

Royal Blind submission - Attainment of Pupils with a Sensory Impairment

Visit to the Royal Blind School by members of the Education and Skills Committee on 12 December 2018

1. Royal Blind and the Royal Blind School look forward to welcoming members of the Education and Skills Committee to visit the school on December 12. We believe this will be an opportunity for members to consider developments in support for pupils with vision impairment since its predecessor committee produced its report on Attainment of Pupils with a Sensory Impairment in 2015, and also since the Scottish Government produced a Workplan in March to respond to the recommendations in the report.

2. The Royal Blind School is particularly pleased to welcome members of the Committee at a time when it has received an 'Excellent' rating in its Education Scotland inspection¹ for learning, teaching and assessment, with the inspection report finding:

"The Royal Blind School places great emphasis on supporting young people to move onto positive, sustained destinations. They provide high quality, equitable targeted support, which enables many young people to successfully transition home, back to mainstream school or into further training or employment."

3. Since the Committee undertook its inquiry into support for pupils with sensory impairment, the Presumption of Mainstreaming has continued to have a major influence on the support provided by the school. We remain concerned that the presumption is not being adequately resourced and is not meeting the needs of all pupils with vision impairment. We have welcomed the proposed new guidance to local authorities on the operation of the policy and submitted a response to the consultation on the draft guidance in February². The school now supports a number of pupils who not only have vision impairment but a number of other additional complex needs.

The school has also continued to develop the work of its Learning Hub providing support and learning opportunities for staff supporting pupils with vision impairment in mainstream schools – although there are challenges for staff in schools to secure the time to undertake this training. In addition the school has established a partnership with East Lothian Council to deliver the vision impairment service in the local authority's schools (ELVIS). This outreach collaboration has been a great success and we hope to deliver similar partnerships with other local authorities.

¹ <https://education.gov.scot/inspection-reports/edinburgh-city/5571146>

² www.royalblind.org/sites/www.royalblind.org/files/PDF/MAINSTREAMING%20RBFINAL_3.pdf

4. We wish to highlight that Scottish Government Pupil Census figures show that there is a need to support an increasing number of pupils with vision impairment in Scotland's education system. The Scottish Government's Pupil Census for 2017 shows there were 4,331 pupils with vision impairment. This is more than double that recorded in the Pupil Census in 2010, which showed in that year there were 2,005 vision impaired pupils.³

5. The 2015 report, the Committee found that "Scottish Government data show that, on average, school leavers with a visual or hearing impairment achieve fewer qualifications at school than those who do not have any additional support needs," and recommended data collection is improved in this area. We believe collection of this data still needs to improve to provide an accurate view of the level of need across Scotland. Recent figures show that pupils with vision impairment still receive fewer qualifications. The figures are now presented in a different format in Attainment and Leavers Destinations Data published by the Scottish Government. However, our analysis indicates that there has been an increase in the number of pupils with visual impairment with no NQ qualifications at Level 2 or better from 12.3% to 17.8%, although there has also been an increase in the numbers with one or more qualification at SCQF Level 7 from 7.9% to 10.1%.⁴

6. Royal Blind has launched the campaign "Our Vision For Equal Education"⁵ because we remain concerned that there is an attainment gap for pupils with vision impairment. Beyond the data we do have on school qualifications, the most recent figures on leaver destinations shows that 88.8% of pupils with vision impairment progressed to positive destinations in 2016/17, compared to 85.2% in 2015/16. However, there remains an attainment gap compared to pupils without additional support needs, 94.9% of whom move on to positive destinations. There has also been a reduction in the number of blind and partially sighted pupils progressing to Further Education. In 2015/16 35.9% of pupils with vision impairment progressed to Further Education, but for 2016/17 this number fell to 32.2%.⁶

7. Another recommendation in the 2015 report was that there should be more data on where people with sensory impairments go after further and higher education, and the Scottish Funding Council has started to publish this data as a result. The Council's publication on College Leaver Data published in October indicates that 94.1% of people with vision impairment progressed to positive destinations, close to the national average of 95%, but in terms of progressing to work the figure was only 11.3% compared to a national figure of 20%. This indicates that once, they have left the education system, there remains a very substantial employment gap for people with vision impairment.

³ <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/dspuppcensus>

⁴ <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/leavedestla/follleavedestat>

⁵ <https://www.royalblind.org/campaigns/our-vision-for-equal-education>

⁶ <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/06/6856>

8. If this attainment gap for young people with vision impairment is to be addressed, there requires to be progress on a number of the areas highlighted in the 2015 report, including action to secure the provision of enough specialist teachers for a growing number of pupils with vision impairment; ensuring that where pupils with vision impairment are educated in mainstream schools there are adequate resources to support them; better provision of habilitation skills; school facilities and equipment which are accessible for blind and partially sighted pupils; and decisions on placements in specialist provision based clearly on providing the best educational environment for the pupil and not solely on budget considerations.

9. The number of Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (QTVIs) was a central consideration of the predecessor Committee. One of the recommendations in the report was that “work should be carried out to ascertain whether there are sufficient numbers of qualified teachers of the deaf and visually impaired.” We believe that further work is required in this area and that there is a lack of clarity around this data. The Scottish Government’s Workplan made reference to the report commissioned from Professor John Ravenscroft which was published earlier this year. This report showed that there were 65 specialist QTVIs for 4,177 pupils compared to a similar report in 2012, which showed that there was a total of 88 specialist VI teachers for 2,019 pupils – although only 27 local authorities responded to that research. It should be noted that the most recent report is now two years old, and refers to headcount figures, whereas the Scottish Government calculates figures by FTE. The Teachers in Scotland 2017 statistical publication showed there 56 were FTE teachers employed by local authorities with a main subject of visual impairment, compared to 58 reported by the Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland’s Languages to the Committee in 2015.⁷

We are also concerned that in a number of education authorities support for vision impairment is being delivered by staff who do not have the relevant qualifications. We know of at least two local authorities who provide vision impairment support services where the number of staff actually qualified in vision impairment is negligible. We note that the Workplan states that workforce planning to provide ASL teachers is “a matter for individual local authorities.” However, Royal Blind believes that to ensure an increasing number of pupils with vision impairment have adequate appropriate access to specialist teaching, the Scottish Government and local authorities should work together to produce a national Action Plan to ensure we have the QTVIs our education system needs.

As up to 80% of our learning is through our vision, effective learning approaches for vision impaired pupils must involve knowledge of delivering and designing a curriculum. This is why specialist support from a QTVI is required. In a mainstream school pupils may only receive tuition in braille (reading and writing) for one or two hours a week from a QTVI. The 2015 report also highlighted the lack of financial incentives for teachers to train as QTVIs.

⁷ The reports by the Scottish Sensory Centre can be found at <http://www.ssc.education.ed.ac.uk/research/papers.html>

10. Royal Blind supports mainstreaming where that is best for the individual pupil. However, too often we hear of blind and partially sighted pupils not having access to the resources they need. This includes pupils being told they cannot participate in subjects because the staff do not have the skills to teach them or the staff ratios required to facilitate their learning are inadequate. For example, one pupil was advised not to take Maths and Science as Highers at a mainstream school, saying he was told the subject was 'too visual' due to the amount of graphs involved in the subjects. Far from pupils with vision impairment benefitting from inclusion in this context, too many feel excluded, lonely and isolated.

It is unreasonable for teachers to be asked to undertake the education of blind and partially sighted children without access to the specialist support and equipment they need. It is also important that all staff working with pupils with vision impairment are aware of the needs of blind and partially sighted pupils. That is why we are calling for a new SQA training qualification in vision impairment for education support staff and others, including those providing care and therapy.

We recognise the Committee has heard the case from the Scottish Children's Services Coalition for 'a dedicated Scottish Government ASN Attainment Fund for local authorities, highly targeted for maximum benefit and additional to current funding.' Such a measure would also be beneficial for pupils with vision impairment.

11. The 2015 report recommended that 'Education Scotland and local authorities should place a greater emphasis on pupils with a visual impairment in mainstream schools being able to access habilitation training.' This is another area in which Royal Blind believes there remains a need to make progress. In the last academic year one pupil attended The Royal Blind School for a year before going on to University just to attain these vital independent living skills which were not provided throughout his mainstream experience. It remains the case today that pupils with vision impairment in Scotland require better access to habilitation training as part of the curriculum, starting in nursery and continuing throughout their education.

12. Among the findings of the 2015 report was "We consider it unacceptable that basic technological failures mean some pupils are not able to access learning materials or make use of their assistive technologies." SAVIE (the Scottish Association of Visual Impairment Education) has recently undertaken to update its research on the "Eye Right" guidance for provision of assistive technology for pupils with vision impairment. SAVIE has found that there remains a varied experience across education authorities in improving access to assistive technology for pupils. While some QTVIs have reported increased use of GLOW and improved accessibility for mobiles and laptops, others continue to report long waits for equipment and problems accessing school wi-fi networks. In addition to access to technology, too often we find the access requirements of blind and partially sighted pupils are still not given sufficient consideration with regard to school buildings, even in the design of new school infrastructure, in relation to issues such as lighting and the location of classrooms.

The predecessor Committee also asked the Scottish Government to confirm “any work on standardised assessments will take account of the needs of sensory-impaired pupils.” We understand that Braille copies are not actually being produced for Scottish National Standardised Assessments. The nature of the tests means that they adapt as they progress depending on the pupil’s answers. If pupils need a Braille copy then the test would have to stop while its next stage test was transcribed into Braille manually. It is very welcome that the tests are available to pupils through text to speech software, but they are also asked to describe what is on the screen, which of course they cannot see. We believe further consideration needs to be given to the accessibility of these tests for pupils with vision impairment.

13. Royal Blind welcomes the new provisions of the Education (Scotland) Act 2016 which have come into force to give children and young people over 12 the opportunity to have a say in the support they should receive at school. However, too often in the current system the needs of the child are lost in spending decisions. Sometimes decisions on provision are determined by the individual approach of the local authority rather than by the wishes of pupils, parents or even an objective assessment of what would be most beneficial for the pupils’ education.

There has been a significant increase in placing requests to the Additional Support Needs Tribunal, with 67 Placing requests considered in 2017/18 compared with 33 for 2013/14. Tribunals on placements are challenging experiences for pupils and parents. In some instances there have been decisions to continue a child’s education in a mainstream school even where parents and other professionals have believed that the pupil would be better served by a placement in the Royal Blind School. Royal Blind believes this situation needs to change if the expectations in this guidance are going to be implemented effectively. We know of teachers who have said that they are not allowed to inform parents of the availability of out of authority placements to the Royal Blind School because the position of the local authority is that all pupils can be educated to an adequate level within their education authority area. Such a policy can override the needs of the child and even cost efficiency. Sometimes it can be as cost effective to send a child to an out of authority placement but because of an internal policy or view, the placement may not be progressed.

14. The 2015 report also highlighted good practice in some schools and called on Education Scotland “to provide evidence to us by the end of 2015 on how it shares such good practice and how it is ensuring similarly effective services are available across Scotland.” Royal Blind agrees Education Scotland has an important role to play in promoting good practice in sensory impairment education and ensuring all schools work to deliver the support pupils with vision impairment require. For these reasons, and also because progress remains essential in so many of the areas identified in the 2015 Report, we believe it would be beneficial for Education Scotland to consider undertaking thematic inspection of sensory impairment education and potentially of additional support for learning more broadly.