



**A plain language summary of research and evidence relating to education for children and young people with vision impairment in the United Kingdom**

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## 1 Summary

This Insight provides an overview of current data and knowledge relating to education for children and young people (CYP) with vision impairment (V I) in the United Kingdom (UK). V I affects the way a child or young person experiences the world and is associated with reduced access to information and fewer opportunities for incidental learning. This can have significant developmental and educational implications. [Research](#) identifies a need for the right additional support to enable CYP with V I to effectively access their learning, achieve their full potential and develop key skills to live and work independently.

The majority of CYP with V I are educated in mainstream settings. However, V I among CYP is a low incidence, high needs disability, compared to some other more prevalent categories of special educational need and/or disability, which means that mainstream teachers and other professionals involved in education often have limited experience and understanding to draw upon to inform their practice.

CYP with V I need specific support and specialist teaching to access the curriculum and to also acquire social, independent living and mobility skills. Current barriers to curriculum access and learning identified in this report include: limited knowledge and expertise of mainstream teaching staff; no single statutory specialist curriculum for the UK; inaccessibility of learning environments and materials; and funding for, and provision of, specialist V I education services.

Sources of support, such as Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with V I (QTVI) are essential to many CYP, yet findings suggest that access to specialist support is often limited. This reflects a variation in service structures, practice and budgets across local authorities, with QTVIs under increasing pressure. The [attainment gap](#) between CYP with V I and their peers in England appears to reflect these challenges; at key stage 2 the gap is 28% and at key stage 4 the gap falls to 21%.

Several areas would benefit from further research, notably: the systematic evaluation of modified teaching strategies to inform inclusive practice; best practice guidance on the transition from primary to secondary education; and largescale qualitative studies to understand how students attending mainstream education experience their schooling.

## 2 About this report

### 2.1 About Insights

Insights are designed to aid understanding of issues relating to people with V I in the UK, and to inform and support decision-making processes by bridging gaps between research, government and charitable policy, service provision and public opinion. Insights are produced by [Thomas Pocklington Trust](#) and supported by the [Vision Partnership](#). Insights are aimed primarily at readers from within the sight loss sector, local authorities, the wider health and social care sectors and employment professionals but are also of relevance to others seeking facts, figures, and academic comment on V I and sight loss. This includes, but is not limited to policy makers, academia, the media, retailers, transport providers, and technology companies.

Insights review and interpret research and current data (where available) to set out brief, plain language summaries. This is the third Insight produced for the [V I Insight Hub](#), with upcoming Insights to cover a range of topics relating to V I, the experiences of those living with V I and sight loss, and the services and care provided to them. Insights will be updated to reflect ongoing knowledge development and policy changes to remain relevant.

These summaries are written for a lay audience and reference academic and grey (unpublished or non-commercial) literature. Searches have been conducted by reviewing electronic databases and references from relevant articles and reports, as well as websites provided by government and other appropriate organisations. Data has also been directly submitted to [Thomas Pocklington Trust](#) by stakeholders. [Contributions and comment](#) are welcome via the [V I Insight Hub](#), where the Insights are hosted.

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## 2.3 Language and abbreviations

### 2.3.1 Definitions

#### **Vision impairment:**

In these reports, vision impairment/visual impairment (V I) is used as an umbrella term, encompassing severe sight impaired (blindness) and sight impairment (partial sight), defined individually below. Where referenced documents use different categorisations of, for example, 'V I', 'blindness', or 'sight loss', we provide a description of how the authors have defined the term.

#### **Severe sight impairment or blindness:**

Generally, people who are severely sight-impaired/blind are:

- People whose eyesight is below 3/60 [Snellen](#)
- People who are 3/60 but below 6/60 Snellen (very contracted field of vision).

- People who are 6/60 Snellen or above (reduced field of vision especially if the reduction is in the lower part of the field).

The terms severely sight impaired, and blind may be used interchangeably. An individual may be formally certified as severely sight impaired with a [Certificate of Vision Impairment](#).

### **Sight impairment or partial sight:**

Generally, people who are sight-impaired are:

- People whose eyesight is 3/60 to 6/60 Snellen with a full field of vision
- People whose eyesight is up to 6/24 Snellen with a moderate reduction of field of vision or with a central part of vision that is cloudy or blurry
- People whose eyesight is 6/18, or better if a large part of their field of vision is missing or a lot of their peripheral vision is missing

Sight impairment will impact substantially on daily life and does not include impairments which are correctable (e.g., with glasses). An individual may be formally certified as sight impaired with a Certificate of Vision Impairment.

### **Child:**

In this report, a child means anyone not over the compulsory school age of 16.

### **Young Person:**

In this report, a young person means a person over the compulsory school age of 16, but under the age of 25.

### **Compulsory education:**

Education is compulsory for all children in [England, Wales and Scotland](#) between the ages of 6 and 16. In [Northern Ireland](#), compulsory education commences at the age of 4 until 16. Further and Higher Education is not compulsory.

### **Inclusive education:**

According to [Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) an inclusive education system is one that accommodates all students whatever their abilities or requirements, and

at all levels – pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational and life-long learning. Students with disabilities are taught with their peers in a mainstream classroom for most of the school day, and education environments that adapt the design and physical structures, teaching methods and curriculum as well as the culture, policy and practice of education environments so that they are accessible to all students without discrimination.

**Mainstream school:** These schools provide an inclusive environment and education for all children, whether or not they have special educational needs or disabilities. Mainstream schools must provide support for children with special educational needs and/or disability.

**Additional Learning Needs:** The [Additional Learning Needs Code](#) for Wales states a person has additional learning needs if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability (whether the learning difficulty or disability arises from a medical condition or otherwise) which calls for additional learning provision.

**Additional Support Needs:** In the context of [Scottish education legislation](#), this term applies to children or young people who, for whatever reason, require additional support, in the long or short term, in order to help them make the most of their school education and to be included fully in their learning. Children or young people may require additional support for a variety of reasons and may, for example, include those who have motor or sensory impairment.

**Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND):** A child or young person has special educational needs and disabilities if they have a learning difficulty and/or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her. SEND is the recognised term of reference in England and Northern of Ireland.

**Primary Special Educational Need:** This is the most prominent SEN a child has that affects their learning.

**Secondary Special Educational Need:** This is the second most prominent SEN a child has that affects their learning.

**Special education school:** These schools are resourced to provide education and support to children and young people with complex or multiple special educational needs and disabilities, which cannot be met in a mainstream setting.



**Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI):** [The CFVI](#) has been developed to support CYP with V I access an appropriate and equitable education. The framework to clarifies and defines the elements of specialist skill development, interventions and best practice support that are essential for CYP with V I and presents outcomes within 11 teaching areas. The model is rooted in the access to learning / learning to access model.

**Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC):** [The ECC](#) is a set of concepts and skills that are taught to students with V I to support their learning that often occurs incidentally with vision. It comprises of nine areas: compensatory or access skills, orientation and mobility skills and concepts, social interaction skills, use of technology and assistive technology, career education, independent living skills, recreational and leisure skills, self-determination skills, and sensory efficiency skills.

**Assistive technology:** According to the [World Health Organisation](#), an assistive technology is any product, especially produced or generally available, the primary purpose of which is to maintain or improve an individual's functioning and independence, and thereby promote their well-being. Assistive technology includes laptops, tablets, computers, Braille devices, magnifying equipment and speech software.

**Reasonable adjustment:** Under the [Equality Act \(2010\)](#), organisations in England, Scotland and Wales have a duty to make reasonable adjustments (or changes) to avoid putting people with disabilities at a substantial disadvantage compared to those who are not disabled. The duty is anticipatory, which means organisations must think in advance, and on an ongoing basis, about what disabled people with a range of impairments might reasonably need such as people who are blind or partially sighted. In Northern Ireland, the [Disability Discrimination Act \(1995\)](#) requires that organisations introduce reasonable adjustments in respect of persons who are disabled.

**Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (QTVI):** [QTVIs](#) are usually commissioned by the local authority to support schools and colleges in the local area. When a child or young person is first identified as having vision impairment, the QTVI will carry out an assessment and make recommendations on the support needed to access learning. QTVIs can provide teaching for specialist skills that CYP with VI need to be able to access the mainstream curriculum with as much independence as possible.

**Disabled Students' Allowance:** The [Disabled Students' Allowance \(DSA\)](#) covers the extra disability-related costs or expenses students have while studying which are over and above those provided as reasonable adjustments by the Higher Education provider. DSA support is split into 4 different areas of need: (1) specialist equipment; (2) non-medical help; (3) general; and (4) travel.

### 2.3.2 Abbreviations

$N$ =: The total number of people in a sample population (e.g., the total number of participants in a research study)

$n$ =: The number of people in a sub-sample (e.g., the number of people in one group within the total sample of participants in a research study)

ALN: Additional Learning Needs

ASN: Additional Support Needs

CYP: Children and young people

EHCP: Education, Health and Care Plan

DfE: Department for Education

FOI: Freedom on Information Request

FTE: Full time equivalent

IDP: Individual Development Plan

PLP: Personal Learning Plan

QTMSI: Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Multi-Sensory Impairment

QTVI: Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment

SEND: Special Educational Needs and Disability

SEN: Special Educational Need(s)

SENCO: Special Educational Needs and Disability Co-ordinator

V I: Vision impairment

## 2.4 Methods

A review was undertaken, between March and April 2024, of available UK evidence relating to CYP living with V I. Standard reviewing techniques such as searching electronic databases, hand searching of references from relevant articles and reports, and a review of websites from government and relevant organisations were used.

A comprehensive search of the Google Scholar database was conducted using a combination of the following keywords: visual/vision impairment, sight loss, blind/ness, education, school, children, young people, further/higher education, curriculum and inclusive practice. The search strategy was developed to identify peer-reviewed articles that focused on education settings, professionals, practice and policy in the context of CYP with V I in the UK. The focus of this report, and the academic and grey literature, is education provision in mainstream settings in the UK.

Stakeholders and charities within the sight loss sector were consulted and asked to provide relevant information, data, or reports that might not be publicly available for inclusion in the review process. The search for academic literature (i.e., peer-reviewed publications or published books or chapters) was limited to publication since 2018 and works relating to the UK. Given the limited research and data available on some topics of relevance, the report includes other data and information reported prior to 2018 and from international sources as follows: where no more recent data is available, where UK-equivalent information is unavailable, or where this data is felt to provide useful context to the report.

Each of the devolved nations has its own term of reference for the statutory system for meeting the additional needs of CYP. For England and Northern Ireland this is special educational needs (SEN), for Wales it is additional learning needs (ALN) and for Scotland it is additional support needs (ASN). Where the statutory system for meeting the additional needs of CYP is referenced in this report, it shall be cited as SEN/ALN/ASN in recognition of the different terms applicable to each of the devolved nations.

### 3 Introduction

Vision impairment (V I) is commonly known as a low-incidence and high needs disability, which means that most mainstream education professionals have limited opportunities to develop knowledge and experience of the specific needs of students with V I. Across the UK there are an estimated [41,000 CYP](#) aged 0-25 with a V I. The heterogeneity found within the population of children and young people (CYP) with V I means there is a wide spectrum of characteristics, abilities and needs.

The significant effect on child development and unique challenges to learning associated with V I [are well documented](#), with vulnerabilities in the areas of mobility and orientation, access to information, communication and independent living skills. The importance of addressing these through inclusive practice and individual adjustments is [widely recognised](#) in the literature. Indeed, the central tenet of inclusive education for CYP with V I is balancing inclusive practice with specialist skills-based interventions to ensure fair access to the curriculum and education system, while developing personal agency and increasing independence ([McLinden et al. 2016](#)).

According to the [UN Convention \(Article 24\) on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), inclusive education is a fundamental human right for every child with a disability, yet CYP with V I in the UK continue to experience barriers to curriculum access and inconsistent provision of specialist support. Accessing education and support for CYP with V I can be complex, with geographical inequalities in service structures and variation in educational offerings. Cuts in local authority budgets for V I education services, changes in additional needs funding and education policy have left the nature and quality of V I provision in the UK highly variable. This means that CYP with V I are consistently disadvantaged and at risk of poorer educational attainment, social development and future independent living outcomes, compared to their sighted peers.

[Research](#) highlights that the obstacles to development and learning associated with V I can be reduced, or removed, if appropriate teaching input is received in an inclusive learning environment and adjustments and specialist support are tailored to meet individual needs.

## 4 Understanding CYP with V I

### 4.1 CYP with V I population overview

The population of CYP with V I is numerically small and highly diverse in terms of severity of V I, abilities and needs. It has been estimated that two in every 1,000 (0.2 per cent) CYP up to the age of 25 in the UK have V I, of whom around 5 in every 10,000 are blind ([RNIB, 2023](#)). This is based on a visual acuity threshold of 6/18 and is likely to be an underestimate as it excludes those CYP with a mild V I and those who are undiagnosed. Data for 2022, published by [RNIB](#), estimates there are a total of 28,760 children aged 0-17 who are blind or partially sighted living in the UK. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the estimated prevalence of V I among CYP aged 0-17 in the UK in 2022.

Classification	Total number
Estimated number of children who are blind aged 0-17	7,170
Estimated number of children who are partially sighted aged 0-17	21,500
Estimated total number of children who are blind or partially sighted aged 0-17	28,760
Estimated number of children who are blind and partially sighted aged 0-17 and have additional disabilities	14,335

**Table 1:** Estimated figures of children aged 0-17 with vision impairment and additional disabilities in the UK in 2022. Source: [RNIB Sight Loss Data Tool](#) (2023).

The population of CYP with V I can be thought of as two distinct sub-populations: those with and those without additional needs, although there is considerable diversity within each of these two sub-groups. [Evidence](#) indicates that around half of children with a V I, in England, have an additional Special Educational Need and Disability (SEND),

some of which are complex, that has implications for learning and development. Consequently, educational and wellbeing outcomes are markedly different for CYP with V I as their sole disability compared to those with V I and additional needs.

Data published by the [Department for Education](#) (DfE) on CYP with V I in England, for the academic year 2022/23, identified 13,693 pupils in all education settings whose primary Special Education Need (SEN) was V I. A further 5,101 pupils whose secondary SEN was V I were identified, bringing the total V I pupil population to 18,794. This represents a 0.5% increase in the total population of pupils with V I from the [academic year 2021/22](#) (N = 18,691). An overview of the number of pupils with V I as their primary and secondary SEN, in different education settings in England (2022/23), is provided in Table 2.

<b>Education setting</b>	<b>No. of pupils with V I as primary SEN – academic year 2022/23</b>	<b>No. of pupils with V I as secondary SEN – academic year 2022/23</b>
State-funded nursery	47	22
State-funded primary school	6,602	1,297
State-funded secondary school	6,546	1,613
Non-maintained special school	200	59
State-funded alternative provision	20	14
State-funded special school	818	2,096

**Table 2:** The number of pupils with V I as primary and secondary SEN in education settings in England for the academic year 2022/23. Source: DfE, [Special educational needs in England statistics](#).

Over [1.5 million pupils](#) in England have SEN and both the number of pupils with an education, health and care plan (EHC plan) and the number of pupils with SEN support increased, 0.3% and 0.4% respectively in 2022. The number of pupils with V I in England receiving SEN support was 9,885 in 2021/22 and 9,913 in 2022/23 ([DfE, 2023](#)).

## 4.2 V I and its impact on child development

Good visual skills are required in child development when acquiring cognitive and functional skills. In 2019 the World Health Organisation (WHO) report on [blindness and visual impairment](#) highlighted the impact of V I on child development. It was observed that young children with early onset irreversible severe V I can experience delayed motor, language, emotional, social and cognitive development. Moreover, vision impairment affects the physical, psychological and social well-being of children and adolescents.

The development and refinement of perceptual and motor skills such as spatial orientation, co-ordination, balance and body awareness are dependent on good vision. In this way, if the input of information via the visual system is impaired then the response of the motor output to this information will also be impaired, leading to motor deficiencies and poor concentration ([Chokron and Dutton, 2016](#)).

Impaired vision affects the way that a child experiences and interacts with the world around them by providing fewer opportunities for incidental learning, notably through observation and imitation, and for exploring the environment. One of the fundamental impacts of V I on children's development is limited access to information and visually orientated concepts. Vision provides the sensory information individuals need for spatial awareness, incidental learning and social development. This ultimately facilitates access to education, social participation, academic success and future employment, as well as self-concept and self-esteem.

To this point, there is consensus both in the [literature](#) and the sight loss sector of the need for a national, UK specialist curriculum for V I education that addresses the development and learning needs associated with blindness and partial sight and reflects the distinctive skills required by learners with V I (curriculum access is discussed in detail in Section 6).

## 5 Legislative and policy context

The right of all CYP in the UK to quality education is recognised in statutory law, government policy and guidance. Consequently, local authorities have a legal duty to ensure that education is available for all children of compulsory age resident in their local area that is appropriate to age, ability and any SEN/ALN/ASN they may have, including V I.

<b>Statutory legislation</b>	<b>Year passed</b>	<b>Devolved nation(s) to which legislation applies</b>
Equality Act	2010	England, Scotland, Wales
Disability Discrimination Act	1995	Northern Ireland
Education Act	2011	England, Wales
Education Act	2014	Northern Ireland
Education (Additional Support for Learning) Act	2004	Scotland
Children and Families Act	2014	England
Special Educational Needs and Disability Act	2016	Northern Ireland

**Table 3:** Overview of legislation applicable in the four nations of the UK.

### 5.1 The right to access education: legislation

#### 5.1.1 Equality Act 2010 (England, Scotland, Wales)

Central to the removal of barriers to learning and participation for students with disabilities was the introduction of the [Equality Act 2010](#). The Act applies to England, Scotland and Wales and, in relation to education and disability, it places a duty on education providers to make anticipatory “reasonable adjustments” for disabled students so that they are not put at disadvantage when compared to their non-disabled peers.



Reasonable adjustments apply to admissions, environmental access, curriculum delivery, extra-curricular activities and examinations. The duty to make reasonable adjustments comprises the following three requirements ([Equality Act, 2010](#)):

- (1) Where a provision or practice puts a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage, compared with persons who are not disabled, the person or organisation on whom the duty is imposed must take reasonable steps to avoid the disadvantage.
- (2) Where a physical feature puts a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with persons who are not disabled, the person or organisation on whom the duty is imposed must take reasonable steps to avoid the disadvantage.
- (3) Where a disabled person would, but for the provision of an auxiliary aid, be put at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with persons who are not disabled, the person or organisation on whom the duty is imposed must take reasonable steps to provide the auxiliary aid.

The Act also requires that providers of services take steps to ensure that information is provided in an accessible format. For CYP with V I this ensures the provision of, for example, large print, braille and audio description as a reasonable adjustment to support curriculum access.

### **5.1.2 Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Northern Ireland)**

The [Disability Discrimination Act](#) is a law to protect anyone with a disability in Northern Ireland. It covers key areas of life such as education and employment. Under the Act bodies responsible for the provision of education and associated services have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to all policies, procedures and practices to ensure that a disabled pupil is not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to non-disabled pupils; this duty is both an anticipatory and a reactive duty. More broadly, the Act places duties on education providers not to treat disabled pupils less favourably for a reason related to their disability.

### **5.1.3 Education Act 2011 (England and Wales)**

The right of CYP with V I to access education across the curriculum includes careers guidance. The [Education Act 2011](#) places a statutory duty on local authority secondary schools and pupil referral units in England and Wales to provide access to independent careers advice for pupils aged 14 to 16. A subsequent amendment to the Act extended the duty to provide access to independent careers guidance to pupils aged 13-18, encompassing Further Education (FE) and sixth-form colleges.

The statutory duty requires the governing body of a school or college to secure careers guidance that is:

- (1) Presented in an impartial manner.
- (2) Includes information on options available in respect of 16 to 18 education or training, including apprenticeships.
- (3) Guidance that the person giving it considers will promote the best interests of the pupils to whom it is given.

### **5.1.4 Education Act 2014 (Northern Ireland)**

[The Education Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2014](#) introduced the Education Authority, a non-departmental public body charged with delivering primary and secondary education services and youth services, and ensuring these services meet the needs of all CYP. The Act created additional duties for the Education Authority to encourage, facilitate and promote integrated education across Northern Ireland.

### **5.1.5 Education (Additional Support for Learning) Act 2004 (Scotland)**

[The Education \(Additional Support for Learning\) Act](#) provides the legal framework for the provision of additional support for learning in Scotland. The Act promotes collaborative working among all those supporting CYP and sets out the rights of CYP within the education system. The key duties on education authorities are to identify, make provision for, and review provision for the additional support needs of CYP for whose education they are responsible. Education authorities must provide CYP with additional support needs arising from one or more complex factors or multiple factors with a co-ordinated support plan setting out a CYP's long-term learning aims and the support that is needed to help them reach these.

### **5.1.6 Children and Families Act 2014 (England)**

[Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014](#) contains provisions for CYP (0-25) in England with SEND and gives guidance to health, social care, education and local authorities to make sure CYP and their families are properly supported. The Act requires local authorities in England to provide CYP and their families with the information and support necessary to understand what help is available to them, to fully participate in decisions and to have their views and feelings about their education taken into account.

The [Act also defines](#) special educational provision as, for a child aged two or more or a young person, “educational or training provision that is additional to, or different from, that made generally available for others of the same age in mainstream schools, maintained nursery schools, mainstream post-16 institutions in England, or places in England at which relevant early years education is provided”. The Act linked support for CYP with SEND aged 0-25 across education, health care and social care with the introduction of the Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan. An EHC plan is a legal document which is drafted by the local authority and sets out, among other things, a CYP’s SEN provision and the outcomes a CYP should work towards (see section 5.3 for an overview of EHC plans in relation to CYP with V I).

### **5.1.7 Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2016 (Northern Ireland)**

[The 2016 Act](#) places duties on Boards of Governors, the Education Authority and health and social services authorities, and provides rights for parents and children over compulsory school age. Provisions of the Act include:

- Requiring a personal learning plan for each child with SEN.
- Requiring the Education Authority to publish an annual plan for special education provision.
- Requiring the Boards of Governors to appoint a learning support co-ordinator to co-ordinate provision for children with SEN in grant-aided schools.
- Giving children with SEN over compulsory school age rights previously exercisable by parents.

## 5.2 Statutory guidance for schools and organisations working CYP with additional needs

Each of the devolved governments also has its own statutory guidance in place for schools and organisations who work with CYP who require additional specialist support.

### 5.2.1 SEND Code of Practice (England)

The [SEND Code of Practice](#) was published in 2015 and provides statutory guidance on the duties, policies and procedures relating to Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014 and applies to England. The SEND Code of Practice covers the 0-25 age range.

The [principles of the Code of Practice](#) state that CYP, including those with V I, have a right to receive and impart information, to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account when planning and reviewing support, and for their goals and aspirations to be considered when agreeing desired educational and other outcomes.

The Code of Practice places a duty on local authorities in England to plan, deliver and review provisions for CYP with SEN and/or disabilities. It sets out [duties that schools must adhere to](#). These include:

- 1) All children with SEND should be identified on a SEND register and schools should have clear provision mapping in place.
- 2) Wherever possible, CYP with SEND should be taught alongside their peers.
- 3) Schools need to have a designated person responsible for coordinating SEND.
- 4) Staff need to be trained to identify and support CYP with SEND for early identification of need.

The Code of Practice acknowledges that many CYP with V I will require specialist support and/or equipment to access their learning, or habilitation support. In such cases, schools are directed to involve specialist teachers with a mandatory qualification for supporting CYP with V I.

In March 2022, the government published the SEND and Alternative Provision Green Paper ([SEND Review: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time](#)). The green paper set out proposals to deliver improved outcomes for CYP with SEND, to restore confidence in the system and

secure financial sustainability. The proposed reforms encompass [4 key areas](#):

- A single national SEND and alternative provision system with consistent standards for how needs are identified and met at every stage of a child's journey across education, health and care.
- Excellent provision from early years to adulthood, increasing the total investment in the schools' budget, with an additional £1 billion in 2022 to 2023 to support CYP with complex needs.
- A reformed and integrated role for alternative provision.
- Deliver clarity on roles and responsibilities for all partners, across education, health, care and local government through new national standards.

The green paper also recognised that well-planned transitions are key to setting young people up for success in Further and Higher Education and beyond. Consequently, new national SEND standards will include standards for transitions, "[providing consistent timely, high-quality transition preparation for CYP with SEND](#)".

In March 2023, following a public consultation, government committed to establish a new national SEND and alternative provision system with the mission to fulfil children's potential, to build parent's trust and to provide financial sustainability. New "evidence-based National Standards to improve early identification of needs and intervention, and set out clear expectations for the types of support that should be ordinarily available in mainstream settings" will underpin a nationally consistent SEND and alternative provision system ([SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time, 2023](#)).

### **5.2.2 Additional Learning Needs Code (Wales)**

The [Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal \(Wales\) Act 2018](#) makes provision for the statutory framework for supporting CYP with additional learning needs in Wales. The Act introduced a new statutory plan, called an Individual Development Plan (IDP). An IDP is prepared by schools, colleges or local authorities working with the CYP and their parents and sets out what the child or young person needs to be able to support their learning.

Alongside the Act is the [Additional Learning Needs Code](#) which came into force in September 2021. The principles of the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system are intended to support the creation of a fully inclusive education system. The 5 core principles are: (1) a rights-based approach; (2) early identification, intervention and prevention; (3) collaboration and integration; (4) inclusive education; and (5) a bilingual system.

Under the ALN code, local authorities have a duty to prepare and maintain an IDP for CYP with ALN, including those with V I. It is stipulated that an IDP should be created through collaboration with the child or young person and their parent(s) and with the involvement, where appropriate, of the agencies and professionals working together to identify the provision to meet the CYP's needs.

Chapter 27 of the ALN code is concerned with planning for and supporting transitions for CYP with ALN and acknowledges that CYP with ALN may find transitions more challenging than their peers do. Consequently, they may need additional support to ensure their education is not negatively affected by the transition. Moreover, the importance of planning ahead and adopting a person-centred approach to deliver a smooth transition is emphasised.

### **5.2.3 Special Education Needs Code of Practice (Northern Ireland)**

The [Special Education Needs and Disability Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016](#) lays out the duties placed on Boards of Governors, the Education Authority and health and social services for special educational provision. The new SEN Framework has yet to be implemented in practice, with [draft SEN regulations](#) and the associated [draft Code of Practice](#) progressing through the legislative process.

The new [SEN Code of Practice](#) will provide statutory guidance for those involved in identifying and assessing CYP who have or may have SEN and for those who provide special educational provision. High expectations and outcomes; inclusion access to a broad and balanced curriculum; early identification and intervention; and partnership and co-operation are the fundamental principles of the Code.

The Code makes provision for the new Personal Learning Plan (PLP) which a school will be required to prepare and maintain for each pupil that has SEN. The PLP provides a record of the special educational

provision put in place and the expected outcomes the provision intends to achieve. The importance of working in partnerships with parents and CYP in both the development and implementation of the PLP is emphasised.

Section 8 of the Code is about planning for the transition of a child to adulthood. It states a first transition plan should be prepared during the school year in which a child with a Statement turns 14 and, as a living document, should be reviewed and amended as the child or young person grows or as their needs change.

#### **5.2.4 Education (Additional Support for Learning) Act (Scotland)**

The [Education \(Additional Support for Learning\) \(Scotland\) Act 2004](#), as amended (2009, 2014 and 2016) sets out the duties of education authorities and the rights of parents and CYP to additional support for learning. Alongside the Act, there is [statutory guidance \(2017\)](#) on supporting children's learning which serves as a code of practice for education authorities.

[The Code](#) emphasises the importance of parents and CYP being active participants in the assessment, planning and review of additional support needs and provision. Chapter 6 of the Code considers the requirements for transitions and states that all CYP should experience activities in the context of the curriculum, learning and achievement which will prepare them for transitions within and beyond school education.

An [independent review](#) of the implementation of additional support for learning was conducted in 2019 and concluded with the submission of a report to Scottish Ministers in 2020. The review found a significant disconnect between CYP experience and the stated aspirations of the legislation and policy. Consequently, implementation of Additional Support for Learning legislation was fragmented and inconsistent. The report made several recommendations, including:

- CYP must be listened to and involved in all decision making relating to additional support for learning.
- A national overarching Vision Statement for success for SYP who have additional support needs must be developed.
- The language used to describe CYP with additional support needs should move away from describing CYP as their condition and not be solely focused on deficits.

The Review and its findings directly informed the Scottish Government's [Additional Support for Learning Action Plan](#) published in 2020.

### 5.3 Education, Health and Care Plan (England)

In England, the SEND Code of Practice includes provision for an [Education, Health and Care](#) (EHC) assessment and plan. The purpose of an EHC plan is to make special educational provision to meet the special educational needs of a CYP, where they need more than SEN support, to ensure the best outcomes for them across education, health and social care. An EHC plan supports CYP from 0-25 years. However, if a young person attends university, then an EHC plan no longer applies and is replaced by Disabled Students' Allowance. An EHCP also ceases where a young person leaves education under the age of 25 years.

The SEND Code states that EHC plans should specify how services will be delivered as part of a holistic package and explain how best to achieve the outcomes sought for the child or young person. Importantly, local authorities should involve CYP and parents in the assessment and planning process. The EHC plan process should also involve multi-agency working between education, health and social care services.

For pupils with an EHC plan, all reviews taking place from Year 9 (age 13-14) onwards should have a particular focus on preparing for adulthood, including post-16 education, independent living, participation in society and employment. For young people, aged 19-25, it is further stated that reviews of EHC plans should have regard to whether educational or training outcomes specified in the plan have been achieved.

Latest [government statistics for 2022/23](#) show that 4.3% (389,171) of all pupils in England have an EHC plan. The percentage of all pupils with an EHC plan who are in mainstream schools has increased from 51.4% to 52.7% in 2023. The number of pupils with V I with an EHC plan was 3,780 in 2022/23 compared with 3,711 in 2021/22.



## 6 V I education and curriculum access

The majority of children with V I, approximately 70%, attend mainstream schools, where they will likely be the only child with V I ([RNIB, 2023](#)). Learners with V I share distinctive needs that require specialist educational intervention to help them overcome challenges to learning and development.

Across the literature, it is generally recognised that accessing education and support for CYP with V I can be complex in a system where specialist V I education services are under increasing pressure in terms of budgetary constraints and resource. [Research published](#) recently by the sight loss sector identified the main issues experienced by CYP with V I in mainstream education settings, including:

- Inconsistent provision of specialist support.
- A lack of joined up working between specialist and non-specialist professionals.
- Mainstream teaching staff are not always fully trained or equipped to support CYP with V I.
- Inaccessible curriculum content and learning materials.
- The attainment gap between CYP with V I and the general student population.
- Poor employment outcomes and high vulnerability of becoming long term NEET (not in education, employment or training).

Data from RNIB's [2023 education Freedom of Information](#) (FOI) survey, concerning provision across England's 152 local authorities, shows there are more CYP requiring and accessing specialist support, yet many services have experienced inconsistent funding, with budgets fluctuating year-on-year. The data revealed that over half of local authorities did not receive a budget increase in line with average inflation in 2023/24, facing instead a decrease to their budget.

A [FOI survey of all local authorities in Wales](#) (N= 22) revealed a similar pattern of budget cuts to specialist V I service provision, with six local authorities being affected by an overall decrease in budgets from 2020/21 to 2022/23. [Data](#) from 31 of the 32 local authorities in Scotland, for the financial years 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23, showed that 11 local authorities had their budget for V I services cut or frozen at least once over the three-year period.

Specialist support for CYP with V I is vital to enable them to access education, yet the evidence from local authorities suggests that many are struggling to make the required investment to maintain service levels, resulting in a patchwork of national provision that puts CYP at risk of not receiving the support they are entitled to.

## 6.1 The key principles of V I education

As discussed in section 4, V I creates unique barriers to education and curriculum access which can be reduced through inclusive design of learning environments, adjustments to teaching approaches and the use of specialist practitioners and resources.

A central tenet of inclusive education for CYP with V I is the notion of ensuring access to a broad and balanced curriculum which is equitable to that provided for all children ([McLinden et al. 2016](#)). Universal inclusive practices should ensure teaching strategies, resources and physical and social environments are accessible to students with V I, while specialist input should respond to individual educational and social needs to enable learners to develop personal agency and independence skills ([McLinden et al. 2016](#)).

CYP with V I require holistic support that promotes equity, inclusion and personal agency and encompasses not only literacy, mobility and independent living skills but also areas such as the use of assistive technology, social interaction and wellbeing ([RNIB, 2023](#)). The development of personal agency and independence is considered to have particular relevance to students with V I, notably their ability to communicate their needs and preferences, navigate physical environments and transition into different learning environments. The importance of promoting CYP with V I as active learners and creating opportunities to develop [self-determination skills](#) is underscored throughout the literature as a critical objective of V I education. Skills associated with personal agency and self-determination include decision-making, goal setting, self-awareness and self-knowledge; these combine to empower students with V I to use their voices, share their views and make daily choices and major decisions.

### 6.1.2 A dual approach: 'learning to access' and 'access to learning'

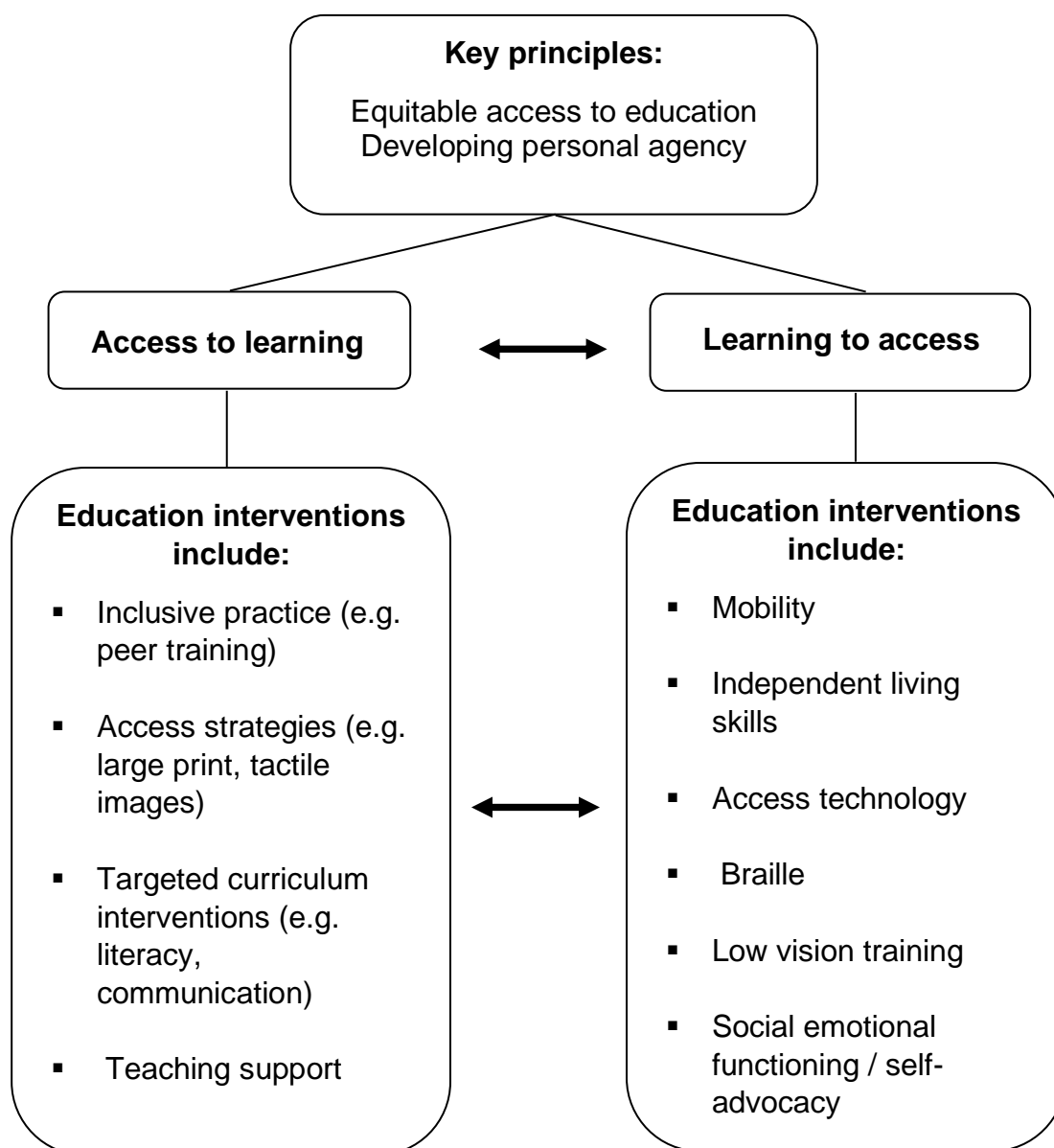
V I education has an established tradition of focusing upon two broad areas of educational outcomes and associated interventions:

- 1) Ensuring CYP have fair and optimised access to the school curriculum.
- 2) Ensuring CYP have opportunities to develop their independence and social inclusion.

[McLinden et al. \(2022\)](#) suggest that the concept of access, in the context of V I, is multi-layered. Firstly, it refers to access to information as a key barrier to education associated with both V I and hearing impairment (e.g., access to print material). Secondly, access also has a social and political meaning, such as fair and equitable access to education (e.g., access to trained teachers and appropriately designed schools). Consequently, access to education for CYP with V I must be achieved through a combination of approaches with an individual and social focus. This is captured in a [dual approach to access](#) that guides educational interventions and broader curriculum design for CYP with V I:

- *Access to learning* - inclusive practice and differentiation ensuring that the learner's environment is structured and modified to promote inclusion, learning and access to the core curriculum, the culture of the educational setting and broader social inclusion.
- *Learning to access* - teaching provision which supports the child to learn independence skills and develop personal agency in order to afford more independent learning and social inclusion.

Figure 1 below presents an overview of the relationship between access to learning and learning to access in the field of V I education.



**Figure 1.** Relationship between access to learning and learning to access in the field of V I education with examples of education interventions. Source: [McLinden et al. \(2022\)](#).

[Access to learning](#) is primarily concerned with supporting the learner in the “here and now”. It calls for inclusive pedagogy and the learning environment to be designed so that CYP with V I can access a core curriculum (shared with their sighted peers) and are suitably included in all lessons. This part of the dual approach recognises the need to address the distinctive learning needs that are associated with V I.

[Learning to access](#) is concerned with maximising the development of independent learners within the mainstream educational environment, as well as preparing them for adulthood, independent living and employment. The intervention approaches, and associated educational outcomes, are aligned to areas such as mobility, low vision and assistive technology training.

While access to learning and learning to access is presented in the literature as a dual approach, it is recognised that in practice these broad approaches are not completely independent of each other and will overlap and intertwine, requiring a balance between approaches ([Keil & Cobb, 2019](#)). The dual model also recognises progression in a child's development and needs, which means over time the emphasis shifts from access to learning, and support being provided directly to the CYP, to the acquisition of the skills they need so they can learn and act more independently (learning to access).

## **6.2 Established specialist curricula frameworks for CYP with V I**

The term specialist curriculum is used in the literature to refer to those distinctive areas, such as mobility, braille literacy, social skills and low vision training, which are not typically taught as part of a core curriculum.

To date, there has been no single statutory specialist curriculum framework for CYP with V I in the UK. Rather there have been several specialist curricula and outcomes frameworks for CYP with V I in use, none of which has statutory status. This has led to a lack of clarity about what should be taught, when and by whom, which, in turn, can lead to inconsistent educational offers for CYP with V I ([Hewett et al. 2024](#)).

Examples of curricula framework that have been developed to promote learning to access and independence skills, and have been recognised by the V I education profession, include the [Expanded Core Curriculum](#) (ECC), first devised in the United States, and the National Sensory Impairment Partnership (NatSIP) [Learner Outcomes Framework](#) in the UK. Introduced in 1996, the ECC comprises of nine core components that should be taught under specialist instruction: access skills, orientation and mobility skills, social interaction skills, use of technology and assistive technology, career education, independent living skills, recreational and leisure skills, self-determination skills, and sensory

efficiency skills ([Opie, 2018](#)). An [RNIB FOI report \(2023\)](#) on education provision for CYP with V I in Scotland found that 16% of local authorities (N= 31) used the EEC, compared with 18% of 137 local authorities in [England](#) (authorities were able to select more than one curriculum option).

In 2016 NatSIP published the [Learner Outcomes Framework](#) for CYP with V I, organised around eight outcome categories: learning to access, use of equipment, independence and negotiation skills participation, meeting others, getting around, looking after him/herself and life after school. The framework was developed based upon research with CYP with V I about their experiences of specialist support at school and what support they considered to be important/would like to have received to enable them to succeed in education and other settings beyond school. RNIB's 2023 FOI reports on education provision for CYP with V I in [Scotland](#) found that 19% of 31 local authorities used the NatSIP Learner Outcomes Framework, while data for [England](#) showed that 56% of local authorities (N= 137) used the framework (authorities were able to select more than one curriculum option).

### **6.3 Curriculum Framework for CYP with V I (CFVI)**

[Hewett et al. \(2024\)](#) identified two key challenges in developing a single curriculum framework for the UK: (1) the UK is made up of four nations each with its own devolved education policies; and (2) specialist curricula should be reflective of the broad spectrum of needs across the CYP with V I population and should contain outcomes relevant to different developmental and communication stages.

To address these issues, the [CFVI](#) (2022) has been developed as a new single, UK-wide, curriculum for CYP with V I. It is an evidence-based, non-statutory, framework developed by professionals, CYP and parents and carers to support CYP with V I access an appropriate and equitable education. The access to learning / learning to access model provides the conceptual basis for the framework. As such, the framework aims to guide professional practice in teaching and habilitation from early years through to higher education and/or vocational training.

The CFVI clarifies and defines interventions, best practice support and the range of skills that are essential for CYP with V I to develop. It also provides a common language and shared vocabulary for CYP, parents

and professionals. The framework defines 11 areas of learning and offers example outcomes that take a holistic approach and consider the developmental, educational, social and wellbeing needs of CYP between the ages of 0-25.

<b>Area 1 Facilitating an inclusive world</b>	Recognising the role of educators (including specialist practitioners) and parents/carers as facilitators and advocates for CYP with V I in education and society.
<b>Area 2 Sensory development</b>	Working with CYP to maximise use and development of the senses.
<b>Area 3 Communication</b>	Working with CYP to develop their social communication skills.
<b>Area 4 Literacy</b>	Working with CYP to develop literacy skills.
<b>Area 5 Habilitation: orientation and mobility</b>	Supporting CYP to be able to move safely through their world as independently as possible.
<b>Area 6 Habilitation: independent living</b>	Supporting CYP to develop the day-to-day skills they need to live as independent a life as possible.
<b>Area 7 Accessing information</b>	Teaching methods CYP can use to access, produce, and manage information independently.
<b>Area 8 Technology</b>	Providing training and opportunity for CYP to use technology with as much independence as possible.
<b>Area 9 Health: social, emotional, mental &amp; physical wellbeing</b>	Providing targeted teaching and support to facilitate the development of the mental, emotional, social, and physical wellbeing of CYP.
<b>Area 10 Social, sports and leisure</b>	Supporting CYP to have opportunities to participate in social, sports and leisure.
<b>Area 11 Preparing for adulthood</b>	Supporting CYP to prepare for their lives after compulsory education and make decisions for their future.

**Table 3.** Overview of the 11 areas of learning defined by the CFVI. Source: CFVI. Defining specialist skills development and best practice support to promote equity, inclusion and personal agency ([RNIB, 2022](#)).

For CYP in compulsory education, it is intended that the framework should be closely integrated with the core curriculum to which all CYP are entitled. While the framework provides descriptors and examples of targeted outcomes for each of the 11 learning areas it is noted that these descriptors are intentionally high level to allow for services and schools to be able to adapt existing provision or develop new activities and resources based on individual need and in accordance with local, regional and / or national policy and practice. The importance of specialist practitioners, such as a QTVI or habilitation specialist, in directly teaching specialist skills to CYP and working closely with parents and non-specialist professionals is also emphasised.

At present, the CFVI is a non-statutory framework. The goal of the sight loss sector is for the CFVI to be granted statutory status across the UK so there is a legal requirement for it to be followed. Despite its current non-statutory status, evidence from [RNIB's latest FOI reports \(2023\)](#) indicates that the CFVI has begun to gain traction among local authorities. [In England](#), all 136 local authorities who responded to the FOI had heard of the framework, a 9% increase from 2022. All 22 local authority V I services in [Wales](#) were aware of the CFVI and the majority of authorities said they used the CFVI criteria and resources in their assessment, planning and reports.

Building on this voluntary take up, there is a sector-wide call for the CFVI to be formally recognised and embedded in:

- Official education policies, guidance and documentation across the UK, including in the new SEND national standards for England.
- Local authority service commissioning and delivery frameworks.
- All educational settings supporting CYP with V I and their families, in partnership with V I specialists.
- Quality standards and competence frameworks (applicable to Scotland) for teachers of CYP with V I and habilitation specialists across the UK.

Moreover, it is recognised that further research is needed into how the framework might be best applied in a CYP's day-to-day education and in understanding the training requirements for specialist and non-specialist professionals to support the delivery of the framework ([Hewett et al. 2024](#)).



## 6.4 The role of assistive technology in V I education

Assistive technology can be defined as “any product whose primary purpose is to maintain or improve an individual’s functioning and independence and thereby promote their wellbeing” ([McNicholl et al. 2021](#)). Assistive technology consists of low-tech devices and equipment, such as handheld magnifiers, and high-tech devices, including magnification and screen reader software.

For people with V I, assistive technology has the potential to improve functioning, increase access and participation in education and employment, reduce activity limitations and promote social inclusion. The role of assistive technology in promoting the inclusion of CYP with V I in education is widely acknowledged in the literature. It is seen as an essential enabler of academic engagement, attainment, personal agency and social participation, together with helping to progress CYPs’ cognitive, social and emotional development ([Lovey and Butler, 2023](#)).

The importance of CYP with V I receiving training and the opportunity to use assistive technology in their education is recognised in all specialist curricula and outcomes frameworks. Training in the efficient use of assistive technology is one of the nine areas of the [ECC](#), for example. The [CFVI](#) also identifies technology as a necessary component of V I education, emphasising the provision of training and access to the most appropriate assistive technology for the child’s needs from an early age.

The role of assistive technology as an enabler of education is also recognised in provisions, available to young people with V I in higher education, under the [Disabled Students’ Allowance](#) (DSA). The DSA exists to help students with a disability, including V I, to get help with any extra essential costs they may have as result of their disability. It provides funding for the support and specialist equipment students need to overcome barriers relating to their V I when accessing their studies. [Specialist equipment](#) may include braille displays, screen reading/magnification software and/or electronic magnifiers. DSA is discussed further in section 9 in the context of higher education.

The use of assistive technology by CYP with V I depends largely on the knowledge and confidence of their teachers. [Mandatory qualification requirements for QTVIs](#) stipulate that they must be secure in their knowledge and ability to use assistive technology and be able to

recommend, teach and assess the use of specialist equipment and technology to enable CYP to overcome or reduce the impact of sight loss. There is no mandatory requirement for mainstream teachers to receive instruction on the use of assistive technology as part of teaching training programmes. Much of the literature highlights that a teacher who is aware of and understands the function and benefit of assistive technology to CYP with V I is more able, and therefore more likely, to effectively integrate it into their teaching practice.

[Ashby Jones et al. \(2019\)](#) investigated the impact of pre-service teacher training in assistive technology on teachers' self-rated competency levels, using qualitative and quantitative measures. Conducted in the United States, the study found that exposure to assistive technology increased pre-service teachers' perceived ability levels and awareness of the needs of students with V I and the resources available to assist them. The results suggest that interactive assistive technology training can be developed and implemented as part of teaching training programmes to increase teacher knowledge and competence. Similarly, a systematic review of 28 studies, addressing computer-assisted instruction for students aged 5 to 22 with V I, by [Tuttle et al. \(2023\)](#), concluded that, with the appropriate training, teachers are capable of implementing computer-assisted instruction. They should, therefore, be provided with 'in-service training' to increase their knowledge and ultimately improve assistive technology instruction.

It is important that CYP with V I have access to the most appropriate assistive technology for their needs and that this is facilitated within their day-to-day experience of education. However, evidence suggests that CYP with V I are not always aware of, or confident in using, the assistive technology available to them whilst in education. A UK study to understand teachers' and students' perspectives on assistive technology revealed that the independence assistive technology brings to students is largely beneficial, while being highly dependent on the individual student ([Loveys and Butler 2023](#)). Participants in the qualitative study (n= 4) acknowledged that assistive technology had a positive impact, providing them with independence in their learning, yet they also identified an important barrier related to the specialised nature of assistive technologies. While the use of assistive technology is intended to cultivate independence and capability, the reality the students experienced was a sense of reliance, dependency and inequality and a desire to not stand out or appear different from peers.

[McNicholl et al. \(2021\)](#) reported similar findings from a systematic review of 26 papers on the impact of assistive technology for students with disabilities in higher education, including those with V I. It was found that when assistive technology is viewed in a positive sense by others, rather than as a tool to alleviate the burden of disability, it can enable inclusion and a sense of belonging in the learning environment. This points to the importance of “normalising” assistive technology use, making it accessible and realising its potential benefits for all students, in order to reduce any stigma.

[Assistive technology training](#) is often delivered too late to CYP with V I, leaving gaps in skills development, particularly post-16. A report by [Thomas Pocklington Trust \(2021\)](#), on technology and accessibility in FE, observed a need for FE colleges to ensure access to assistive technology and effective training for CYP with V I. The report emphasised that it should not be assumed that all students with V I are fully confident in the use of assistive technology and, as such, students should be supported throughout their time in FE to develop their skills and confidence in the use of assistive technology.

Evidence from the [academic literature](#) identifies inadequate training in how to effectively use assistive technology as a barrier to positive educational engagement and attainment. Qualitative insight into student experiences in [Australia](#) found that inadequacies of technologies themselves acted as a barrier to effective assistive technology use. A key finding was the frequency with which students faced compatibility issues between assistive technology and standard school systems, and the lack of expert technical support available to quickly resolve any issues. This generated significant frustration for students and, ultimately, restricted their inclusion and equitable participation in the curriculum.

## **6.5 Transition planning and practices in V I education**

[Douglas et al. \(2019\)](#) define “transition” as the term commonly used to describe the life changes that CYP experience as they move from one educational setting to another. This may include primary to secondary school and secondary school to college, university or work. Each transition point along the educational pathway can be profound for a CYP with V I, given that each new setting in which they must learn and function will have different expectations and will assume certain skills are already secured.

Different transition points may require different approaches to planning and practice depending on a CYP's specific development, educational, emotional and social needs at the time. This was reflected in findings from a longitudinal study, by [Hewett et al. \(2021\)](#), that followed 82 young people from England and Wales with V I as they completed compulsory education. The authors concluded that transition should not be viewed as a single moment in time. Rather, transition is an ongoing process through which the young person is enabled to develop the skills and experiences they need to be successful as they move from one stage of education to the next.

Recent government proposals for the [SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan \(2023\)](#) similarly acknowledged that, 'although each child or young person's journey will be different, destination planning should be built in from the earliest stages and should continue through their education, centred around the aspirations, interests, and needs of the child or young person', to ensure successful transitions and preparation for adulthood.

Person-centred transition planning is highlighted throughout the literature, and in statutory guidance for each of the devolved nations, as the cornerstone of good practice. A systematic review of 39 papers, exploring transition planning from primary to secondary school, observed that, at its best, transition planning is person-centred, addressing students' individual strengths, preferences, interests, capacity and potential, rather than taking the students' disability as the starting point for planning ([Strnadova et al. 2023](#)).

Both the [Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales \(2021\)](#) and [statutory guidance](#) to the Education (Additional Support for Learning) Act 2004 for Scotland advocate that transition planning is most effective when a person-centred approach is adopted, ensuring the CYP's and parents views are sought and taken into account, giving both parties a meaningful role in the planning process and decisions. In this way, transition planning extends beyond the basic principle of differentiation, where a universal approach might be adjusted to meet students' needs, to genuinely seek to integrate opportunities for student self-advocacy and choice.

[Hewett et al. \(2019\)](#) identified 4 further types of enabling resource that can help with a successful transition:

- Human support – i.e. people who support with tasks such as reading
- Adjustments and inclusive practice – i.e. modified materials, inclusive teaching strategies.
- Support for teaching or training – i.e. people who will teach and train V I students independence skills.
- Independence and personal agency – i.e. mobility skills, self-advocacy.

QTVIs play an integral role in ensuring that each transition is effective across a wide range of ages and educational contexts. Standard 9 in the [specification for mandatory qualifications for QTVI](#) details the knowledge, understanding and skills that they must show in relation to supporting transitions. This includes understanding the importance of empowering CYP with V I of all ages to be prepared and make informed choices about their future and of recognising that the challenges CYP with V I face at transition may change according to the stage of their educational pathway. Further, QTVIs must learn how to coordinate appropriate transition planning, liaise with key stakeholders and assist older learners to develop the knowledge and skills they will need in adult life, post-16 education, training and employment.

Transition best practice, challenges and experiences are discussed further in sections 8 and 9 as they relate to specific transition points in compulsory and post-16 education.

## 7 Education and specialist practitioners supporting learners with V I

[The majority of CYP with V I attend mainstream schools](#) which means that non-specialist classroom teachers and teaching assistants are largely responsible for implementing inclusive practices and providing day-to-day support to learners with V I. Mainstream teachers will also be guided and supported by a member of staff with responsibility for special/additional needs, who oversees policy and provision for all CYP with SEN/ALN/ASN and/or disabilities within the school. Similarly, in further and higher education the responsibility for implementing anticipatory adjustments and inclusive practices lies principally with mainstream teaching staff (i.e. lecturers, alongside input from the institution's central disability services).

The central specialist practitioners working in the field of V I education are QTVIs and registered qualified habilitation specialists. Additionally, specialist teaching assistants who have undertaken additional training, such as a braille qualification, and are working under the direction of a QTVI, may also support learners with V I. These specialists will be involved in promoting the inclusion of CYP with V I in education and directly teaching specialist skills, for example, independent living skills, braille literacy, assistive technology and mobility ([RNIB, 2022](#)).

### 7.1 Mainstream education practitioners

#### 7.1.1 Mainstream teachers

[An independent review](#) of additional support for learning implementation in Scotland (2020) reported that there is minimal requirement for a focus on additional support for learning as part of initial teacher training. The review heard from probationary teachers in their first year of teaching who felt ill prepared in terms of knowledge, understanding and practice skills to support pupils with additional support needs. The low incidence nature of V I further exacerbates the gap in mainstream teachers' knowledge and understanding of SEN/ALN/ASN and inclusive practices.

An Australian study, conducted by [Fanshawe et al. \(2023\)](#), identified teachers' professional knowledge about how to support students with blindness or low vision as a key barrier to equitable participation in mainstream education. Further, the authors suggested that a lack of prior knowledge and experience may lead some teachers to have lower

expectations for students with V I. Qualitative findings from a UK study, to explore parent views of V I provision, highlighted a lack of training, awareness and time among school staff and a complete lack of understanding of the impact of V I on access to learning and on independence ([Cummins and Hayton, 2024](#)). Moreover, research by Guide Dogs UK (Internal report, 2022) reported that 69% of 4,800 mainstream teachers surveyed lacked confidence in their skills to support children with SEND, including those with V I. The survey also found that 85% of mainstream teachers (N= 4,800) felt working with specialist professionals would make them more confident in teaching a child with a V I.

Having access to good quality continuous professional development for mainstream teachers is emphasised throughout the literature. A systematic review by [Miyuachi \(2020\)](#) concluded that teacher training programmes incorporating knowledge and strategies in educating students with V I among mainstream teachers would serve to effectively promote inclusion. It was suggested that the ideal training content would encompass theoretical and knowledge-based content on inclusion and V I, along with practical teaching experiences with students with V I. Similarly, [McLinden et al. \(2022\)](#) called for access to good quality continuous professional development, for mainstream teachers, to ensure they understand both the context in which they work and best practice in meeting the needs and achieving positive outcomes for CYP with V I.

### **7.1.2 Mainstream teaching assistants**

Teaching assistants (TAs) play a crucial role in enabling access to the curriculum and supporting the inclusion and achievement of pupils with V I. [NatSIP guidance \(2022\)](#) on effective working with TAs identified three main ways that TAs support pupils with V I:

- Promoting the communicative, experiential and visual/tactile development of the pupil to reduce the attainment gap.
- Ensuring the pupil can access the lesson and achieve the objectives set for him/her while exercising independence.
- Enabling the pupil to be socially included and be involved in lessons.

The guidance also stated that TAs should not simply support the content and delivery of lessons and may also work outside lessons modifying curriculum materials and spend time on specialist skills training with a pupil.

Most TAs are employed by individual schools and, although they often work with QTVIs, many are managed by a mainstream teacher and/or member of staff responsible for special/additional needs within the school who has no background in V I. According to RNIB's FOI [report on education provision for CYP with V I \(2023\)](#), 53% (N= 145; n= 78) of local authorities in England employed a specialist TA. The total number of TA posts across these authorities was 271, a 3% decrease since 2022. [Within Wales](#), local authority V I services and education consortia reported that together they employed a total of 20.4 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) TAs. Two local authority V I services employed no specialist TAs. [In Scotland](#), 37.5 FTE pupil support assistants were employed across 31 local authorities, although in six authorities none of these held a qualification in braille proficiency.

While many TAs receive basic awareness training, there is no formal requirement for them to have specialist training or qualifications to work with CYP with V I. The main area of specialist training is in braille proficiency ([RNIB, 2023](#)). Quantitative data from [Cummins et al. \(2024\)](#) found that 69% of parents surveyed (N= 46) understood that the TA supporting their child did not have specialist V I knowledge, and 21% did not know the qualification/skill set of the supporting TA. Consequently, 38% of parents were not confident in the TA's knowledge to support their child. The authors suggest that a lack of training of support staff can lead to inconsistencies in provision and reduced inclusion and access to learning for CYP with V I.

[RNIB's 2023 policy position](#) on the deployment and training of TAs recommends that the work of TAs should be overseen by a QTVI and they should receive training through the continuous professional development process to develop the specialist skills needed for the role. TA training should include: understanding V I and its implications for the educational and social development of CYP; learning and applying a range of specialist skills; and developing positive working relationships with CYP that promote their independence and engage them in planning and decision making.



## 7.2 Qualified teachers of children and young with vision impairment (QTVI)

Specialist teacher training in the area of V I education is facilitated through a [2-year postgraduate level](#) of training as part of the continuing professional development of qualified teachers. This leads to the status of QTVI and gives practitioners the knowledge base and specialist skills required to support learners' development across education and the family setting, from 0 to 25 years.

In the context of the access to learning / learning to access dual approach, several common roles and responsibilities for QTVIs have been emphasised in the literature. These include, but are not limited to, providing instruction in braille or instructing pupils with large print and optical devices and teaching additional curriculum skills, such as independent living skills, social interaction skills and the use of assistive technology ([Akbarak and Douglas, 2022](#)). In addition, QTVIs often fulfil other roles, including performing functional vision assessments, monitoring the learning progress of CYP and providing guidance to mainstream teachers, CYP and their families. [McLinden et al. \(2016\)](#) describe the role of the QTVI as understanding how to balance providing targeted support for individual learners with V I with the need to develop independent learning.

The multi-layered role that specialist teachers have in supporting learners with V I is reflected in the knowledge, understanding and skills standards outlined in the [mandatory qualifications for QTVIs](#). Published by the DfE, the mandatory qualifications exist to ensure consistently high quality specialist support that has a positive impact on raising the aspirations and achievement of CYP with V I and improving their well-being. The knowledge and skills that QTVI must acquire are broad ranging, which reflects the holistic support that CYP with V I need, and include:

- Working in partnership with families to ensure a shared understanding and consistency of approach in support CYP and promoting their independent.
- Understanding how V I influences the way that CYP learn, develop and participate in social and educational contexts.
- Identifying support needs and teaching/promoting access to specialist skills and resources.

- Designing and advising on teaching which is accessible and promotes inclusive practice, including the physical and social environment.
- Assessing CYP with V I's functional vision and ensuring appropriate teaching strategies and resources are in place.
- Understanding of the wide-ranging implications of V I for CYP's social development and long-term emotional resilience.
- Supporting transitions across educational contexts, including the promotion of independence and self-advocacy skills.

QTVI are integral to the holistic provision for CYP with V I, yet budget cuts (or freezes) to local authorities and sensory services have, and continue to, impact the quality of provision. The literature presents a UK-wide picture of decreasing funding and increasingly unmanageable caseloads for QTVI, which means a specialist workforce under pressure and CYP with V I at risk of not receiving sufficient support ([Hayes et al. 2023](#)).

The total number of CYP aged 0-25 on V I service caseloads in England was 31,165 in the year 2023/24; this figure represents responses, to a FOI request, from 137 local authorities ([RNIB, 2023](#)). In 2022 there were 554 FTE specialist teaching posts in England, with 19 vacancies. Comparatively, in 2023 there were a total of 605 FTE specialist teaching posts and 11 vacancies across the 135 local authorities (N= 152) who responded to the FOI. Despite an overall increase of 9% in filled QTVI posts, the situation varies between areas of the UK with 57% of local authorities reporting a decrease or freeze in the number of QTVIs from 2022 to 2023, alongside caseload increases ([RNIB, 2023](#)). Table 4 gives an overview of the distribution of QTVI employed within V I services across the responding local authorities in England (n= 137).

<b>Position</b>	<b>Number of staff employed in position</b>	<b>Proportion of staff employed in position</b>
Lead QTVI with mandatory qualification	95	16%
QTVI with mandatory qualification	375	62%
In training for mandatory qualification	81	13%
Qualified teachers without mandatory qualification who will begin training	10	2%

within 2 years		
Qualified Teacher of CYP with Multi-Sensory Impairment (QTMSI) with mandatory qualification	23	4%
QTVI and QTMSI	14	2%
Qualified teachers without mandatory qualification (V I) not in or due to begin training within 2 years	7	1%
Lead QTVI vacancies currently vacant	4	Not given
QTVI vacancies currently vacant	7	Not given

**Table 4.** Overview of the distribution of QTVI employed within V I services across the responding local authorities (n= 137). Source: [RNIB, 2023](#).

[In Scotland](#) the total number of CYP with V I reported to be on active service caseloads in 2023 was 2,482 (data provided by 25/32 local authorities). RNIB's report found that only 12 local authorities (N= 32) had a strategic manager for V I services with a specialist qualification or a QTVI in a lead role. Local authority responses revealed 98.1 FTE posts for QTVI. Of these, 22.7 FTE were in training or due to begin training with the next two years. [Within Wales](#), there were 1,663 CYP with V I on local authority V I service active caseloads. V I services providing support across 10 local authorities had over 50 CYP on their active caseload for every QTVI. V I services providing support across 12 local authorities in Wales reported having no strategic lead with a mandatory qualification for QTVI or a lead QTVI, which represented provision for over half of the local authorities in Wales. The ratio of QTVI to CYP with V I ranged from 1:13 to 1:85, with the time between referral and an initial visit from a QTVI ranging from 2 weeks to 2-3 months. Comparatively, in [Northern Ireland](#), the Education Authority V I service had 8.6 FTE QTVI, meaning on average, there were 59 CYP with V I for every QTVI working for the V I service.

Data from RNIB's FOI reports demonstrate that there is wide variation in the level and type of specialist support available to CYP with V I across local authorities and the UK overall. Of the QTVIs included in the figures, the significant number of those in training and set to begin training in the next two year is apparent and further adds to concern that insufficient QTVIs could lead to CYP with V I not receiving the specialist teaching

that they are entitled to enable them to access learning and achieve their potential.

The critical support QTVIs provide to CYP with V I requires that this support is maintained and protected. As such, the V I sector has recommended that the devolved governments provide adequate and protected funding for local authorities to deliver specialist education services for CYP with V I. It is further suggested that immediate action is taken to increase the numbers of QTVIs, including a clear and fully-funded plan of action to improve recruitment and retention of the current workforce ([RNIB, 2023](#)). Moreover, schools and local authorities are encouraged to apply the following principles and practices to ensure equitable access to education for CYP with V I:

- All CYP with V I are assessed and supported by QTVIs who hold, or are working towards, the mandatory qualification.
- QTVIs work directly with CYP in a teaching capacity in specialist areas.
- QTVIs work closely with non-specialist teaching staff to ensure CYPs' needs are met through inclusive teaching.
- QTVIs advise on and oversee the implementation of strategies to promote social inclusion.
- QTVIs maintain close contact with families as a source of ongoing support.

### **7.3 Qualified habilitation specialists**

Habilitation involves individualised training for CYP with V I that aims to develop their mobility, orientation and independent living skills. The core goal is to maximise the CYP's independence, enabling them to access and progress through compulsory education to further study, employment and an independent life ([Habilitation VI UK, 2017](#)).

Habilitation training is provided by qualified habilitation specialists (QHS) who support CYP with V I within an educational setting (from nursery all the way through to university), in public spaces and in the home. While the role of the QHS is not mandatory in any of the UK education systems, it is widely recognised as important in relation to developing independence skills and supporting access to learning. Habilitation training is, for example, referenced in the [SEND Code of Practice for England](#) and the draft [Additional Learning Needs Code of Practice for](#)

[Wales](#) as a potential source of special educational support. More recently, habilitation (inclusive of orientation, mobility and independent living skills) has been recognised as an important learning area within the CFVI. The inclusion of habilitation recognises the importance of each child or young person being supported to be as independent as possible, in an age appropriate way. Further, it is stated that much of the teaching should be carried out by, or under the direction of, a QHS ([RNIB, 2022](#)).

Habilitation specialists work with individual CYP and their parents/carers. CYP with V I receive training in the use of alternative independence strategies. These strategies may include: spatial awareness, long cane use and everyday living skills, such as cooking, personal care and social skills ([Thomas Pocklington Trust, 2020](#)). The habilitation specialist will also work with mainstream teaching staff in educational settings, along with other specialist professionals (e.g. QTVI), to develop the child's independence and provide support during the various transitions between schooling stages.

The limited empirical data available on the impact of habilitation support on the academic learning of CYP with V I highlights the positive impact that this support has on independence, self-confidence and accessibility and inclusion in school life. A qualitative study, by [Manitsa and Barlow-Brown \(2022\)](#), to assess habilitation services for CYP with V I in the UK found that the person-centred approach to each child's independence, promoted by these services, was deemed central to the experiences and development of CYPs. Children and young people who participated in the study referred to feelings of belonging and acceptance in their school and social environment that they developed through the habilitation support they received.

Figures from [RNIB FOI reports](#) indicate that in 2023, a total of 4,443 pupils were on active habilitation caseloads in England, a 5% increase from the previous year. Half of the local authorities in England (n= 145), who responded, advised that they directly employed a QHS, while 43% commissioned an external organisation. [In Scotland](#), a total of 448 pupils were on active habilitation caseloads and 48% of local authorities (n= 31) employed a QHS. [Across Wales](#), 312 pupils were on active habilitation caseloads and 19 local authorities (N= 22) reported the employment of a QHS. [The Education Authority for Northern Ireland](#) reported that the proportion of CYP receiving habilitation support, funded by the authority, remained at 2% in the year 2023, suggesting that a

significant proportion of CYP with V I did not receive the specialist support they needed in their educational setting to develop independence and fully access the curriculum. This latest FOI data suggests that, despite the positive impact of habilitation, provision is inconsistent across the UK, with the number of CYP with V I receiving habilitation support varying greatly.

## 8 Compulsory education for CYP with V I

The majority of CYP with V I attend mainstream schools, where they may be the sole child with a V I ([RNIB, 2023](#)). The predominance of mainstream education settings, for CYP with V I, reflects both government and local authority commitment to ‘mainstreaming’ as a central pillar of an inclusive approach to education that enables all CYP to achieve their full potential. In 2019, for example, the Scottish government published [guidance to education authorities](#) on their duty to provide education in a mainstream school (unless certain exceptions apply) and ensure inclusion and inclusive practice underpinned the education experiences of all CYP.

Studies about mainstream education provision for CYP with V I also predominant in the literature, compared with specialist schools. As such, this report focuses too on the research and evidence relating to the provision for, and the experience of, CYP with V I in mainstream education settings.

### 8.1 Primary education

In the [academic year 2022/23](#), there was a total of 5,923 pupils with V I as their primary SEN attending mainstream primary schools in England. Of these pupils, 77.8% had SEN support in place and 22% had an EHC plan (see Table 5).

Primary school year	Number of pupils with V I as primary SEN	Percentage of pupils with V I with SEN support	Percentage of pupils with V I with an EHC plan
Reception	481	79.4% (382)	20.6% (99)
Year 1	679	78.4% (532)	21.6% (147)
Year 2	743	77.9% (579)	22.1% (164)
Year 3	869	77.4% (673)	22.6% (196)
Year 4	984	79.0% (777)	21.0% (207)
Year 5	1046	76.8% (804)	23.2% (242)
Year 6	1119	76.8% (859)	23.2% (260)

**Table 5.** DfE statistics on pupils with SEN in primary schools in England for the academic year 2022/23. Source: [DfE, 2023](#).

Across England, the number of children with a V I as a recognised primary SEN increases steadily to the age of 8 (Year 3). This increase will likely be the impact of children starting formal education and new diagnoses of V I through vision screening and functional vision assessments. From the age of 8 to 11 years the number of pupils is relatively steady, with the yearly count increasing at a smaller rate.

[Government statistics](#) on attainment in key stage 2 (year 6) national curriculum assessments in England, for the academic year 2022/23, show an attainment gap between the 1,119 children with V I as their primary SEN and their sighted peers, without any SEN.

<b>Pupil Characteristics</b>	<b>Percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard in reading</b>	<b>Percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard in writing</b>	<b>Percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard in maths</b>
Pupils with no SEN	73.0%	71.0%	73.0%
Visual Impairment – primary SEN	58.0%	51.0%	55.0%

**Table 6.** Government statistics on attainment in KS2 national curriculum assessments in England for the academic year 2022/23. Source. [DfE, 2023](#).

In previous academic years, pupils with V I as a primary SEN (in England) performed less well than their peers without SEN yet were the highest attaining of the SEN groups. In 2018/19, for example, the average attainment in reading, writing and maths for all SEN pupils was 22%, compared to 46% for all pupils with V I as a primary SEN ([RNIB, 2022](#)). In the literature, the consistent and significant attainment gap between children with V I and their sighted peers is identified as the outcome of children not getting access to the wider, additional curriculum and the right specialist support early in education ([RNIB, 2023](#)).

Primary school marks the first phase of formal education for CYP with V I. During this phase, the child will be taught by a designated class



teacher, spend most of the time in one classroom and experience a structured day and a curriculum that gradually becomes more demanding. There is an emphasis on children learning to read and write and developing a range of basic skills across the national curriculum. [McLinden et al. 2022](#) suggest that in primary education the collaboration between specialist practitioners, support services, the educational setting and parents is crucial in making sure the balance of support is right for an individual child. Planning and collaboration are key in the initial transition process when a child with V I enters primary education. Shared understandings and goals should be agreed between all parties, including input from the child to whatever extent is possible.

A study by [Pease et al. \(2020\)](#) also identified that effective information sharing between specialist and non-specialist practitioners was critical for supporting CYP with V I in mainstream primary school settings. Qualitative insight from 9 primary school teachers, employed in 3 schools in Gloucestershire, revealed that teaching staff valued expert input in widening their knowledge of each condition and understanding the specific needs of each child with V I when it came to tailoring and implementing support.

Specialist practitioners have an important role in supporting mainstream primary school teachers to adopt an inclusive teaching approach. As such, [McLinden et al. \(2022\)](#) suggest that QTVIs need to have an understanding of the primary years' curriculum, of how children learn during this phase of development and education, how V I can impact learning and how learning can be made accessible. They must also understand how children can learn strategies and skills to overcome potential barriers to learning at each stage of primary education (learning to access). Drawing on this knowledge and understanding, the QTVI is then able to share and demonstrate teaching strategies to mainstream primary teachers to make the curriculum more accessible and inclusive.

The next phase of education involves transition to a more complex secondary school setting, which can be challenging for all pupils. However, CYP with V I are likely to experience more challenges than their sighted peers. Specific challenges include adjusting to a new and bigger physical environment, more challenging curriculum content, interacting with more teaching staff and changes in social support. [Strnadová et al. \(2023\)](#) highlight that while extensive research exists in relation to the transition to post-school life for students with disability, the

transition to secondary school holds unique contextual challenges and therefore requires consideration in research.

A 2023 systematic review ([Strnadová et al. 2023](#)) pointed to the importance of a person-centred and personalised transition planning approach including collaboration between stakeholders and supporting pupil voices in all decisions. The provision of clear guidelines for transition roles, responsibilities and resources was also identified as important, along with quality training at primary and secondary schools to develop staff capability around transition support. Another facilitator for primary to secondary school transition planning that was valued by both parents and pupils was ensuring pupils had sufficient information about their new school which could be gained through orientation days to become familiar with the layout of the new school.

Barriers identified in the review included limited input to transition planning by pupils, the lack of attention to self-determination development in primary education, and across the transition process, and limited information about each pupil's present level of achievement and development. [Strnadová et al. \(2023\)](#) suggest that further research is needed to test and establish the transition practices and processes identified in their review, through predominantly qualitative research with education practitioners, CYP with V I and parents.

## 8.2 Secondary education

In the academic year 2022/23, there were 1,190 pupils with V I as their primary SEN at the end of secondary education in state-funded schools in England ([DfE, 2023](#)). The average rate for 'attainment 8' (which measures pupils' performance in 8 GCSE-level qualifications) for pupils with V I was 39.6%, compared to 50% for pupils with no SEN ([DfE, 2023](#)).

[VI sector reports](#), published in June 2023, evidenced a significant attainment gap between CYP with V I and their peers without additional support needs in all four nations of the UK. Data for Scotland showed a 25% attainment gap between school leavers with V I who had one or more qualifications at Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework level 5 (National 5) or better and school leavers with no additional support need. In Wales, GCSE results

showed a gap of greater than 26% for pupils achieving Level 2 (equivalent to 5 A\* to C) including England/Welsh and maths.

Attainment figures for England showed that, in 2020/21, pupils with V I were one of the highest performing SEN groups, with 58% achieving grade 4 and above in English and 39.4% achieving grade 5 and above for Maths. However, there was a significant gap in English and Maths attainment rates compared to pupils with no SEN. 58 per cent of pupils with V I achieved grade 4 and above in English, compared to 79% of pupils with no SEN. 39 per cent of V I pupils achieved grade 5 and above in Maths compared to 58% of pupils with no SEN ([RNIB, 2022](#)).

The lower attainment level of pupils with V I in maths is highlighted more broadly in the literature. A systematic review by [Klingenberg et al. \(2019\)](#) highlighted that students with V I tend to perform below their ability in maths compared with other academic subjects. This is attributed to their awareness and understanding of spatial and directional concepts being more challenging to grasp compared with students without V I. The review also observed that many maths textbooks have visual images with important content information that is not transcribed or described in either Braille or digital versions. To this point, [Hayes et al. \(2023\)](#) suggest that incorporating hands-on experience within the mainstream secondary classroom is essential and the implementation of multi-sensory, inclusive teaching methods, such as tactile, 3D models) can benefit all children in mainstream education.

Although students with V I are capable of studying all academic subjects, they can be excluded from accessing and participating fully in the core curriculum, particularly at secondary level as the focus of education shifts to more academic content and attainment ([Miyachi, 2020](#)). Outside the UK, a [systematic study](#) found that barriers in accessing the curriculum were experienced more in secondary schools than in primary schools, and were more prevalent in subjects such as mathematics, science and physical education.

Focused on the UK, [McLinden et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasise that the mainstream secondary education context is markedly different from primary schools. Firstly, secondary schools often occupy a larger site and students are required to move between classrooms and buildings

for different subjects, in contrast to smaller primary schools. Secondly, the curriculum is broader in scope and more demanding and lessons may operate at a fast pace. Finally, different teachers will have different approaches to teaching and classroom management, which may be harder for students with V I to navigate.

The importance of learning to access, in readiness for adulthood, is more apparent at secondary level than at primary level education. However, [McLinden et al. \(2022\)](#) suggest that there is often less flexibility in the secondary curriculum to facilitate learning to access, particularly in the later years when curriculum content is largely determined by assessment requirements. Assistive technology is essential for learning to access at all phases of education, but the range and complexity of the secondary curriculum makes it particularly important in this phase. Students with V I are likely to use a range of assistive technology to access a broad curriculum and need time to learn and practise with different devices, which adds to their workload. It also requires specialist practitioners who are knowledgeable and confident in supporting the use of assistive technology ([McLinden et al. 2020](#)).

Moreover, the expansive nature of the secondary curriculum can be a challenge to many specialist practitioners, whose subject knowledge is unlikely to be detailed, making it harder to fully understand a subject's access challenges and the most appropriate support strategies to implement. The [mandatory qualifications](#) for QTVIs stipulate that specialist teachers must understand current statutory curriculum frameworks and their associated assessment criteria. However, this does not necessarily equate to in-depth subject specific knowledge.

A fundamental difference between mainstream primary and secondary education is the increased focus on summative assessment, which greatly determines future pathways in post-16 education, training and/or employment. [McLinden et al. \(2020\)](#) suggest that examinations can be seen as a microcosm of the wider access to learning/learning to access balance, requiring a mutually agreed set of access arrangements which reflect the needs of individual students with V I.

Under the [Equality Act \(2010\)](#) awarding bodies for England, Scotland and Wales are required to make ‘reasonable adjustments where a disabled person would be at substantial disadvantage in undertaking an assessment’. In Northern Ireland, the provision of individual arrangements for disabled students taking examinations is required under the [Special Education Needs and Disability Order 2005](#). The reasonable adjustments made must enable candidates to access the assessment without giving any advantage over other candidates. Moreover, in England, Ofqual requires awarding bodies to design their assessments such that they do not present any unjustifiable access barriers to students. Ofqual, therefore, provides rules and guidance to awarding bodies to support them in providing reasonable adjustments that promote fair access for all candidates ([Ofqual, 2021](#)).

Access and assessment arrangements available for UK candidates in externally assessed examinations, such as GCSEs, include: extra time, the use of technology to read questions and generate responses, the provision of question papers in alternative formats and a scribe to write a candidate’s responses ([Nisbet, 2020](#)). A report by [Ofqual \(2021\)](#) provides qualitative insight into how assistive technology was being deployed in practice, from the perspective of teachers, SENCOs and students. The study found that decisions around the deployment of assistive technology for examinations appeared to be largely driven by the specific needs of the students. The importance of frequently re-assessing students, identifying and meeting new and changing needs as they arise, was also highlighted.

Guidance on supporting learners with V I, [produced by the Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research \(University of Birmingham\)](#), similarly emphasised the importance of discussing examination arrangements with students since they have a good understanding of the types of reasonable adjustments that work best for them. Moreover, it was recommended that once access arrangements are agreed, students should have chance to practice using them properly before the exam.

[Ofqual’s 2021 report](#) also identified that the degree of compatibility between assessment materials and the assistive technology with which they are used, though not fundamentally problematic, had scope for improvement. It was suggested that the digital file formats in

which examination papers are provided could be tested with a wider variety of assistive technology software to ensure compatibility. It may also be that examiners can further embrace the principles of universal design when developing examination question papers.

Research by [Nisbet \(2020\)](#), to explore secondary level assessment arrangements, found that digital examination papers from five out of six UK awarding bodies were not adequately prepared for candidates with severe V I who use screen reader technologies. Only one awarding body offered digital papers that were adequately accessible with screen readers. [Nisbet \(2020\)](#) reasons that UK awarding bodies may not produce screen-reader accessible papers because guidance [published by the UK Association for Accessible Formats \(2020\)](#), for adapting and modifying questions papers for candidates with disabilities, addresses the production of Large Print and braille examination papers, but does not deal with screen reader technologies.

Every state secondary school across the UK should offer some form of career provision, which includes impartial advice and guidance from a qualified careers advisor. Evidence from England has highlighted a pattern of inconsistent and fragmented Career Education, Information and Guidance (CEIG) across mainstream school settings ([Thomas Pocklington Trust, 2020](#)). Data collected from a survey of CYP with V I (N=36) and three focus groups attended by 19 QTVIs revealed disparity in specialist support available to CYP, determined by factors such as school setting, the local authority and whether they had a EHC plan or not. A related issue was the growing prevalence of QTVIs having to meet gaps in CEIAG provision, despite concerns that they are not qualified to do so. Moreover, the importance of tailored, rather than generic, CEIAG support for CYP with VI, which addresses their V I in a positive and aspirational manner, was emphasised ([Thomas Pocklington Trust, 2020](#)). The report called for a clear national CEIAG strategy that ensures CYP with V I receive the guidance they need.

### 8.3 The transition to post-16 education

The transition from secondary school to higher education, training or employment symbolises a shift to greater independence and adulthood. Not only does the physical environment change, but expectations, support and even legal rights and responsibilities will be different ([Douglas et al. 2019](#)). [McLinden et al. \(2022\)](#) highlight that provision of specialist support is less likely to be provided directly by specialist practitioners. This means that CYP with V I will need to be increasingly confident in articulating and advocating for the specialist provision they need. In secondary education, it is essential, therefore, that specialist support focuses on learning to access strategies so that CYP with V I develop the necessary skills and confidence to achieve a successful transition.

The [government's 2022 SEND review](#) highlighted that well-planned transitions are key to setting young people up for success in FE. However, too often, information about a young person's needs and required support is not shared in good time, making it challenging for colleges and other FE settings to put the right provision in place. To address this the [DfE is developing good practice guidance](#), for England, to support high-quality transitions for CYP with SEND and alternative provision. While it will ultimately look at transitions between all phases of education, the initial focus will be transitions into and out of post-16 settings.

The [Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales \(2021\)](#) already contains guidance on good practice to support the transition to FE. Opportunities to become familiar with the new setting, meeting teaching staff and taking part in taster sessions are recommended as helping to prepare young people with their transition to an FE institution. Young people should also be provided with time, preferably before or at the point of enrolment, to discuss their needs and the support they require.

## 9 Post-16 education for CYP with V I

Evidence from a longitudinal study ([Hewett et al. 2021](#)), tracking the post-school experiences of 80 young people with V I, in England and Wales, highlights the importance of ensuring that when a student with V I leaves compulsory education they are suitably equipped with a broad range of skills to live and continue learning with as much independence as possible. This is crucial because, for many young people with V I, entering post-16 education will be the first time they assume primary responsibility for disclosing and advocating for their needs and access arrangements to education and specialist practitioners.

### 9.1 Further education

Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide specialist support to all CYP aged 0-25. However, when a young person transitions to post-16 education the support they receive either diminishes or disappears ([Thomas Pocklington Trust, 2022](#)). Reports from the V I sector, published in 2023, found an inconsistent approach to the provision of specialist support in further education (FE) institutions across local authorities in each of the devolved nations of the UK ([RNIB, 2023](#)).

With no clear guidance as to how support from specialist staff should be provided in post-16 education, for many CYP with V I the support drops off when they leave school. In Northern Ireland and Scotland, for example, QTVIs support students in mainstream schools who remain in formal education (years 13 and 14). However, if a student moves to a local FE college, it is the college's disability service that holds the budget for specialist support ([RNIB, 2023](#)). Similarly, in England, each local authority operates their own policy, which can be different between a sixth form and a mainstream FE college setting, and they are less likely to offer habilitation for students aged 16 years+ than other age groups ([VIEW, 2022](#)). Moreover, since V I is a low incidence disability, it is possible that FE college disability services will lack knowledge of specific needs of this group of students.

UK-wide research commissioned by [Thomas Pocklington Trust \(2022\)](#) found that a quarter (24%) of local authorities provide different post-16 provision depending on whether a young person studies in a mainstream or a sixth form college. They reported that almost two thirds (61%) offer



statutory services to students with V I in sixth form, but less than half (44%) have a statutory offer for mainstream colleges. This meant a quarter of mainstream colleges had to buy in their support, compared to 10% of sixth form colleges.

[Hewett et al. \(2021\)](#) reported that the majority (over 90%; N= 86) of participants recruited to their longitudinal transitions study, covering England and Wales, progressed to either a sixth form or FE college. A small number of participants, attending FE colleges, reported challenges accessing their courses. This included learning material not being made available in an accessible format and not receiving essential equipment at the start of the academic year. Research by [Thomas Pocklington Trust \(2022\)](#) also highlighted a need for FE colleges to ensure access to assistive technology and effective training for students with V I. FE colleges should not assume that all students with V I are fully proficient in the use of assistive technology. As such, the report recommended that students should be supported throughout their time in FE to develop skills and confidence in the use of assistive and alternative format technologies.

[Hewett et al. \(2021\)](#) also identified evidence of 'churning' amongst students with V I in the FE sector. Churning is characterised by young people repeating years in college or repeatedly taking courses at the same level (or even lower levels) and appearing not to progress to higher education or employment. This demonstrates the negative impact, to the attainment and progression of young people with V I, of not getting access to the right support. Attaining lower levels of qualifications, not being able to access education and/or employment and a lack of tailored support are factors that may leave students with V I at increased risk of becoming long-term NEET (not in education, employment or training), compared to their sighted peers ([RNIB, 2023](#)).

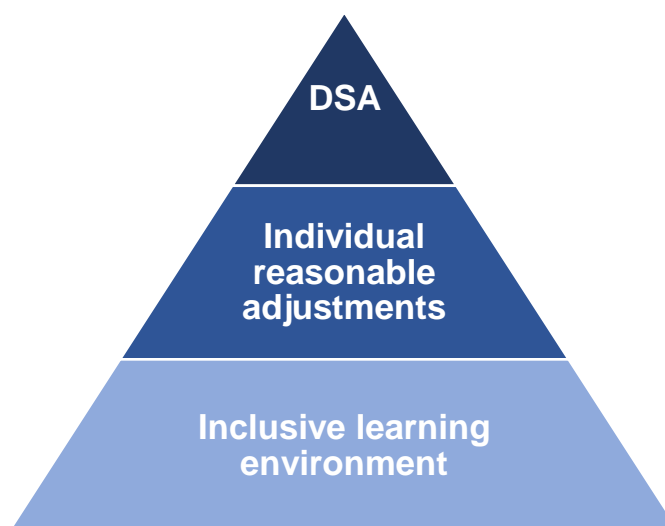
[Commissioned research](#) from Thomas Pocklington Trust has suggested that the critical gap between the ages of 16-18, when students received very mixed support in FE settings, may be closed if government and/or local authority action was taken to:

- Ringfence adequate funding to deliver specialist services to students with V I in all post-16 education settings.
- Review eligibility criteria and policies to ensure that ECH plans are not required to assess local authority sensory impairment services.

- Embed the CFVI into statutory regulations so that young people with V I and their families have a clear understanding of the pathways of support and services available.
- Ensure that all students with V I leave compulsory education with the skills and knowledge they need to use mainstream and assistive technology.

## 9.2 Higher education

The regulatory landscape requires higher education (HE) providers to assist and support disabled students as they may reasonably require. According to the [Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group](#), in a 2017 report, supported by the DfE, HE providers should take a proactive approach to developing and embedding an inclusive teaching and learning environment. Figure 2 shows a model for supporting disabled students in HE which was proposed by the DfE to illustrate how HE providers should structure their support for students with all disabilities, inclusive of those with V I.



**Figure 2:** A model for supporting disabled students in HE. Source. [DfE \(2017\)](#).

While education policy and regulation has placed greater responsibility on HE providers to embed inclusive practice, the literature in relation to the transition to HE often focuses on students without disabilities, and understanding of the experiences of specific groups, such as those with a V I, is lacking ([Tomlinson and Killingback, 2024](#)). While support mechanisms are implemented to address potential barriers to access,

students with V I often report a largely universal approach to reasonable adjustments, and inclusive practice, rather than one that accounts for individual needs and personal preferences ([Tomlinson and Killingback, 2024](#)).

### 9.2.1 Access and barriers to inclusion

In the academic year 2021/22, there were [3,700 students with V I](#) enrolled in higher education in the UK; this represents a 7% increase from 2020/21 (N= 3,450). A total of 2,940 students with V I were studying for an undergraduate degree and 760 for a postgraduate qualification ([HESA, 2023](#)). Whilst national HE data demonstrate more students with V I are accessing HE in the UK, this does not necessarily equate to seamless provision and improved equality of experience. After all, the experience of students with V I in HE is influenced by the interaction of various factors, ranging from statutory requirements and the physical environment to the teaching staff and peers they interact with and the agency of the individual themselves.

Government provides support for students with V I in HE through the [DSA](#), a non-means tested scheme to fund specialist equipment, non-medical help and general expenses associated with a student's V I. Currently, UK students are eligible to complete a DSA assessment prior to starting HE. Yet, evidence from the literature indicates that awareness and understanding of the DSA process is often low amongst students with V I and many do not apply, despite being eligible ([Hewett, 2018](#)). To help overcome this issue, it has been suggested that students should be encouraged, and supported, to investigate the DSA scheme and make an application at the earliest possible opportunity to ensure specialist equipment and support can be in place for the start of the academic year ([Hewett, 2018](#)).

Even where students do apply for DSA, it has been noted that the onus falls upon them to find a way to navigate the complex and burdensome application process ([Thomas Pocklington Trust, 2024](#)). A qualitative study by [Hewett et al. \(2023\)](#) found that 14 out of 33 participants who applied for DSA experienced problems across the various stages of the application process. This included delays in their initial application being processed, inaccessible forms and difficulties in obtaining the necessary evidence to support their application. Study participants also experienced a range of problems with the delivery of their funded

support prior to the start of their courses. Fifteen participants experienced delays in receiving their allocated assistive technology, while a further 16 considered the technology they received was not fit for purpose. The study suggested the failure of DSA, to deliver funded support and technology before the academic year has begun, causes strain to students and impacts their transition experience into HE. Consequently, this negatively affects students' education and social participation and creates an additional administrative burden, which combines to place them at a disadvantage to their sighted peers.

In February 2024, the Students Loans Company introduced an [improved DSA service model](#). Under the new model, students continue to apply to the Students Loan Company for DSA, and once eligibility is confirmed, one of two contract suppliers is allocated to be responsible for the provision of needs assessment, assistive technology equipment and training and aftercare. This new approach has been designed to improve the student application journey and to address a number of 'pain points', including a long process, having to contact multiple companies and no straight forward complaints process ([Thomas Pocklington Trust, 2024](#)).

All universities have a disability or learning support team that can advise on available support and help with transitioning and participating in HE. Accessibility, reasonable adjustments and finances are facilitated by university disability services ([Tomlinson and Killingback, 2024](#)). Disability support in universities is typically managed by a dedicated team, however, smaller institutions may assign individual members of staff to support students who declare a disability. [Hewett et al. \(2023\)](#) conducted interviews with 40 HE students with V I in the UK, capturing their experiences of the full university student lifecycle. Of 40 participants, 35 of them met with dedicated disability support staff to discuss their V I and the reasonable adjustments that they might need. Reasonable adjustments agreed included advanced access to timetables to facilitate mobility and orientation, digitalisation of textbooks and transcription of lecture notes.

### **9.2.2 Teaching staff**

Disability services do not directly address subject specific barriers and enablers. This task falls to academic teaching staff, who often face barriers of their own in the form of limited specialist pedagogical guidance and resources, combined with limited experience of teaching

students with V I. This can mean that reasonable adjustments intended to facilitate inclusion can be experienced as disabling rather than enabling by students with V I ([Tomlinson and Killingback, 2024](#)).

Academics involved in a Turkish study by [Firat \(2021\)](#) acknowledged that students with V I face academic barriers, including difficulty accessing lecture notes, inadequate library resources and a lack of faculty understanding. The academics reported that they wanted to help students with V I, but did not have the knowledge, training and confidence to do so. The study suggested that any academic teaching students with V I should be equipped with the necessary knowledge of V I and inclusive pedagogy. Moreover, academics should consider the needs of students with V I when designing and delivering lectures, adopting a person-centred teaching approach.

The importance of academic staff working in partnership with students with V I and disability support services is emphasised in the literature. Inclusive HE education should be seen as a progressive partnership between the institution, its staff and students, with a recognition that reasonable adjustments put in place to support a student with V I will evolve over time, as all parties learn together about what forms of adjustments work best at different points across the educational journey ([Hewett, 2018](#)).

[Tomlinson and Killingback \(2024\)](#) suggest that open discussion with disability services staff, and students with V I, around subject and student-specific learning and support would help to equip teaching staff with an awareness of the anticipatory adjustments they can make to ensure an optimal level of support and inclusion for individual students. Being accessible, approachable and working together was also identified, by [Frank et al. \(2020\)](#), as critical to academics developing supportive relationships with students with V I that help to facilitate positive learning experiences.

Guidance to aid HE professionals better understand how to work with students with V I suggests that lecturers should seek to ensure a balance between inclusive practice and reasonable (individual) adjustments in teaching sessions by ([Hewett \(2018\)](#)):

- Issuing lecture notes to students in advance of lectures.
- Providing verbal cues to indicate to students that they are moving between slides.

- Avoiding simply pointing at information and providing additional verbal instruction.
- Describing any written information which is not in the students' notes, such as diagrams or mathematical workings which are written on a whiteboard.
- Providing copies of reading lists in sufficient time for alternative formats to be obtained.

At the core of HE is the opportunity for all students to become independent learners and to develop their own independent research skills. This often presents barriers for students with V I as reference material is ordinarily presented in a format which is not readily accessible. [Hewett \(2018\)](#) suggests that such barriers can be overcome with the provision of universal inclusive practices, whereby HE providers provide transcription services, purchase alternative formats of books and journals and provide research assistants to help students identify relevant text. These measures were identified as examples of good practice that HE providers can embed to help create an inclusive learning environment in which students with V I can study as independently as possible.

### **9.2.3 The student experience**

For students with V I, self-awareness and personal agency are key enablers of a positive learning experience and successful education outcomes. While personal agency is important throughout each phase of education, it is fundamental in helping students with V I to navigate the HE environment and to know how best to advocate for and draw on individualised adjustments ([Hewett et al. 2023](#)). This is because, in comparison to compulsory education, there is an expectation that the student will take much greater responsibility for their learning, social participation and independent living.

The importance of developing students with V I as independent learners is recognised in specialist curriculums, yet evidence suggests that many students entering HE have had limited opportunities to self-advocate when younger. Consequently, students often do not feel equipped and confident to self-advocate and challenge if their needs are not being met. This may prevent them from self-advocating to negotiate support arrangements, explain their V I and challenge if things go wrong, which

can have a negative impact on their experience of HE ([Hewett et al. \(2023\)](#)).

Students interviewed in a longitudinal study, conducted by [Hewett et al. \(2017\)](#), experienced a number of barriers including not knowing how to explain their impairment and how it affected their learning and not knowing how explain to academic staff how to prepare accessible course materials. This suggests that self-awareness and good communication skills are key attributes that enable students with V I to feel confident in advocating for their learning and support needs and expressing these with disability support and teaching staff.

[Research on the experiences of students with V I in HE](#), in the UK, indicates that there are multivarious factors that enable and complicate their access, participation and success in HE. There are some common self-reported barriers to inclusion and learning in the university setting that students with V I encounter. Whilst HE providers are legally required to make reasonable adjustments to remove barriers, [Frank et al. \(2020\)](#) found that a lack of academic support, difficulty accessing lectures and inaccessible course materials presented considerable barriers to learning for physiotherapy students with V I. Interviews with a small group of students revealed that visual materials provided were generally not fully accessible and teaching methods were aimed at the sighted majority in the classroom. Moreover, students described how the unsupportive attitudes and behaviours of academic staff led to limited and inconsistent provision of reasonable adjustments, which reduced access to course content and required students to put in a significant amount of additional time and effort into their studies to compensate.

A larger study of 32 students with V I, conducted by [Hewett et al. \(2017\)](#), found that participants encountered similar academic barriers. These included not having lecture material in accessible formats, no adjustments to visual elements and fast-paced lectures. Such barriers often stemmed from institutions not meeting their responsibility to make anticipatory adjustments at the start of the academic year and support/teaching staff not understanding the appropriate accessible format the students required.

One of the most common types of adjustments for students with V I is personalised examination arrangements, such as modified papers assistive technology and extra time. Evidence from [Hewett et al. \(2023\)](#) indicates variation in student exam experiences. Thirteen participants

(N= 40) who reported on their exam experiences in HE stated that they were not able to access their exams as intended. This included papers not being prepared correctly in an accessible format (e.g. Braille papers which contained mistakes), agreed assistive technology not being made available, and not receiving agreed extra time to complete the exam. The authors suggest that barriers to examinations, and learning more generally, often stem from an overreliance on individual and ad hoc adjustments, rather than the institutions having appropriate universal inclusion policies in place.

Statistics show that students with V I experience poorer employment outcomes compared to their peers without V I and are, therefore, vulnerable to becoming long-term NEET. [Hewett et al. \(2023\)](#) found that 46.4% of students with V I (N= 40), graduating from HE, were in full-time work, compared to 59.8% of the students with no known disability. Instead of progressing to employment, many participants in the longitudinal study continued onto alternative options, including further study (n= 8) and travel abroad (n= 1). Three participants had elected to apply for voluntary work instead of paid employment due to limited work experience, which they believed made their CVs less competitive.

Student access to careers guidance was identified as a contributory factor that can influence student progression to employment. [Hewett et al. \(2023\)](#) found that only 13 participants (N= 40) had engaged with their university's career service, with many citing the pressures of maintaining their studies as a barrier to doing so. It was also reported that some students experienced a negative response in relation to their V I when attending careers events and speaking with careers advisors. This appears to link to societal perceptions of individuals with V I and assumptions about what they are capable of in terms of education, independent living and employment.

HE providers have a responsibility to support all students within their institution and this should include a careers service that offers specific guidance to students with V I. [Hewett \(2018\)](#) suggests this may include advice on how to declare their disability to a potential employer, information on support that the student might utilise in the workplace, such as Access to Work, and advice on how best to approaching discussing reasonable adjustments in the workplace. Additionally, to improve long term outcomes careers services should encourage students with V I to seek suitable work placements or voluntary



opportunities and support them in applying. While the existing research sheds light on the experiences of students with V I when preparing for life after HE, further research to understand the perspectives of careers advisors and disability support staff in the delivery of careers information and guidance for students with V I would be beneficial.

The Vision Partnership [Insight report on employment](#), published in 2023, highlighted there is limited data on the transition period from young adulthood and education through to employment. The report observed that a lack of individualised careers support and work experience opportunities can hinder the progression of young people with V I from education into employment. There appears to be awareness of this within the sight loss sector, with the development of schemes such as Thomas Pocklington Trust's [Get Set Progress Internships Programme](#) and [Works for Me](#) employment service. Yet, evidence relating to the efficacy of such support in meeting employment needs and outcomes in the UK is not yet available.

## 10 Social inclusion and support for students with V I across education

V I may limit social interaction and have a negative impact on individuals' socio-emotional development. Research evidence has demonstrated that for students with V I both the inability to access various aspects of the curriculum, and conversely, the various supports used to access the curriculum, can detract from their school experiences ([Jessup et al. 2018](#)). There remains limited empirical research into the social dimensions of school inclusion in CYP with V I across the UK.

### 10.1 Social inclusion

Social inclusion as a concept in the literature encompasses the development of positive social relationships with peers and teachers, as well as student participation in school activities ([Manitsa et al. 2023](#)). A student's sense of belonging and social inclusion may be influenced by personal characteristics, parent support, peer support, teacher support, emotional stability, extra-curricular activities and environmental/school safety ([Allen et al. 2018](#)).

An Australian study, involving 12 high school students with V I, aged 13-17 years, explored social aspects of school. Participants described school social inclusion as being noticed, or recognised authentically, 'for the way you are' and not being overlooked or ignored by staff or peers ([Jessup et al. 2018](#)). The study found that students' social inclusion was enhanced when their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness were met. However, the wider variety of teachers in high school, compared to primary school, meant teachers may not feel they have time or see it as their job to attend to the diverse social needs as well as academic needs of individual pupils ([Jessup et al. 2018](#)).

[Jessup et al. \(2018\)](#) observe that social contexts that foster self-determination also foster social inclusion. Yet, self-determination for students with V I can be challenging to foster in school environments. While researchers and professionals have underscored the importance of promoting self-determination skills among CYP with VI, this emphasis has been slow to translate into practice. Evidence has indicated that often teachers do not prioritise self-determination in their day-to-day instruction due to insufficient time and lack of awareness of curricula ([Cmar and Markosi, 2019](#)).

## 10.2 Social support

Social support refers to the pro-social behaviours or attitudes that individuals receive from their family and social environments with the aim of enhancing social functioning and interactions. These behaviours contribute to the development of the feeling of being valued and accepted ([Manitsa & Doikou, 2022](#)).

Research suggests that the social support provided to students with V I by teaching staff and their peers in educational institutions may have a positive impact on their academic learning, socio-emotional development, sense of belonging, well-being and future independent living ([Manitsa et al. 2023](#)). Conversely, students with V I are at risk of lifelong socio-emotional problems if they do not receive the appropriate social support during these formative years.

There is consensus in the literature that supportive relationships with peers and teachers is an important enabler of social inclusion and support in education settings, especially where a student has additional needs. Moreover, social relationships and friendships may also have a positive impact on students' self-esteem and self-confidence ([Manitsa and Doikou, 2022](#)). A systematic review, by [Subban et al. \(2022\)](#), identified that teachers who are 'warm' and 'empathetic' and demonstrate acceptance and kindness in their interactions with students contributed to a sense of school inclusion. Time is essential to building social relationships, yet education is a time-driven, outcome-focused system. Students with V I need time to build relationships with peers and teachers as well as additional time to access the curriculum ([Jessup et al. 2018](#)).

Research evidence, from international studies, has found that education professionals often report a lack of confidence in understanding and supporting the socio-emotional needs of their students with V I. It is suggested that this possibly stems from a lack of professional training and a clear understanding of students' individual needs ([Manitsa et al. 2023](#)). Students with V I have also emphasised the importance of raising awareness and educating staff and service providers about their specific needs. Consequently, [Manitsa et al. \(2023\)](#) suggest the development of a conceptual framework that analyses the different elements of social inclusion to help practitioners and academics to better understand the socio-emotional needs of students with V I and therefore promote their social inclusion and support in education settings.

## 11 Future research

The literature review undertaken in the production of this Insight report has highlighted several areas in which data and knowledge is lacking:

- More data are needed on the prevalence of V I in the CYP population across the different phases of education and the impact of V I on place of study, educational attainment and progression to post-16 education and employment. This would improve estimations of the attainment gap and employment outcomes as a result of V I.
- [Research from Australia](#) has shed light on how students with V I in secondary school experience mainstream education and the provision of the expanded core curriculum, giving an opportunity to hear the voices of students themselves. There are few UK studies that explicitly seek to know how CYP with V I, attending mainstream primary and secondary schools, experience their schooling. A largescale qualitative study would help to identify trends relating to, for example, classroom teacher understanding of V I, access to the core and specialist curriculums, barriers to learning and social participation.
- UK studies that investigate the underlying factors that influence mainstream teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion and attainment of students with V I are needed. Such research should be designed to provide insight on teacher knowledge and experience, inclusive practices, students with V I (including nature and severity of V I) and the environment in which teachers are placed. This could help to increase understanding of the relationship between these factors and inform teacher training programmes and continuous professional development.
- Given the well-established traditions of V I education, namely the access to learning/learning to access model, it is perhaps surprising that there is a dearth of strong evidence in the literature to inform inclusive teaching practices. This apparent lack of evidence may be [linked to the low incidence nature of V I in CYP](#) compared to other more prevalent categories of SEN/ALN/ASN. Systematic evaluation of the adjustment and modification of teaching strategies to include CYP with V I, through formal research, would help to establish precise and prescriptive definitions of what interventions work in V I education,

meaning mainstream teachers would be better able to engage CYP with V I in learning.

- [The CFVI makes a transformative contribution](#) to UK policies and practice in providing more coherent and joined up education provision across the UK and ensuring CYP with V I can access an appropriate and equitable education. However, further research is needed into how the framework might best be applied in child's day-to-day education and in understanding the training requirements required to support the delivery of this by specialist and non-specialist practitioners.
- While there has been some exploration of the primary to secondary school transition process, the focus of many research studies continues to be the [transition to post-16 education and/or employment](#). This limits the understanding of how CYP with V I experience the earlier transition process and the availability of best practice guidance for QTVIs and mainstream classroom teachers on supporting independence and personal agency as CYP prepare for and adjust to the transition to secondary education.
- [Research outside the UK](#) has examined the impact of training 'pre-service' mainstream teachers in assistive technology competencies on teachers' self-reported confidence and preparation to support CYP with V I in the use of assistive technology. Providing such training in teacher training programmes could translate to increased integration of assistive technology, as part of inclusive teaching practices, and increased opportunity for CYP with V I to participate in learning, resulting in academic and social benefits for students.

## **Appendix A - Overview of government SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan. Right support, right place, right time (2023)**

[The government's Plan](#) sets out how an effective single national system, for England, based on new National Standards will be delivered, through new local partnerships and an improved EHC plan process to ensure that the experience of seeking support is less bureaucratic and less adversarial for CYP with VI, their families and providers alike.

### **New National Standards**

The new standards will set out what provision system leaders, such as governing bodies, headteachers and college principals, need to make available for all children with SEND in every local area, nursery, school and college. National Standards will cover the evidence-based approaches to identification and intervention for those with SEN support and for those with EHC plans. Government will work closely with CYP and their families when writing the National Standards to find a balance between national consistency and individual needs. A suite of SEND and alternative provision practice guides will be produced to equip frontline professionals with the skills to make best use of provision and identify needs early, accurately and consistently.

### **A reformed, nationally consistent EHCP process**

EHCP templates and processes will be standardised to improve consistency and best practice. So too digitalisation of EHC plans will reduce the burden of the administrative process, improve the experience of parents and professionals and improve monitoring of the health of the SEND system.

### **Transitions and preparation for adulthood**

The DfE is developing good practice guidance to support consistent, timely, high-quality transitions for CYP with SEND and in alternative provision. Government also proposes to continue working with Student Loans Company to reduce the time for DSA support to be agreed. A set of National Standards for Personal, Social and Employability Skills Qualifications is being developed. These qualifications will provide knowledge and skills to support the transition into employment and are particularly important for some students with SEND.

### **A skilled workforce and excellent leadership**

Government will introduce a new leadership level SENCO national professional qualification for schools and fund up to 5,000 early years staff to gain an accredited early years SENCO qualification. Training will be expanded to increase school staff confidence in using assistive technology.

### **A financially sustainable system**

Core school funding will increase by £3.5 billion in 2023-24 compared to the year before, of which almost £1 billion of that increase will go towards high needs. This means high needs funding will be £10.1 billion in 2023-24. A system of funding bands and tariffs will be developed so that consistent National Standards are supported by more consistent funding across the country.

## **Appendix B – Further explanation of the 11 learning areas of the CFVI**

### **Area 1: Facilitating an Inclusive World**

At the heart of this area is a social model of support, with a focus on inclusion and inclusive or universal practice, ensuring physical and social environments are accessible for children and young people with vision impairment. Parents/guardians, all educators and professional carers advocate for inclusive education and community environments which enable young people to flourish and develop their personal agency, and for the removal of barriers to access participation.

### **Area 2: Sensory Development**

This Area of the framework recognises the importance of working with the child/ young person and family to maximise the use and development of the senses. Specialist input and support will be informed by the nature and severity of the vision impairment, if it was from birth or later onset or if the condition is degenerative, and whether there are other physical or learning needs.

### **Area 3: Communication**

This area of the framework recognises the importance of working with CYP to develop effective communication in formal (e.g. the classroom) and informal settings. This might involve specialist adjustments and approaches to teaching, or adopting alternative or bespoke approaches. Much of the teaching should be undertaken by, or under the direction of, a suitably specialist qualified professional. Central to this will be the child or young person's preferences, needs and circumstances.

### **Area 4: Literacy**

Teaching of literacy to CYP with V I should not be thought of as a simple access issue that can be solved with adjustments to print material or an alternative code (such as braille). Developing literacy skills might involve specialist adjustments and approaches to teaching, or adopting alternative or bespoke approaches and technology.

### **Area 5: Habilitation: Orientation and Mobility**

This area recognises the importance of teaching CYP with V I to be able to navigate the world around them, and to be able to move safely and with confidence from one place to the next. It recognises the importance of each CYP being supported to be as independent as possible, in an age appropriate way.



### **Area 6: Habilitation: Independent Living Skills**

This area recognises the importance of supporting children and young people with vision impairment to develop the day to day skills they need in order to live as independent a life as possible. Much of the teaching should be undertaken by, or under the direction of a RQHS.

### **Area 7: Accessing Information**

This area considers the teaching of methods children and young people can use to access, manage and produce information as independently as possible. Young people also require an understanding of when to use particular approaches, how to manage and navigate an information rich world, and the role of others in scaffolding them by preparing materials, adjusting the environment and making accommodations.

### **Area 8: Technology**

Some technologies require bespoke teaching and time delivered by a professional with specialist knowledge of that technology. It is important that CYP have access to the most appropriate assistive technology for their needs at as early an age as is appropriate, and that this is facilitated within their day to day working.

### **Area 9: Health: Social, Emotional, Mental and Physical Wellbeing**

This area is important for all CYP with V I, across the full spectrum of developmental and communication stages. It includes working with the family of the child/ young person, as well as providing support to professionals to ensure the needs of the CYP are understood.

### **Area 10: Social, Sports and Leisure**

This area of the framework recognises the importance of supporting CYP with V I to have opportunities to participate in social, sport and leisure opportunities, and the community which is traditionally beyond formal education.

### **Area 11: Preparing for adulthood**

This area focuses on preparing young people for further study or employment. The contents of this area need to be taken into consideration throughout the child/young person's life, to ensure that everything is in place for them to have a successful transition into adulthood.

## **Appendix C – Further explanation of the Expanded Core Curriculum**

### **Area 1: Assistive Technology**

An umbrella term that includes assistive and adaptive tools as well as instructional services that can enhance communication, access and learning. It can include electronic equipment, computer access such as magnification software and low vision optical devices.

### **Area 2: Career Education**

Career education will provide students with visual impairments of all ages the opportunity to learn through hands-on work experiences. They also learn work-related skills such as assuming responsibility, punctuality, and staying on task.

### **Area 3: Compensatory skills**

Compensatory skills include skills necessary for accessing the core curriculum including concept development; communication modes; organization and study skills; access to print materials through use of low vision aids and other compensatory strategies.

### **Area 4: Independent Living Skills**

Independent living skills include the tasks and functions people perform in daily life to increase their independence and contribute to the family structure. These skills include personal hygiene, eating skills, food preparation, time and money management, clothing care, and household tasks.

### **Area 5: Orientation and Mobility**

Orientation and mobility instruction enables students of all ages and motor abilities to be oriented to their surroundings and to move as independently and safely as possible. Students learn about themselves and their environments, including home, school, and community. Orientation and mobility lessons incorporate skills ranging from basic body image, spatial relationships, and purposeful movement to cane usage, travel in the community, and use of public transportation.

### **Area 6: Recreation and Leisure**

Instruction in recreation and leisure skills will ensure that students with visual impairments will have opportunities to explore, experience, and choose physical and leisure-time activities, both organized and

individual, that they enjoy. This instruction should focus on the development of life-long skills.

### **Area 7: Self-determination**

Self-determination includes choice-making, decision-making, problem solving, personal advocacy, assertiveness, and goal setting. Students with visual impairments often have fewer opportunities to develop and practice the specific skills that lead to self-determination. Students who know and value who they are and who have self-determination skills become effective advocates for themselves and therefore have more control over their lives.

### **Area 8: Sensory Efficiency**

Sensory efficiency includes instruction in the use of vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. It also addresses the development of the proprioceptive, kinaesthetic, and vestibular systems. Learning to use their senses efficiently, including the use of optical devices, will enable students with visual impairments to access and participate in activities in school, home, and community environments.

### **Area 9: Social Interaction Skills**

Social interaction skills include awareness of body language, gestures, facial expressions, and personal space. Instruction also includes learning about interpersonal relationships and self-control. Having appropriate social skills can often mean the difference between social isolation and a fulfilling life as an adult.

[Full Education Insight on the VI Insight Hub.](#)