

Good afternoon Peter,

I hope this email finds you and your family well.

I am writing to inform you about a paper we have drafted in response to COVID-19, entitled, 'Widening Inequalities for CYP in Education with Vision Impairment,' and hope you might disseminate the attached report among committee members. I hope members find it informative, highlighting the challenges of a small group of pupils with SEN who are often overlooked.

Angel Eyes NI (AENI), is a registered charity representing the voice of over 700 families of children and young people (CYP) with vision impairment, across the province. Vision impairment is a low incidence disability, and a discrete group under the SEN & disability banner.

We surveyed the parents/ carers within our VI community (with 116 respondents), in response to their communicating ongoing concerns regarding home-learning and educational support. COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities for this group, with 60% of families reporting they received inaccessible resources from teachers and schools during this period, and 62% reporting the need to adapt resources to meet the needs of their child. These are alarming figures, and certainly flag-up a group of CYP who will be 'left behind.'

Our vision is for all children and young people with a vision impairment to have equal access in education. Therefore, it is necessary we bring to light the distinct challenges experienced by our families and share these with committees engaged with safeguarding the rights of children and promoting opportunity. We hope you find the report informative and helpful in consideration of any future planning, policy and/or practice proposed by the EA or Department of Education, in respect to COVID-19 and provision of services for SEN.

Furthermore, I would like to draw your attention to a FOI request we made to the EA at the outset of 'Lockdown.' We asked about the budget allocation for the Vision Support Service; a service tasked with supporting pupils with VI in curriculum access, assistive technology, and capacity building with school staff. Unfortunately, we have been informed this information is not held by the EA. Therefore, we would question how the effectiveness of this service is measured? This too is included in the attached report.

Should you, or committee members, have any questions or comments please, do not hesitate to contact me directly.

Thank you for your support on this matter.

Kind regards,


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# Angel Eyes NI

## Covid-19: Widening Inequalities for Children & Young People with Vision Impairment in Education



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# Covid-19: Widening Inequalities for Children & Young People with Vision Impairment in Education

20th July 2020

## Executive Summary

Angel Eyes NI (AENI) has compiled this report to illustrate how the needs of blind and partially sighted children and young people in Mainstream and Special Schools are being met by their school, and the Education Authority's Sensory Support Service, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report captures some of the educational challenges experienced by children and young people with vision impairment and aims to highlight pertinent issues with the hope to promote redress, for the widening gaps in service and provision. AENI would like to thank all the families who have communicated their concerns and challenges with us, and to those who formally responded to our survey for the drafting of this report.

AENI acknowledges that this report comes at a time of uncertainty, when services have been faced with added pressures due to the pandemic, and the need to quickly find 'new ways of working.' However, it also comes at an opportune time with Special Educational Needs and Disability reform being drafted and implemented, and the Education Authority scrutinising its provision and services for children and young people with Special Educational Needs (as reflected in its recommendations and Improvement Action Plan).

The following research is compiled from the results of a survey of 116 parents/carers, all of whom have a visually impaired child in education, alongside other recent and relevant published reports, providing a full picture and account of the landscape in Northern Ireland.

The results clearly indicate a need for review of educational support for this community of children and young people. COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities for this group, with 60% of families reporting they received inaccessible resources from teachers and schools during this period, and 62% having to adapt resources, to meet the needs of their child.

Furthermore, it highlights a lack of information on SEN services being readily available by the Education Authority, despite recommendation from the Northern Ireland Audit Office Report into Special Education Needs Review (June 2017). At the time of compiling this report, the Education Authority reported it did not hold budget information pertaining to its SEN Support Service for children and young people with vision impairment.

Through collaboration and cultivating a culture of transparency, AENI is confident that systematic change and cost-effective solutions are achievable. Such redress will ensure equality of access to education and technology, for children and young people with vision impairment. This report details 8 recommendations that will help facilitate and realise this vision.



## Context:

Angel Eyes NI (AENI), is a registered charity supporting over 700 families of children and young people (CYP) with vision impairment across the province. Our vision is to ensure equal life opportunities for CYP with a vision impairment (VI), with a particular focus on equal access to education. AENI represents the voice of its service users through participation in many groups and forums, including All Party Working Groups for Vision Impairment, Disability and Children & Young People. We sit on the Children's Disability Strategic Alliance (CDSA) and education sub-group, VI Sector Forum, and engage with the Education Authority's (EA) Joint Consultative Forum. AENI is a collaborative and solution focused organisation, responsive to the needs of its service users. For example, we have developed an ongoing, accredited Level 4 Course for Classroom Assistants in partnership with Ulster University, to create a consistent roll-out of competent professionals, supporting pupils with vision impairment in both mainstream and special schools.

2019/20 Department of Education Census reports 2117 pupils registered as Blind/Partially Sighted, or as having a multi-sensory impairment. The majority of these pupils are in primary level education (69%). Since its inception in January 2015, AENI's, Education Advocacy service has supported over 250 families, more than a third of whom have highlighted inadequate 'in-school support' as a serious area of concern e.g. ineffective deployment of untrained Classroom Assistants and inadequate provision of accessible learning resources.

AENI recently submitted a Freedom of Information Request (FOI) to the Education Authority, to better understand the support provided to CYP with vision impairment and obtain more information on this discrete group of pupils with disability and Special Educational Needs (SEN).

## Rationale:

- NI Equality Commission (ECNI), 'COVID-19 and Education: Equality Considerations, Policy Position Paper,' 23 June 2020**

This recent report draws attention to the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the most vulnerable in our community. This especially includes children with Special Educational Needs, where pre-existing inequalities are further exacerbated.

The ECNI report notes the paucity of available data and recommends therefore gathering related information from elsewhere. It goes further, stipulating more collaborative approaches in order to identify and respond to barriers to education, and to develop and deliver solutions, involving the families and wider communities of key groups.

Additionally, the report recognises that the disruption in their formal education will have an especially detrimental impact on visually impaired children's development.



Home schooling inevitably limits access to specialist supports (including those provided within Special Schools) and cuts off social interaction.

The ECNI report (June 2020) highlights the key inequalities arising from this shift to home-learning. These are:

- **Lack of access to educational or curriculum support materials.**
- **Inadequate digital materials, either due to lack of IT equipment or broadband, or the accessibility standards of the materials themselves,**
- **Insufficient access to related support and equipment – in particular for those children with disabilities or SEN (Article 3.42, Pages 12 & 13)**

Research has shown the many positive benefits that technology can have on SEN pupil attainment. Assistive Technology and the acquisition of the skills and knowledge for its effective use, can be a 'game changer' for persons with a vision impairment, but especially for children in their vital, and irreplaceable, developmental years. Proficient use assists with curriculum access, mobility, and independence. Unfortunately, many pupils with vision impairment in NI schools do not have the appropriate technology and trained personal support to help them reach their educational potential. The report acknowledges the Minister of Education's confirmation of a scheme to loan digital services to those 'considered vulnerable' but notes that it does not include those children with SEN disabilities (Article 3.49, Page 14).

As a 'blended learning' approach now seems imminent for the new 2020-21 academic year, it is imperative that these shortcomings are addressed so as to ensure that children with a vision impairment can access the curriculum both at school and at home.

### **AENI Survey, June 2020:**

Angel Eyes NI surveyed parents within the VI community, in response to their consistent concerns regarding home-learning and educational support. 116 parents of children & young people (CYP) responded. Of these CYP 34% attend Special School, and 66% Mainstream. Most respondents' children are at primary level (69%).

- **Communication** – 79% of respondents have been in touch with their child's school. However, only 20% have been in communication with their child's Qualified Teacher for Vision Impairment.

Only 32% of pupils have received some form of online learning, with the majority having no face-2-face contact with their teacher or fellow pupils at all.

- **Resources** – 59% of respondents received learning resources electronically, 16% in paper format and a mere 19% both.

However, 60% report the resources are inaccessible and therefore unusable. 62% of respondents have had to adapt the resources for their children themselves.





Only 16% reported the help of the classroom assistant to adapt resources. This is an essential task for the CA. 57% reported the CA was not used to help and 27% do not know. Only 27% of respondents' children have access to specialist printed books Others have purchased online during lockdown.

Given these shocking results, AENI plans to conduct two further surveys to highlight other issues pertinent to mainstream and special education groups e.g. access to therapies.

### **Wider Context and Communication:**

The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) Report (June 2017) highlighted the increasing year on year expenditure by the Department of Education and EA on SEN support services and evaluated their effectiveness. In years 2015-16 the spend by the EA on SEN was £217 million (an increase of 30% from 2011/12). In recommendation 5 it stipulates that, 'the EA must ensure that SEN expenditure is reported consistently and that EA expenditure on all types of support for children with SEN can be easily identified and monitored, otherwise it cannot be controlled (Page 25, Article 3.6).'

AENI's Freedom of Information (FOI) Request to the EA aimed to gain clarity on how the Vision Support Service was funded. This service is tasked with supporting pupils with curriculum access, technology, resources, and capacity building with both mainstream and special school staff. Surprisingly, it appears that the EA does not hold this budget information and therefore cannot quantify the expenditure on its support for CYP with vision impairment in N Ireland. Furthermore, it is disappointing that information regarding training of school staff/capacity building, including classroom assistants, by the service is available only for the academic years 2018/19 (despite the NIAO Report highlighting an increasing spend on Classroom Assistants, with the total expenditure in 2015/16 being £55 million).

We at AENI would question how the effectiveness of the service is measured and evaluated, when such basic budget data, training records, and evaluation are not kept.

NICCY's recent 'Too Little, Too Late' Report (March 2020) found that stakeholders are 'unanimous in their concern about the quantity, quality and accessibility of support for children at all stages of the SEN process (Page 9)'. It recommends the EA conduct a 'systematic review of all supports and services for children with SEN', concentrating on accessibility and availability of services, the extent to which they are appropriately resourced, evaluated and founded on evidence based practice (Page 13, Recommendations 1a).' AENI's findings, from its family survey and FOI request only reinforces this conclusion.



## Conclusion:

It is apparent that pupils with vision impairment (as others with SEN) have been disproportionately impacted by COVID19.

There is great concern amongst parents about how this cohort of children can adequately access learning. They face the same challenges as their sighted peers under these trying times, but additionally, are largely unable to access learning materials provided by the schools. Thus, disability inequality is evident, and reasonable adjustments (as stipulated in Special Education Needs & Disability Order, 2005) are not being applied by schools to ensure inclusion, and equity of resources. Whilst we are aware the Education Authority (EA) issued a notice of 'best endeavours' as a response to COVID19, the adaptation of resources is the remit of staff still in employment and carrying out duties during this time.

Parents, who are already under great stress, are having to adapt materials sent by the school in order to make them accessible. This specialist task should be undertaken by the employed Classroom Assistant and Teacher. Additionally, Specialist Teachers have largely not communicated sufficiently with parents, to help advise and support on how to make learning accessible for their visually impaired child.

Social isolation is of great concern to all parents, especially those whose children have additional needs and are experiencing feelings of anxiety. With less than a third (32%) of respondents' children receiving any form of online instruction many have not had the comfort of seeing a teacher or receiving first-hand any reassurances or appropriate sympathy and support. This is compounded by pupils not having had the opportunity to socialise with their classmates via the available digital platforms.

Lastly, COVID19 has highlighted the issue of 'Technology Poverty' throughout the Province. Promisingly, the Minister of Education has earmarked funds to redress this problem. As there is an identified discrete number of children requiring this technology it is reasonable to expect they be prioritised by the Department of Education, EA, and schools to avail of the minister's initiative. Yet with only 27% of respondents' children having access to paper books, the evidence of reliance on electronic and digital books is striking and undeniable.

With 'blended learning' becoming the 'most likely' educational approach for September 2020 and the new academic year, it is pertinent the above inequalities are recognised fully, and appropriate steps taken to correct them. Many CYP have 'lost learning' experiences during the pandemic lockdown, and therefore a 'best practice' for resources provision must be established and implemented for the outset of the new academic year.





**Recommendations:**

1. School Staff must be responsible for making all modifications to learning resources, ensuring effective curriculum access both at school and at home (equality of learning for all)
2. School Staff must, when using technology in remote learning, ensure the learning is accessible for the pupil (e.g. through consideration of the technology, app used, and quality of broadband)
3. All CYP with VI must have access to appropriate assistive technology to support their learning
4. All CYP with VI must be supported by remote or school-based training on how to use their technological devices effectively
5. School Staff must be provided with proper remote or school-based training on how to use technology effectively to support learning of CYP with vision impairment
6. Communication between parents/ carers, school staff and Education Authority support services (Qualified Teachers of Visually Impaired) must be consistent, open, honest clear and respectful
7. All classroom assistants should be required to undergo the certified training provided by Ulster University
8. Appropriate data should be gathered by the relevant authorities to enable performance in all areas to be effectively monitored and evaluated

