

Response to the Education Committee's Call for Evidence: Inquiry on Special Educational Needs (SEN) Reform

The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) is the largest organisation representing people affected by sight loss in Northern Ireland and across the UK. We campaign for the rights of blind and partially sighted people in order to break down the barriers that still exist and amplify the voices of people living with sight loss to bring about real social change.

There are approximately 57,500 blind and partially sighted people in Northern Ireland. RNIB estimates that by 2030 there will be a 24 per cent increase in the number of people with sight loss here.

General Comments

We are keen to respond to this call for evidence, given its importance for children and young people with vision impairment.

As members of the Partnership for Inclusive Education, we endorse its recommendations, which are as follows:

- The development of an Integrated Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Workforce Strategy, co-produced with professional bodies and trade unions. This strategy should include clear targets and milestones for recruitment, retention, and professional development across all sectors of the workforce;
- The provision of adequate funding and resources for schools to release staff for training and professional development, including backfill costs where necessary;
- Clarification of the role of Classroom Assistants within the new support model, including employment protections, access to accredited training/CPD, and formal pathways for progression;
- The establishment and resourcing of area-based professional learning networks, enabling schools and practitioners to share

practice, engage in peer mentoring, and collaborate on inclusive solutions; and

- Enhanced cross-departmental and cross-sectoral collaboration through representation on relevant structures, shared action-plans and targets, and the pooling of resources to improve the wellbeing of children as per the statutory requirements of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, where appropriate.

We welcome the SEN Reform Agenda's emphasis on early intervention and on providing the right support, in the right place, at the right time. As vision impairment is a low-incidence, high-needs disability, how to go about providing this support is not well-understood.

For children and young people with a vision impairment, providing such support depends on proper resourcing and partnership working.

In terms of resourcing, the specialist SEND workforce needs to be future-proofed, as the number of Qualified Teachers of the Visually Impaired (QTVIs) approaching retirement has led to significant case load numbers, limiting QTVIs' ability to provide the appropriate amount of support. As Table 1 demonstrates, the Educational Authority (EA) Visual Impairment (VI) service and the Jordanstown Outreach Service's caseload has increased year-on-year.

Table 1. Caseload By Year

This table has four rows and two columns.

Academic year	Total number on active caseload of EA VI service and Jordanstown Outreach Service
2022/23	756
2023/24	867
2024/25	883

Source: RNIB [1].

In addition to resourcing, partnership working is the key to providing the right support, in the right place, and at the right time.

An example of best practice, and effective partnership working, has been the development of the [Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment](#) (CFVI) led by RNIB, and co-designed

through collaboration between QTVIs, voluntary and community organisations, and academic partners from the University of Birmingham. The framework has been endorsed by the Education Authority, with the Sensory Support Service actively involved in the project's reference group. The CFVI is also referenced within the Sensory Support Service's Graduated Response to the SEND Transformation Programme, and on the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments' (CCEA) website.

In the following sections we will outline why appropriate, and appropriately resourced, SEND provision is vital for children and young people with a vision impairment. We will conclude by detailing the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with a Vision Impairment (CFVI).

1.0 The Importance of SEN Provision for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment

1.1 Attainment Gap

There is a consistent and significant attainment gap between children and young people with a special educational need (SEN) or disability and their non-disabled, non-SEN peers across the UK: In 2023-24, the pupils with SEN in Northern Ireland who achieved 5 GCSEs A*-C (including English and Maths) in 2022 was 40.4 per cent versus 77.5 per cent for pupils with no SEN or disability [2].

1.2 Disability and NEET

A 2022 report from the University of Ulster found that a young disabled person is almost five times more likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) than a non-disabled person. Additionally, the NEET rate for disabled people in NI is among the highest across all UK regions [3]. Several factors can predispose a child or young people to becoming NEET, including: lower academic attainment levels; not being able to access education; limited opportunities for work experience; and a lack of tailored careers guidance [4].

1.3 Children with a Vision Impairment Receiving Habilitation Support

the proportion of children and young people receiving habilitation support funded by the Education Authority has dropped to one per cent. This suggests that a significant number of children and young people

with vision impairment are not receiving the specialist support they need to develop their independence and fully access education.

2.0 The Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with a Vision Impairment

The key to creating accessible learning and assessments for children and young people with vision impairment lies in the guidance provided in the [Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment](#) (CFVI). The CFVI has been endorsed by the Education Authority, and managers of their Sensory Support Service sit on the project's reference group. The CFVI is referenced in the Sensory Support Service's Graduated Response to the SEND Transformation Programme and on CCEA's [website](#). CCEA staff have also translated the CFVI into Irish.

The majority of children and young people with a vision impairment are educated in mainstream settings, they do require specialist support to both access their education and to acquire skills that promote independent learning, mobility, everyday living, and social communication.

A significant challenge, however, is that there has been no universally recognised specialist framework that outlines the right people, time, place and to deliver this specialist support. The lack of a shared framework has led to inconsistent support. In some cases, specialist equipment is not fully supported (e.g., accessibility features on a pupil's laptop not being supported by a school's IT system). In other cases, however, support is not being provided at all: RNIB's 2024 Freedom of Information Report revealed that the proportion of children and young people receiving habilitation support funded by the Education Authority has dropped to one per cent. The report goes on to state that this 'suggests that a significant number of children and young people with vision impairment are not receiving the specialist support they need to develop their independence and fully access education' [5]. This underscores the need for a specialist framework when planning, and resourcing, support for children and young people with vision impairment.

The Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI), the first of its kind in the UK, provides a consistent approach and language to the education of children and young people with vision impairment. Vision Impairment is a low-incidence disability,

but the level and complexity of specialism needed to support children and young people is high. A key principle of the framework is that support is available from suitably qualified professionals (e.g. qualified teachers for vision impairment and habilitation specialists) whilst also outlining how non-specialist teachers and assistants can best support children and young people. The framework further outlines how to provide the **right support** at the **right time** (e.g. teaching children how to access information v. teaching them to advocate for their access to learning in later years), and in the **right place** (e.g., mainstream settings, for most children and young people with vision impairment).

The framework's collaborative development — involving major UK organisations, professionals, and those with lived experience of sight loss — makes it a robust, evidence-based tool.

The CFVI does not ask teachers to rewrite their curricula and jettison good practice; rather it codifies existing good practice whilst providing guidance as to where, when, how and by whom this practice should be introduced. In codifying good practice, the CFVI facilitates parents and carers' involvement in their child's education. The CFVI also empowers educators and school leaders: as vision impairment is low-incidence disability that requires significant specialist support, the question of how to support visually impaired children and young people is not asked until the child materialises, and the standard answer is to simply assign a classroom assistant to the student. As noted during RNIB's meeting with Janis Scallon and Lorraine Brown from the Department of Education in October 2024, codification of good practice under the CFVI empowers educators – including those in further and higher educational settings – to respond knowledgeably and appropriately to a visually impaired child or young person's needs.

For further information please contact Mary Alice C. Clancy, RNIB Policy and Campaigns Officer at MaryAlice.Clancy@rnib.org.uk

1. RNIB (2025), 'Education provision for children and young people with vision impairment in Northern Ireland, 2024'. Available at: <
<https://www.rnib.org.uk/living-with-sight-loss/supporting-others/left-out-of-learning/freedom-of-information-reports/>>.

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2. Department for Education (2025), Qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2023/24', 29 May. Available at: < <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-leavers-202324>>.
 3. Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) (2022), 'Maximising potential: A review of labour market outcomes for people with disabilities in Northern Ireland'. Available at: < <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/pdf/2022/disability-and-the-labour-market/Disability-and-the-labour-market.pdf>>
 4. RNIB (2023), 'Unlocking education for all Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment in Northern Ireland'. Available at: < https://media.rnib.org.uk/documents/APDF-SV230105_CFVI_Project_Phase-NI-REPORT-v01.pdf>
 5. Research and Insight Team et al. (2025). 'Education provision for children and young people with vision impairment in Northern Ireland, 2024', RNIB.