

## **Visit to the Royal Blind School**

### **Background**

A delegation of members visited the Royal Blind School in Edinburgh on 12 December 2018. Members present were Clare Adamson (Convener), Johann Lamont (Deputy Convener), Dr Alasdair Allan, Gordon MacDonald, Oliver Mundell.

The Royal Blind School provides places at the school including residential places. 29 children currently study at the school but it has a maximum capacity of 45, although the number of children the School can take is dependent on the extent to which children have multiple requirements.

The Headteacher, Elaine Brackenridge, hosted the visit and the Committee thanks Elaine and all the School staff and children and young people that shared their time and experience with members during the visit. The morning consisted of two meetings and a tour of the building meeting children and staff. This note is drafted around themes discussed during the visit as opposed to in chronological order.

### **Presumption to mainstream**

The Headteacher set out the challenges in providing appropriate support for children with complex needs and suggested that the law should be changed to shift the current extent of the presumption towards mainstream education. She felt that parents who have pushed for their child to come to the School often reflect that mainstream education has not been an inclusive socialising experience and children can begin at the school with very little confidence, willingness to engage or practical life skills. She said her biggest concern was perhaps that children in mainstream education who are perhaps not receiving the support that could help them fulfil their potential are not making a fuss about it.

### **Peripatetic**

It also provides Elvis (East Lothian Visual Impairment Service) which involves RBS staff going to schools in East Lothian to provide support and roll-out training to teachers and other school staff, and provide peripatetic support services. This is a unique service tendered for by the Council which the School hopes to replicate in other areas. The School would like to see a national hub model adopted with peripatetic support available to all local authorities, similar to the approach taken in New Zealand. The School has had initial discussions with other local authorities on providing support, such as Argyll and Bute and Orkney.

### **Financial considerations**

Another member of staff suggested that there are different approaches taken between local authorities, and that increasingly councils are openly stating,

that certain decisions are based on budgetary constraints. Teaching staff have told the School that in certain council areas school staff have been told that it is a disciplinary matter if they mention to parents out of authority provision such as the School. They also suggested that Tribunal processes can be very demanding, long and emotional for families and that the process families are required to go through could be reviewed. A further point was that if a local authority agrees to fund a place at the School they can then refuse to pay transport costs and parents are then required to find money to pay for what can be long journeys to and from the School. One member asked about the cost difference between a child being placed at the School and being in a mainstream school. A member of staff suggested local authorities would suggest it is cost neutral, the School costs 20.5k a year as a minimum but this can be significantly higher depending on the needs of the individual child or young person.

### **Specialist training for mainstream school staff**

One of the members asked whether one issue might be that those taking decisions in schools are perhaps not trained to assess particular additional support needs. There was agreement from the staff present at the School on this point. It was also highlighted that because many teachers and support staff in mainstream schools have not received specialist training, they often need support from specialists. For example where a local authority refuses a child a placement at the School, the School often provides over the phone advice to the staff in the relevant mainstream school to help them support that child and can also provide written strategies/advice.

### **Employment and social inclusion**

One members asked about employment levels for the visually impaired. The response was that unemployment is around 75% and this is not reducing. The headteacher suggested that in addition to barriers to employment, young people can also feel socially isolated if they have not received an inclusive education in mainstream school. A member of staff suggested up to P4 visually impaired children and other children tend to integrate well but up towards P7 they find visually impaired children often become more socially isolated in mainstream schools. The headteacher suggested there are transition issues when young people move from school to adulthood and adult services / social work do not provide the same level of support that they have received in mainstream school or at the School.

### **Practical 'life skills'**

She suggested students can leave the School with excellent qualifications and can progress through university with the required life skills. She also highlighted the emphasis on children and young people attending the School for a sufficient period to give them more confidence and practical skills and then they can fare well in mainstream education. On that basis her preference is to receive children at an earlier stage to provide them with this confidence over a period of months or years. This is as opposed to a young person

arriving that have had hard experiences and the School needs to build trust with the child and often with the parents. In addition, where the School did not consider a place at the School was required for a child and mainstream school could provide support, the School has referred them back to the relevant local authority.

### **Braille**

The headteacher highlighted that very few teachers, outwith the School, are trained in Braille beyond knowing A to Z. Work is underway on the QTVI qualification as only A to Z is required at present and a higher standard is required in her view. The cost of different machines to aid reading (e.g. Perkins Brailier, BrailleNote Touch, Brailiant, text to speech software, video magnifiers) was discussed, and the increasing reliance on technology such as audio readers.

### **Regional Improvement Collaborative**

The Headteacher suggested Regional Improvement Collaboratives were an opportunity to consider some of the issues she has raised, although this is not formally part of their agenda.