# State of the Nation – services for children and young people with sight loss in Wales

The aim of this paper is to provide an update on the current state of services in Wales for children and young people with a vision impairment (CYPVI), to highlight areas of ongoing concern and to seek a way forward from the Welsh Government. A previous version of this paper was produced in March 2017.

## Introduction

It is estimated that there are around 2000 children and young people aged 0-19 with a visual impairment in Wales. At least 20 per cent of these will have additional disabilities and/or additional learning needs; a further 30 per cent have very complex needs[[1]](#footnote-1).

Children with vision impairment have different needs from adults with sight loss. To reduce lifelong inequalities, it is important that they (and their parents / carers) receive support for both early learning and formal education and habilitation (the acquisition of independence in daily living activities and mobility skills) throughout childhood and the transition into adulthood. If this support is not received in a timely manner it can severely impact on their intellectual, social and emotional development which in turn affects their life chances.

## Context

Over the last few years there has been a lot of Welsh Government initiatives and legislation affecting services to children and young people with vision impairment and additional needs:

* In 2016 the Welsh Government published the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act Codes of Practice. These Codes provide detailed guidance about the need for habilitation.
* The new All-Wales Integrated Pathway for Children and Young People (0 to 25 years) with Vision Impairment, and their Families has been agreed and hosted on the Vision2020UK website. This provides a framework for a joined-up delivery for support services from the time of diagnosis of a vision impairment. This includes access to the Low Vision Service Wales.
* The Welsh Government published a refreshed Eye Care Plan in August 2017 and the 10 new priorities until 2018 include targets around habilitation and sight testing in schools
* The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act received Royal Assent on 24 January 2018. Codes of Practice in relation to the Act are being developed. The Wales Vision Forum will be seeking to ensure that support requirements for CYPVI are properly covered.

**Areas of ongoing concern:**

**Population assessments and Area Plans**

The Wales Vision Forum had some concerns about the variations in the content of the population assessments. It was clear that some lacked the detail that exists in others, and this had the potential to affect decisions about service provision.

Habilitation services for CYPVI are not available in every local authority area in Wales which is unfair. Even when available, the current level of service provision does not meet good practice ratios in many areas of Wales.

The development of area plans provided an opportunity for local authorities to review the services that they provide. The Wales Vision Forum engaged with all Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs) developing the plans to highlight the needs of people with sight loss. Most of the plans referenced sensory loss and we will continue to scrutinise implementation to ensure these needs are not being overlooked.

**Workforce issues**

The Wales Association of Vision Impairment Educators (WAVIE) has kindly provided an updated snapshot of staffing levels and caseload data as at March 2018 (Annex A)

Sensory Services across Wales have agreed to adopt the National Sensory Impairment Partnership (NatSIP) Eligibility Framework to consider the needs of CYPVI. The minimum score to be eligible for support from services differs across the country.

The figures collected are caseload figures from services and this may not include the number of CYPVI who did not meet the locally adopted NatSIP minimum eligibility score for intervention, yet still have a recognised vision impairment.

Overall specialist staffing to support the needs of CYPVI remains worrying:

* The All Wales Sensory Group, consisting of heads of sensory impairment services from across Wales, has been monitoring the numbers of qualified teachers of the visually impaired (QTVIs) over the last few years to ensure succession planning. As of 1st September 2016, a total caseload of 1,732 children and young people were being supported across Wales by 31.7FTE specialist staff. As at March 2018 the number of QTVIs increased slightly to 32.4FTE and the case load increased to 1764 children and young people. It is still anticipated that this caseload will increase by approximately 400 children and young people when the new additional learning needs legislation providing for support from 0-25 comes into force. This is likely to necessitate at least a further 5 FTE staff. Concerns remain that several of the current QTVI staff employed are over the age of 55 years and will reach retirement before new staff are qualified to replace them. The All Wales Sensory Group are aware of these issues and are working with the Welsh Government to address them
* In May 2016 only 8.6FTE children’s habilitation specialists were employed in Wales, with 10 Local Authorities not employing any. The situation has deteriorated. There are now only 7.6FTE children’s habilitation specialists employed in Wales, with 8 Local Authorities not employing any. It is estimated that the number employed, directly or indirectly, should be between 16 -20 FTE to meet need. The Welsh Government is taking some welcome action to address this shortage.
* Alongside the shortage of habilitation specialists it is reported that there are 1.3FTE rehabilitation officers in 6 local authorities supporting children and young people. This is contrary to the guidance in the Social Services and Well-being Act Codes of Practice which sets out the need for comprehensive habilitation services. To be effective this must be delivered by a qualified habilitation specialist or a rehabilitation worker formally accredited to work with children.

As part of its Additional Learning Needs Transformation Programme a total of £289k has been allocated across four local authority regions to support the post-graduate training of local authority-based QTVIs, hearing impairment (HI) and multi-sensory impairment (MSI). Some of this funding will be used to facilitate training in Habilitation, Braille and British Sign Language for local authority-based specialist staff. The funding includes four places on Habilitation training courses, and one for Mobility. Examples of uptake on other types of VI related training include: sixteen places on Braille courses at either Level 1 or 2; one place on a VI assistant course; and six places on post-graduate courses for QTVIs.

### Access to services

### There are still discrepancies in access to services for children and young people with vision impairment across Wales. However, there are some welcome moves to address this:

* As already noted the All Wales Sensory Group is monitoring the staffing levels of QTVIs across Wales. They also continue to moderate use of the NatSIP Eligibility Framework for Involvement as the standard tool for deciding on entitlement to education support and have set up annual moderation meetings to ensure standardisation in its use
* The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act correctly recognises the need to prioritise preventative / reablement work to support children with vision impairment. There should be recognition of SSIA benchmarking recommendations presently being revised which should include a recommended number of habilitation specialists per capita
* From a local authority perspective, there is a need to monitor implementation of Area Plans to ensure that the needs of CYPVI are always considered.
* The new ALN Act should provide a more child-centred approach to the provision of services. The developing Codes of Practice will need scrutiny to ensure the needs of CYPVI are covered and habilitation support is centred around educational development.

These initiatives need to be monitored and receive appropriate levels of commitment and funding to operate consistently.

**Our Asks**

For these initiatives to impact beneficially on the lives and prospects of CYPVI there must be a commitment, driven forward by the Welsh Government, to joined up working from education, health, social care and voluntary sectors. These changes need to happen:

Services for children remain mixed with evidence of very limited provision in several local authorities with variations in other areas with pathways to service. Education, health and social care are still working too independently in many areas. Early years support needs more careful thought and should be family centred. Services should support the whole child from birth or the point of diagnosis, without delayed access to the right support at the right time Services are best co-ordinated around education but with a multi-agency approach supporting work in non-educational settings. There is strong evidence that early intervention has the strongest impact.

There is a need for a continued focus on workforce planning for QTVI’s and habilitation specialists building on the recent work of the Welsh Government. To deliver a structured programme of support local authorities should be employing at least one accredited habilitation specialist per 100 CYPVI.

The transfer from children to adult services tends to happen at different points during the young person’s journey and requires more consistency and focus.

Despite ongoing budgetary restraints all sectors must come together to develop new ways of working based on recent and emerging legislation.

**Conclusion**

Whilst the national developments are welcome, how they are delivered by local authorities will be the real test. Planning, especially in terms of cross-sector working and in workforce numbers and development, is paramount in this. Given recent and ongoing legislative changes in Wales there is a real opportunity for all the sectors in Wales to work together to improve services for Welsh CYPVI. This includes the Welsh Government, health, social services and education providers working alongside the voluntary sector to make a difference.

Partnership working is the only way to provide services that will ensure that Welsh CYPVI achieve their full potential and have the skills to be ready for adult life. This can only be achieved with early intervention by the right people at the right time.

1. #  Vision2020UK: Shared statistics and key messages about sight loss (2013)

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)