additional support needs; and contact and support received by children with additional support needs not attending school or childcare hubs.

Do you have any information to share on the extent to which food is reaching the children who need it most?

We have concerns over the ability of some children with visual impairment to access food supplies given the challenges faced by blind and partially sighted parents. Families which have used supermarket food delivery services for years have found they are no longer able to secure slots due to the impact of the pandemic. We recognise that supermarkets have sought to improve arrangements and that the Scottish Government has worked with local authorities to provide access to food for people who are shielding. However, many people with visual impairment are still unable to access food deliveries. The situation has been exacerbated because people with visual impairment have not been classed as a vulnerable group by the Scottish or UK Governments in the same way people with other conditions have been, although we understand some supermarkets are now doing so. People specified as a 'vulnerable group' have had priority access to supermarkets which people with visual impairment have not had. This has resulted in many having their ability to access food supplies significantly restricted, resulting in great anxiety for many and also affecting young people with visual impairment.

We wish to draw the attention of the Committee to a blog written for Royal Blind by Vicky Haylott, a former pupil of the Royal Blind School who is also the parent of a current pupil at the school, who has described how this situation has affected her family. Vicky writes: "The situation has created a genuine emergency for many blind people; some without family or friends living nearby so they literally do not know where their next meal is coming. Along with other campaigners, I have inundated supermarkets with calls, tweets and letters to prompt them to address this injustice."

You can read Vicky's blog here:

<https://www.royalblind.org/blog/campaigns/why-we-need-more-support-for-blind-and-partially-sighted-people-during-the-coronaviru?p=29119&back=node%2F29119>

The efforts Vicky and other blind and partially sighted people have made to highlight this issue has resulted in progress, and today Vicky has successfully registered as a vulnerable customer with Tesco. However, we are concerned some people with visual impairment will still be having challenges accessing food deliveries and believe classifying people with visual impairment as a vulnerable group will help resolve these problems for all people with visual impairment.

Are there any issues with certain ways of providing food, any particular barriers that need to be addressed?

It is important to recognise the further challenges facing people with visual impairment, including young people, that social distancing measures implemented in food retailers present. While we recognise the fundamental importance of social distancing, supermarkets are now inaccessible for blind and partially sighted people as a result. For people with visual impairment who can go to shops, social distancing markers on floors and the introduction of one-way routes around supermarkets cannot easily be navigated by either long cane or guide dog users. They often rely on touch and guiding from another person to navigate the shop. There have even been cases where supermarkets have refused to accept paper shopping lists from people with visual impairment for fear of spreading the virus. We believe these challenges underline the compelling case for people with visual impairment to be designated as a vulnerable group.

What level of provision exists for children and young people with complex ASN in school/childcare hubs?

In line with government guidance issued on 23rd March concerning vulnerable groups, the Royal Blind School was exempted from the general school closures that occurred across the country as we are a provision for children with complex needs and ASN. We subsequently contacted parents of our day pupils to gain an understanding of whether they would choose to continue to send their children to school. Most parents were anxious that their children remain away from public areas as most of our pupils have complex health as well as learning needs. We only had a small number of families who would wish to send their children to school, so the decision was made to close the school to day pupils, although those with 52 week residential places have remained in our care. This is, however, subject to ongoing

review and we have weekly contact with our parents to gauge the level of support they may require going forwards. To ensure the safety and well-being of our staff, teachers are working from home and supporting our children and their families through digital platforms.

We continue to support children with complex needs who cannot be cared for at home through Royal Blind's children and young people's residential services. The pandemic has created significant challenges which means we have had to adapt our services. We have altered start and finish times of shifts to accommodate staff who are affected by a reduced service from public transport. We are working creatively to adapt use of the spaces available to us in rotation (deep cleaning between each use) so that young people can have time in spaces other than their bedrooms. We are working with our therapy team to ensure that 'essential' 1:1 therapies continue, albeit in a limited way. There have been some challenges accessing the therapy support normally provided to children at the School. It would be beneficial to have more guidance on what constitutes essential therapy to ensure support for disabled children isn't inappropriately interrupted. We are utilising staff who are having to work from home by asking them to undertake administrative tasks and asking them to support parents by telephone. We have increased the use of FaceTime and Skype so that families who cannot visit are able to keep in touch with their child. We have had to stop all group activities, family visits and outings (although we are able to use our garden and outdoor spaces).

The Scottish Government is regularly providing important guidance for schools, but this is generic and often requires to be adapted so it can be applied to specialist schools and specialist teaching. While we have good and regular dialogue with the Scottish Government on how we are adapting provision at this time, it would also be beneficial if there was more information provided by the Scottish Government on how generic guidance should be applied for specialist schools and children with additional support needs, including through providing case studies to illustrate this guidance.

Are there appropriate places at school/childcare hubs or in private nurseries available?

It is difficult for us to assess whether there are sufficient places at school/childcare hubs or in private nurseries available on a national basis, but we know from the young people we work with of the significant impact there has been on provision. We also recognise the challenges for providers such as those who provide private nurseries. The introduction of social distancing has meant we have had to close our Kidscene after-school and holiday club which caters for children from the Royal Blind School and other special schools as well as local mainstream schools. Kidscene provides an integrated environment for children with and without disabilities. We are aware other organisations will have had to make similar decisions which impacts on support. While Kidscene is not currently open, we are continuing to use its facilities for our charity's key workers to provide them with childcare, so they continue to work in our care services.

We believe it is important that the Scottish Government asks education authorities to provide information on how children with additional support needs are being

supported in their area and by their schools. We are concerned that there will be variable provision across the country given the pressure on additional support needs provision prior to the pandemic. Our concerns over this issue led us to join with the Scottish Children's Services Coalition, the National Deaf Children's Society, the National Autistic Society Scotland to call for any Barnett consequentials resulting from an extra £700 million for pupils with special education needs announced by the UK Government in the Spending Round in September to form part of an increase in additional support needs funding for pupils in Scotland. We are aware of research by the Scottish Children's Services Coalition which shows that average spending by local authorities on additional support needs has fallen by £889 per pupil over the same period, a 26.1% real terms cut. While we have welcomed an additional £15 million announced by the Scottish Government last September for pupil support assistants for children with additional support needs and are now calling for further action in this budget, there are fewer specialist teachers for visual impairment while the number of pupils with visual impairment is increasing. (1) We believe it is inevitable that these pressures on specialist provision for pupils with additional support needs will impact on the support which can be made available to pupils and families in these challenging circumstances.

What contact, and support is being received by children and young people with additional support needs and their parents/carers where they are not attending school/childcare hubs?

The support provided by Royal Blind varies significantly depending on the needs of the child. We have exam candidates, so we are sending relevant SQA guidance home to parents and keeping pupils informed of their course submissions. Some of our children require the structure of a school day so virtual lessons have been set up at regular times. Accessibility is always an issue with our children who are blind and partially-sighted so we are selecting online resources carefully and often creating our own. We have children with complex medical needs who are not in good health for reasons unrelated to Covid-19 and who require a friendly and supportive voice at the end of a phone. We have children with complex learning needs who require the full attention of their parents and carers and cannot work or learn independently. This is challenging for some of our families and we are trying where we can to support through learning boxes that have been sent home, lists of personalised ideas and resources based on our knowledge of the child and interactions with the professionals working with the child or young person. We are still operating within a multi-disciplinary approach and working closely with therapists, nurses, habilitation specialists as well as with Local Authorities and external agencies. The range of support from our education staff has been excellent and continues to respond to the needs of our individual children.

As with provision in schools and childcare hubs, we believe it is likely there will be differing levels of support for pupils with visual impairment across the country. Therefore, we believe it is important that the Scottish Government asks education authorities to provide information on how children with additional support needs are being supported in their area and by their schools and how parents are being provided with helpful information resources such as those provided by Parent Club Scotland. It is welcome that Parent Club has established an online coronavirus hub. This provides helpful advice for parents in relation to a range of additional support

needs including links to Royal Blind learning resources for young people with visual impairment.

We wish to stress how important it is that children with visual impairment who are not attending schools or childcare hubs are supported at this time. We are deeply concerned about the potential for people with visual impairment to be socially isolated as a result of the current measures to reduce incidence of Coronavirus. In 2018 we conducted research into the links between sight loss and social isolation which showed people with visual impairment already had a higher risk of isolation. Our survey of 281 people living with visual impairment, including young blind and partially sighted people, found that 90% had some experience of loneliness and two thirds said that they had experienced it directly as a result of their sight loss. When asked what support helped them overcome feelings of loneliness, participants most frequently referred to support from our services. While we are still providing services to young people we support, a range of services for young people with visual impairment will have been impacted by Coronavirus, which means it is essential further measures are taken to ensure they are supported to cope with a situation which increases their risk of isolation. (2)

References:

1. [Royal Blind statement on Pupil Census figures](#)
2. [Royal Blind report "Social Connections and Sight Loss."](#)

For further information contact Richard Baker, Policy Manager for Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded