



Draft Written Submission to the NI Assembly Committee for Education

Strategic Review of Current SEN Provision and the SEN Transformation Agenda

Submitted by: Angel Eyes NI

Date: November 2025

Angel Eyes NI is the leading charity supporting children and young people with vision impairment, and their families, across Northern Ireland. In 2016, we established our bespoke Education Advocacy Service, the only service of its kind in Northern Ireland, providing tailored, one-to-one support to help families navigate the SEN system, secure appropriate provision, and overcome barriers to inclusion. Drawing on specialist expertise in both vision impairment and education, our team works directly with parents, schools, and professionals to ensure that children receive the right support, in the right place, at the right time. Since its inception, the service has supported more than 500 families. However, despite ongoing efforts to transform the SEN system, persistent challenges remain, and too many children and young people with vision impairment continue to be failed by the current structures.

1. Key Issues

Through our work with families, young people and schools across Northern Ireland, Angel Eyes NI has identified **three key systemic challenges** within current SEN provision for children and young people with vision impairment (VI):



- **Inclusion and accessibility barriers**, including limited digital accessibility, inadequate adaptation of learning materials, and restricted access to after-school and extracurricular activities.
- **Inconsistent identification, assessment and statementing**, with delays that undermine early intervention and place significant strain on families.
- **Insufficient specialist workforce capacity**, particularly the shortage of Qualified Teachers of the Visually Impaired (QTVIs), the lack of habilitation provision, and limited training for teachers and specialist classroom assistants.

While the SEN Reform Agenda Delivery Plan expresses positive ambitions, it does not yet address the *specialist, detailed and ongoing requirements* of sensory impairment. It also fails to resolve the long-standing deficiencies within the Vision Support Service or the systemic pressures experienced by schools and families.

To address these gaps, we propose the following:

- Ensuring that the “**Right Support, Right People, Right Time, Right Place**” framework explicitly incorporates the needs of learners with vision impairment.
- Introducing **timely, alternative pathways for identification and provision** for children with *stand-alone* vision impairment who do not require a full statutory assessment. These learners should instead be allocated appropriately trained adult support, such as a skilled technician, to adapt resources, support technology use, and provide early intervention.



- **Strengthening workforce knowledge and skills** through mandatory, high-quality training for all school staff, building on the successful Team-Training model piloted by Angel Eyes NI.
- Ensuring the **routine use of technology assessments** and the provision of appropriate assistive technology, accompanied by training for both staff and pupils.
- Commissioning a **comprehensive review** of the Education Authority's Vision Support Service to evaluate practice, impact, resourcing and value for money.

These actions would provide a coherent and evidence-based foundation for improving outcomes for children and young people with vision impairment within Northern Ireland's SEN system.

1. Context:

Children and young people with vision impairment (VI) form a low-incidence group within Northern Ireland's Special Educational Needs system. This cohort of children and young people require consistently applied reasonable adjustments and assistive technology to access the curriculum, participate fully in wider school life, develop independence, and transition successfully into further education, employment and adulthood.

The most recent data from the RNIB 2024 Freedom of Information review shows that 883 children and young people are currently on the Education Authority (EA) Vision Support Service caseload, an increase from 756 in 2022/23 and 867 in 2023/24. An additional 406 children are



known to the service but receiving no direct support, and 40 children attend Jordanstown School.

This expanding population is supported by a specialist workforce under significant and sustained pressure. The EA employs 8.6 full-time equivalent QTVIs and one QTMSI, meaning each QTVI supports an average of around 60 pupils, while the two QTVIs in the Jordanstown Outreach Service carry caseloads of 154 pupils each. These caseloads exceed recommended levels and contribute to inconsistent provision across regions (RNIB, 2024).

The number of children requiring the highest-level specialist input also remains substantial. There are 16 braille users (or expected braille learners) in NI schools, each requiring intensive, regular, specialist teaching, AT instruction, and tactile literacy support. Yet mandatory braille training is only required for classroom assistants, not teachers, and there is no systematic braille progression monitoring across the system.

Of the 883 children and young people currently receiving specialist vision support in Northern Ireland, 75% now have a Statement of Special Educational Needs, a significant increase of nine percentage points since 2023/24 and seven percentage points the year before. This steady rise in the proportion of VI learners requiring statements reflects both the growing complexity of need and the increasing pressure on specialist services to meet statutory provision.

Whilst the number of CYP with VI is small within the SEN framework, it is also believed that many more children will have an undiagnosed or unreported vision difficulty. It is estimated that children with learning



disability are 28 times more likely to have visual problems compared to their typically developing peers ((Ulster University, n.d.).

2. Evidence: Challenges within the Current SEN System

Inclusion, Accessibility and School Experience – The Challenge

There remains a widespread lack of awareness and understanding across Northern Ireland's schools about how vision impairment affects learning, participation, and curriculum access. More than one third of the families engaging with the Angel Eyes NI Education Advocacy Service do so due to concerns about the quality and consistency of in-school support. The most common issues include:

- **Inaccessible learning materials**

Pupils, particularly at post-primary, frequently receive poorly photocopied A5 mixed-source booklets that are not adapted or available in digital format. Teachers often report they cannot locate editable originals and may be reluctant to retype resources, despite duties under SENDO to provide accessible materials.

- **Limited digital accessibility and AT skills**

Despite some pupils having access to iPads or laptops, school staff frequently lack the skills needed to use these tools effectively. This was confirmed by 2025 training data, which found that 58% of participants rated their assistive technology knowledge as poor or very poor before training, and 58% had a poor understanding of how to adapt materials. As a result, devices remain unused in school bags or are used



inappropriately (e.g., photographing the whiteboard instead of accessing adapted digital content).

- Exclusion from wider school life

Children and young people with VI are often discouraged or excluded from practical subjects, trips, extracurricular activities and enrichment opportunities due to perceived risk or insufficient staff training.

Collectively, these issues mean that children with vision impairment are routinely treated less favourably than their peers—not because of their impairment, but because staff lack the required training and confidence. Although the EA Vision Support Service provides specialist guidance, its ability to deliver training at scale is severely constrained by high caseloads and limited capacity.

The Impact – Why These Challenges Matter

The consequences of inadequate support extend beyond school and into adulthood. Independence, access to learning, and future employability are closely tied to a young person's ability to use technology and adapted resources effectively.

Current evidence shows that:

- Only around one quarter of adults with vision impairment are in paid employment.
- 38% of young people with VI are NEET, compared with 12% of their sighted peers (RNIB, 2018).



These outcomes are not inevitable. They reflect the cumulative impact of inadequate early intervention, inaccessible curriculum materials, and the absence of structured assistive technology training.

Angel Eyes NI's 2025 training evaluation further highlights the scale of unmet need:

- 75% of NI participants had never received any training in vision impairment before attending.
- 46% rated their pre-training confidence as poor or very poor.
- 58% rated their AT knowledge as poor or very poor.
- 58% had a poor understanding of adapting materials.

Yet the training also demonstrated what is possible when staff receive appropriate support:

- 100% of participants reported increased understanding of vision impairment.
- 100% reported improved confidence in creating accessible learning environments.
- 100% improved their understanding of how to use assistive technology effectively.
- 95% described the improvement in adapting materials as "significant."

This clearly shows that the barriers facing pupils with VI are not fixed, but training-related and solvable.



The Solution – Scalable, Cost-Effective and Evidence-Based

To address these systemic gaps, Angel Eyes NI, through various funding streams, designed and delivered targeted training across Northern Ireland. Pre-training evaluations consistently show that around 70% of attendees have never received any previous training, despite supporting pupils with VI daily. This is consistently evident in all pilot training schemes the charity undertakes.

The latest 2025 training programme provides clear evidence that a structured, whole-school approach is both impactful and scalable:

- 100% of participants agreed that training delivered across the school team—teachers, SENCOs/SETs, and assistants—would be highly beneficial.
- 96% believed their learning would also positively impact other pupils in their class.
- A “one-year-on” follow-up of 2024 participants showed 100% were still applying their learning, and 100% had disseminated what they learned to colleagues, demonstrating sustainable impact and capacity building.

In addition, we advocate for:

- Early and comprehensive ICT assessments for every child with VI.
- Assistive technology provision based on functional vision, the individual holistic needs, and the environment, rather than narrow eligibility criteria.



- A province-wide, mandatory training programme for school staff supporting learners with VI.

Angel Eyes NI's training model, co-developed with professionals, lived-experience experts, and educational specialists, offers a cost-effective, scalable, and evidence-based mechanism to ensure staff have the right skills, and children receive the right support, at the right time.

3.2 Identification, Assessment and Statementing - The Challenge

The second most frequent issue raised through the Angel Eyes NI Education Advocacy Service concerns the statutory assessment framework and associated processes. Families routinely experience significant barriers when seeking statutory assessment for their child with vision impairment (VI):

- **Over 95% of requests for statutory assessment are declined** in the first instance, requiring parents to enter the appeals process.
- Angel Eyes NI has supported families through appeals and the preparation of Case Statements, and **100% of cases over the past three years have been conceded by the Education Authority.**
- This cycle represents a costly and inefficient use of resources, financially for the EA and emotionally for families.

Approximately 50% of children and young people with vision impairment have additional special educational needs (RNIB, 2018). These children



require timely identification, holistic assessment, and early intervention. However, for children with vision impairment as their only diagnosis, subjecting them to lengthy and costly assessment processes, which are highly likely to be declined initially, does not represent an effective or proportionate use of limited resources.

Compounding this, statutory documentation often fails to capture visual need accurately. Research has shown a persistent pattern of under-identification of vision impairment in SEN statements. In a study of 104 pupils in special schools, 10.6% met the WHO criteria for visual impairment, yet only five had this recorded in their SEN or EHCP documentation (Little, Saunders and McClelland, 2018).

The Impact

When vision impairment is not fully recognised or accurately described within statutory processes, the consequences for the child are significant:

- Up to **80% of learning is accessed through vision**, meaning even relatively mild impairment can affect mobility, communication, literacy, social development, and independence.
- Without accurate identification and recording of visual need, children are denied essential supports such as
 - assistive technology assessment and training,
 - orientation and mobility training,
 - habilitation,



- curriculum and environmental adaptations, and
- teaching of skills within the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC).
- The statutory appeals process creates unnecessary administrative burden, financial cost, and emotional strain for families, eroding confidence in the SEN system.
- Delays in receiving appropriate support further widen educational inequalities and hinder long-term independence.

This misalignment between children's needs and the statutory process increases reliance on Statements of SEN as the only reliable route to secure provision, even when a statement may not be necessary for a child with isolated vision impairment.

The Solution

A more effective, proportionate, and child-centred approach is required. Angel Eyes NI advocates for the following:

1. Early identification and proactive planning

Most children with vision impairment are known to eye health professionals prior to school entry. Through early collaboration between Health and Education, schools can be prepared in advance with the necessary adult support in place from day one.



2. Appropriate support without unnecessary statutory processes

For children with vision impairment and no additional learning needs, early planning, not statutory assessment, should be the default route to securing:

- adapted materials,
- environmental adjustments,
- trained classroom support,
- access to assistive technology, and
- development of independence skills.

3. Accurate and detailed Statements where required

Where a Statement of SEN is necessary, it must:

- clearly describe the child's diagnosis and functional vision in *Part 2*;
- specify and quantify provision in *Part 3*;
- include QTVI recommendations relating to curriculum access, AT, environmental adjustments, orientation and mobility, habilitation, and the Curriculum Framework for Vision Impairment (CFVI).

This ensures legal clarity, accountability, and consistency of provision.

4. Reducing administrative burden and restoring family confidence

A streamlined, early-intervention model, supported by evidence-based staff training, would reduce unnecessary appeals, direct funding to frontline support, and rebuild parental confidence in the system. Families



would no longer feel that a Statement is the only mechanism to secure appropriate support.

3.3 Access to Specialist Support - Challenges

1. Lack of Review and Transparency Within the Sensory Support Service

The EA's Sensory Support Service sits outside the newly formed local Impact Teams created under the SEND Transformation Programme. While this acknowledges that vision impairment is a lifelong condition not suited to short-term interventions, it has also resulted in a missed opportunity to review the service's effectiveness, including:

- staffing levels and workforce capacity;
- resourcing and cost-effectiveness;
- consistency and quality of support provided to schools;
- training delivered to staff;
- measurable outcomes for pupils and families.

There is currently no publicly available data on:

- the professional competencies of specialist teachers;
- their ongoing professional development;
- the scope or frequency of the support they deliver;
- outcomes for children and young people with VI;
- whether an Outcomes-Based Accountability (OBA) model is in use.



2. High Caseloads and Narrow Eligibility Criteria

The service is under significant pressure:

- individual QTVIs carry high caseloads;
- eligibility is determined largely by visual acuity and visual field measurements, rather than a full assessment of functional vision, environmental access, or the child's holistic needs.

This results in inconsistent provision and delays in accessing specialist advice.

3. Inconsistent and Insufficient Habilitation Support

Habilitation remains critically underdeveloped and uneven across Northern Ireland.

- Only 1% of pupils on the EA caseload received habilitation support in 2024 (down from 2% the previous year).
- Provision is spot-purchased, fragmented between Health and Education.
- Jordanstown School reports 43% of pupils receiving or awaiting habilitation, highlighting significant inequity between mainstream and specialist settings.

4. Limited Staff Training and Inappropriate In-School Support



Angel Eyes NI's Education Advocacy Service frequently supports families whose children are receiving inappropriate or ineffective support in school. This includes strategies such as:

- reliance on oversized A3 photocopies in place of meaningful accessibility;
- lack of adapted materials;
- inconsistent use of assistive technology due to staff uncertainty.

Pilot training delivered by Angel Eyes NI consistently shows that staff have limited prior training in VI-specific techniques, assistive technology, and accessibility strategies.

Impact

1. Reduced Quality and Consistency of Support

High caseloads, narrow eligibility criteria and lack of capacity prevent timely interventions. Without a transparent review or measurable outcomes framework, families experience variable and unpredictable levels of support.

2. Delayed Development of Essential Skills

Insufficient habilitation provision delays independence, impacting mobility, safe travel, confidence and full participation in school life.

3. Ineffective Classroom Practices

Inadequate staff training leads to recurring inappropriate strategies (e.g., A3 enlargements), inaccessible materials, and underuse of assistive



technology. These practices restrict curriculum access, engagement and academic progress.

4. Wider System Strain and Inequity

While children in specialist settings may access a broader range of support, many in mainstream schools do not, reinforcing inequity and creating a postcode lottery.

5. Long-Term Consequences for Independence and Outcomes

Without early, specialist support, pupils with VI face barriers to independence, learning and progression, contributing to poorer educational outcomes and long-term inequalities.

Solutions

1. Establish Assistive Technology Specialists within the Vision Support Service

Create dedicated AT Specialist posts to:

- conduct early ICT/functional vision assessments;
- prescribe appropriate assistive technology;
- train teachers, SENCOs, SETs and classroom assistants;
- support device set-up, troubleshooting and ongoing skill development;
- build a consistent, NI-wide approach to digital accessibility.

This reduces pressure on QTVIs and improves early intervention.



2. Implement a Comprehensive, Mandatory Training Programme

Building on evidence from Angel Eyes NI's 2025 training evaluation—where 100% of staff improved confidence, AT knowledge and understanding of adapting materials—a province-wide training model should be introduced to:

- equip all school staff with core VI inclusion skills;
- ensure strategies are sustained year-on-year (as evidenced by the One-Year-On Survey);
- improve access not only for VI pupils but for other learners with diverse SEN profiles.

3. Introduce a System-Wide Review and Outcomes Framework

- Conduct a full review of the Sensory Support Service, including staffing, competencies, cost-effectiveness and impact.
- Implement an Outcomes-Based Accountability (OBA) model to evaluate and monitor service delivery.
- Ensure eligibility criteria reflect functional vision assessment and holistic need, not visual acuity alone.

4. Reform Habilitation Provision

- Establish a dedicated habilitation funding stream.



- Create a single, coordinated commissioning model across Health and Education.
- Ensure equitable access across all regions and sectors.
- Embed habilitation goals within PLPs and CFVI implementation.

4. Conclusion

Children and young people with vision impairment are a small cohort within the SEN system, but their needs are complex, specialist and lifelong. The evidence presented in this submission demonstrates that, despite the intentions of the SEN Reform Agenda, too many of these children continue to be excluded from full participation in education because support is late, inconsistent, or dependent on how knowledgeable and resourced an individual school happens to be. Families are required to fight for basic adjustments; QTVIs and habilitation specialists are working under intense pressure; and statutory processes and services are not yet configured to recognise and respond to functional vision and holistic need.

At the same time, the solutions are clear and achievable. With early identification and planning; accurate and detailed recording of visual needs in Statements where required; specialist assistive technology assessment and provision; a reformed and accountable Vision Support Service; equitable habilitation; and mandatory, evidence-based training for school staff, Northern Ireland can deliver on the promise of “the right support, from the right people, at the right time, in the right place” for children and young people with vision impairment. The outcomes from



Angel Eyes NI's training programmes show that when staff are equipped with the right knowledge and skills, barriers fall quickly and sustainably—for pupils with VI and for many others with additional needs.

We therefore urge the Committee to ensure that the Strategic Review and the SEN Transformation Agenda explicitly and robustly address the needs of children and young people with vision impairment: by reviewing and strengthening the Vision Support Service; embedding functional vision and habilitation within assessment and planning; resourcing specialist roles, particularly in assistive technology; and commissioning a province-wide training framework rooted in proven models such as the Angel Eyes NI team-training approach. These are targeted, cost-effective changes that would have a disproportionate positive impact on educational equity, life chances and long-term societal contribution.

Angel Eyes NI would welcome the opportunity to provide oral evidence to the Committee and to work in partnership with the Department, the Education Authority and other stakeholders to co-design practical, deliverable reforms. With focused action now, Northern Ireland can become a leader in inclusive education for children and young people with vision impairment and ensure that they are not simply accommodated but enabled to thrive.

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