



Give me access to college:

Blind and partially sighted students
locked out of post 16 education.

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Same story, new facts – a snapshot of our findings

We have long heard from blind and partially sighted young people, their families, further education (FE) providers and local authority sensory impairment services that support for post-16 education does not always work.

The University of Birmingham’s longitudinal study found that blind and partially sighted young people were ‘churning in college’ - repeating courses at the same level without progressing [1].

Research from All Able and commissioned by Thomas Pocklington Trust found complicated routes into colleges and a lack of compliance with website regulations that are meant to ensure that online content is accessible. The report highlighted the impact that this had upon a young person that was asked to leave an IT course and encouraged to study catering, because the college didn’t know how to make the course accessible [2].

Despite blind and partially sighted learners achieving good GCSEs compared to other SEND groups, they are twice as likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) than the general population of 16–25-year-olds [3].

Something is clearly going very wrong. Our recent research has helped us to understand part of the problem - blind and partially sighted young people are simply being left to fall into a black hole of support [4].

A black hole of support

Our research shows a fragmented and unreliable system of support. There is variation between and within local authorities on how post-16 provision is delivered [4].

Local authorities (LAs) have a statutory responsibility to provide specialist educational need and disability (SEND) support to all children and young people aged 0-25. However, when a young person reaches 16 their support either drops-off or vanishes.

Our research has found;

- **A quarter (24%) of LAs provide different post-16 provision depending on whether someone studies in a mainstream or a sixth form college**
- **Almost two thirds (61%) of LAs offer statutory services to blind and partially sighted students in sixth form, but less than half (44%) have a statutory offer for mainstream colleges**
- **A quarter of mainstream colleges must buy in their support, compared to 10% of sixth form colleges.**

Furthermore, LAs that charge for their services saw a low take up of their offer, with 2 in 10 supporting no students in the year of 2021/22.

The current SEND system is not inclusive and blind and partially sighted students are being denied equal access to a quality education.

What needs to be done

We believe that urgent action is needed and that the current governments' review of SEND legislation is the ideal moment to ensure that all blind and partially sighted students can access the support they need to get the most out of their post-16 education.

We are calling on government to;

- 1. Ensure that adequate ringfenced funding is available to deliver statutory services to blind and partially sighted students in all post-16 education settings**
- 2. Embed the Curriculum Framework for children and young people with Vision Impairment into the proposed National Standards or updated Code of Practice so that parents and blind and partially sighted children and young people know what they should expect**
- 3. Ensure as part of the SEND review that Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs) are not used to determine whether someone is eligible to access statutory sensory impairment support**
- 4. Ensure that all blind and partially sighted young people leave compulsory education with the skills and knowledge they need to use mainstream and assistive technology.**

We are calling on local authorities to;

- 5. Review their provision for blind and partially sighted young people in post-16 education, to ensure that a service is in place**
- 6. Review their eligibility criteria and policies to ensure that EHCPs are not required to access local authority sensory impairment services**
- 7. Join us in calling on government to ensure that there is adequate funding so that all blind and partially sighted young people can access local authority sensory impairment services in post-16 education.**

Falling off a cliff

We know that visual impairment is a low incidence high need disability. The amount of support a blind or partially sighted child or young person may require will vary throughout their education. There will be times when they may need more intensive support and other times when they may only need information and guidance.

As a result, it is unrealistic to expect those working in post-16 education to have the experience and knowledge of how best to provide support to a blind or partially sighted young person. This is why there are specialists, including Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (QTVIs) or habilitation/mobility specialist.

The role of specialist support

QTVIs are teachers with additional specialist mandatory qualifications. They support and work in educational settings with those involved in the young person's education, health and care provisions.

They play a critical role in;

- **Establishing strategies for students to access their course and learn independently**
- **Guiding teaching staff on how to best support a blind or partially sighted student accessing learning and social opportunities within an educational setting**
- **Assessing and teaching specialist skills that will help with learning, such as how to use assistive technology, independent living and learning skills, learning braille and much more**
- **Working with mobility and rehabilitation specialists on developing mobility and independence skills**
- **Advising on special arrangements for exams or assessments.**

QTVI's are vital in advising non-specialist professionals, by creating an accessible education environment for blind and partially sighted young people.

“I think I may have been one of the fortunate ones who did have everything put in place. I had a separate classroom for my GCSE exams, everything was really well organised, I think it may have been due to my vision impairment teacher being really good.

I received mobility training from the council where I live. There are two different councils, one where I live and one that my school is in... it was the local council where I live that organised the mobility training. This included getting from school to home, and it was really helpful.”

Amina

Understanding accessibility

QTVIs and specialist services play a crucial role in providing advice and guidance on accessibility. It is not reasonable to expect a post-16 setting to have the specialist knowledge required, given that many professionals will only support one or two blind or partially sighted students in their teaching career.

We surveyed QTVIs and they outlined the importance of specialist knowledge, including of accessible information when supporting blind and partially sighted students. They explained that they had experienced;

- **A lack of awareness of the kind of specialist support students require from colleges**
- **Colleges not buying in support, citing that they have staff that are adequately trained, or purchasing support through private suppliers**
- **Difficulty trying to contact the right person within FE colleges.**



The blackhole in post-16 support

Up until the age of 16 there is recognised structured support for blind and partially sighted students in education. Once they attend university, they become eligible for Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and on entering the workplace they can access support via the Access to Work scheme. However, there is a critical gap between the ages of 16 and 18 when students get very mixed support in further education settings.

Help! Where is my support?

How sixth form and mainstream colleges access specialist support from a LA can be confusing.

“If the sixth form is part of a local authority school or academy, there is statutory provision. If the college is not... traded work can be delivered.”

Local authority

Our research found that;

- **A quarter (24%) of LAs provide different post-16 provision depending on whether someone studies in a mainstream or a school-based sixth form college**
- **Almost two thirds (61%) of sixth forms provide local authority sensory impairment services, compared to less than half (44%) of mainstream colleges**
- **A quarter of mainstream colleges must buy in support compared to only 10% of sixth forms.**

“Our service is funded via the designated schools grant high needs block, which doesn't reach to colleges; however, this is under review/discussion. We have concerns that [a] traded service to colleges doesn't offer the best way to ensure needs are met.”

Local authority

Worryingly, 4% of local authority sensory impairment services do not offer support to any students in a sixth form setting and 6% offer no support to mainstream colleges, despite a legal obligation to do so.

“We do not support students in a mainstream college. They access their own support, such as from charities.”

Local authority

Am I eligible for support?

We are deeply concerned that parents and young people do not have a clear understanding of how to access specialist provisions or whether they are eligible for support.

Our Freedom of Information (FOI) survey found a staggering array of different criteria for assessing the needs of blind or partially sighted students. Some LAs have a different eligibility policy in place depending on whether a student is attending a sixth form or a mainstream college, some are simply not clear.

“Impairment[s] are supported according to their level of need. This is determined through Functional Vision Assessments, the NATSiP Eligibility Framework, medical diagnosis and a QTVI.”

Local authority

“Already on caseload, or by clinical referral.”

Local authority

“Each referral is looked at on an individual basis.”

Local authority

With such varying criteria it would make any young person’s journey through post-16 education difficult to navigate.



“So, as someone who is sight impaired, I don’t think I fully fit the expectations boxes. You know, I wasn’t someone who needed to learn braille. I wasn’t someone who used a cane. I wasn’t someone who really used assistive technology in classes. I was just the kind of kid who needed to be at the front of the class, and maybe need some slides printed. So, it was almost like I didn’t fit into the criteria well enough to access certain support opportunities.

I ended up going through the entirety of my school career and sixth form career too with quite limited support. I wasn’t even getting 20% extra time on my exams. I did well in my GCSEs and A-levels (until the exams were cancelled because of Covid), but I had no time allowances, no recommendations and I found that quite difficult.

I wasn’t aware of just how difficult I found it until I left sixth form. I then really struggled because I had no physical plans in place. I had quite strong attachments to some teachers because I wasn’t very confident, and I didn’t really go out in the playground. I think my sight impairment made me quite self-conscious and quite nervous to do various things. So, I got along with teachers much more than I got on with students.

There’s not enough understanding around sight impairment and how vast the spectrum is. This meant that I was excluded from support that I needed and I wasn’t really aware how to ask for it. As an adult I still struggle to ask for support I need in certain areas. There needs to be more done to support young people in secondary school and college.”*

Nisha

The arbitrary use of EHCPs

We also found an inconsistent application of EHCPs. Worryingly, 15% of LAs ask for an EHCP to be in place before offering support in a mainstream college setting.

EHCPs should not be used as a tool to limit access to support for blind and partially sighted students in post-16 education. They should only be used when support is more complex and not applied depending on the education setting a student chooses to study in.

“There is an arbitrary differentiation between sixth form and college. Why would a student need less support in college automatically? Especially, since so many students with vision impairment don’t have an EHCP.”

QTVI



The role of technology

Technology is vital for all stages of education. It can engage and create active learners, encourage individual learning styles and boost peer collaboration [5]. As well as making learning fun, it ultimately enables blind and partially sighted students to access learning - equalising the playing field.

Technology can empower full participation and open up potential career opportunities, which may not be possible without it.

“Well, technology is right up my street. Technology I think is amazing! I just wish that, and I always say this, that there’s this bubble between the disabled vision impaired community and everyone else.”

Blind and partially sighted student

However, we have found that there are issues with funding and not enough is being done to promote the use of mainstream and assistive technology.

Who pays?

When it comes to purchasing equipment and delivering training for assistive technology there is consensus amongst QTVIs that more funding and clarification on who is responsible for paying and providing this is needed.

“Our service only provides specialist equipment. Schools and colleges must provide laptops and iPads, which are not considered specialist by our LA.”

QTVI

QTVI’s told us that they deliver some level of training on specialist assistive technology, however, standard equipment which can be customised for blind and partially sighted students is not considered as ‘specialist technology’. This leaves learners without the ‘know how’ to use standard equipment which could potentially support them in their learning.

“Funding restrictions mean students do not have access to assistive technology. Don’t just consider “assistive” tech as a specialist area. Training to use mainstream technology effectively is also important.”

QTVI

The role of a QTVI is varied and they do not always have the knowledge and understanding of the full range of available assistive technologies, suggesting that specialist assistive trainers should be a resource drawn upon to support students in post-16 education.

“The QTVI may not have all the knowledge/experience for each assistive technology there is available out there.”

QTVI

Putting an emphasis on technology

QTVI’s explained that there can be resistance to allocating the time students need to develop essential technology skills, as it can be seen to cut into the students learning time. It is not always seen as a core requirement of a learner’s education by post-16 settings to develop such skills as touch typing and using mainstream technology with built-in accessibility settings.

“As I have had such a lack of support with assistive technology and training, I am worried about my future when leaving college. How will I get training especially for jaws on the laptop and IT skills. We have tried to find people ourselves to help me at home but with no success. I had to teach myself to use my Braille note touch even though I had a one-off training session of about 3 hours. I still feel unsure as to what assistive technology would benefit me.”

Leanne

Learners must be able to access the technology they have been trained to use. Ensuring they move through and build upon their academic experience with the independence skills they have gained. However, due to a lack of funding and training, once a student has been trained on specialist technology it is not always then utilised during their time in post-16 education.

Mastering technology skills is paramount for blind and partially sighted young people as we move to a world that is increasingly dependent on it. It is vital to deliver the skills blind and partially sighted students need to navigate through an online and digital world.

“There are so many things now that I wish were suggested to me at the time, for example the various pieces of assistive technology and magnifiers. I was never recommended anything of this sort but rather the basic things like font size of resources and sitting at the front of the classroom.

When at college, most of my resources and materials were given to me in paper copies, which 90% of the time didn’t meet my access arrangements. I therefore came up with the solution of having an iPad to view textbooks and any other course material.

I had never used assistive technology until at university. Because I have been introduced to it so late, I am now struggling to integrate assistive technology into my workflow whilst at university, to the point where I don’t use it as much as I should be.

More emphasis must be put on training blind and partially sighted students to use assistive technology, especially from a young age. So that as they progress in their education it doesn’t become a burden to learn. I also believe that whilst assistive technology is important, mainstream technology should also be introduced early on. The idea that the student should be able to explore and pick which technology is best for them and their needs, is for me the most important consideration of all.”*

Ramneek

No clarity! No responsibility!

We know that funding for specialist local authority sensory impairment services is not stable. Three quarters of LAs have cut or frozen their budgets at least once in the last four years. This is despite a gradual increase in children and young people using these services, meaning LAs are having to make their budgets stretch further [6]. Sensory impairment services are creaking at capacity.

“QTVI caseloads [are] too big, so priority [is] given to students with an EHCP.”

QTVI

“[There is] inadequate staffing numbers within the service to be able to support learners in post-16 settings.”

QTVI

QTVIs told us that government must be clearer on how they expect provisions to be funded in FE. Given the pressure they are already under to meet the needs of students aged 0-16, the capacity isn't always there to do this effectively for those in post-16 education.

There is a lack of clarity in government guidance on who should fund FE support for those aged 16-25. This lack of clarity has resulted in LAs not providing an equity of provision of support for blind and partially sighted students in post-16 education.

“Understanding of funding! If pupils have an EHCP then colleges are more likely to buy support in, but the majority of caseloads do not have one and this is not an issue when they are in a school setting as service is dependent on their need.”

QTVI

“More clarity and equivalent block funding needs to be given to specialist support provisions in post 16 settings. More regulated funding in this area and it should be the same as pre 16 education settings.”

QTVI

Alice is studying in a mainstream further education college. She is currently in her second year of a psychology A-Level and has just completed an A-level in maths. She also did her foundation study in maths and English at the college. Her support whilst studying has been patchy at best and non-existent at worse.

It has taken most of her college education without access to a QTVI, mobility support and technology. Her college has now sourced a QTVI to support her, but this has taken five years. Alice had to apply for various grants to purchase a laptop and Braille note touch.

Alice finds it hard to study and revise as she is unable to access textbooks and information.

“I feel most of the teachers have been supportive and understanding of my needs but not communicated with the right people at the college to make things accessible. I just feel as though I was never wanted at college in the first place. As the only totally blind student, it just felt too much trouble for them. I feel as though I have been nothing but a problem to them. I feel frustrated, let down and disappointed and this impacts on my enjoyment for learning and my mental health. I now dread going to college and if I want to go on further with my education it has totally put me off.”

Alice

The role of the Curriculum framework

The Curriculum framework for children and young people with vision impairment (CFVI) can help address the lack of equity of support in post-16 education.

The CFVI has been developed to support blind and partially sighted children and young people to access an appropriate and equitable education.

The framework focuses on 11 teaching outcomes including facilitating an accessible world, orientation and mobility, independent living skills, accessing information, technology, and preparing for adulthood. It also outlines the importance of health, social, mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. These are all fundamental skills which support the learning, development and participation of blind and partially sighted young people throughout their education and beyond [7].

The CFVI creates a universal language and approach to how blind and partially sighted young people can access the right support, at the right time. We encourage government to endorse the framework and to make it a recognised national statutory requirement.



What needs to happen

The SEND green paper provides an opportunity for the Government to address these issues. We are calling on government to ensure that:

Ask one: there is adequate ringfenced funding available to deliver specialist services to blind and partially sighted students in all post-16 education settings.

It cannot be right that some LAs do not provide any support to blind and partially sighted students in post-16 education, nor that they can provide different support depending on the setting someone chooses to study in. This must be addressed so that there is dedicated funding and clear guidance from government.

Ask two: the Curriculum Framework for children and young people with vision impairment is embedded into the proposed National Standards or updated Code of Practice so that parents and blind and partially sighted children and young people know what they should expect.

The embedding of the CFVI into statutory regulation will enable families and young people to have a clear understanding of the pathways of support and services available from a nationwide perspective. It will also enable QTVIs and habilitation officers to raise awareness and inform discussions with non-specialist professionals about when these fundamental skills need to be taught and reinforced.

Ask three: as part of the SEND review that Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs) are not used to determine whether someone can access specialist vision impairment services.

We believe that EHCPs are being used incorrectly to restrict access to LA sensory impairment services, rather than as a tool to unlock additional support an education setting should provide. This can only be addressed alongside a government review of how specialist support is funded.

Ask four: all blind and partially sighted young people leave compulsory education with the skills and knowledge they need to use mainstream and assistive technology.

All young people should leave compulsory education with a knowledge and awareness of how to use mainstream and assistive technology. This will enable blind and partially sighted young people moving into adulthood to have the skills and knowledge in using technology proficiently to progress in their education and beyond.

We are also calling on local authorities to;

- **Review their provision for blind and partially sighted young people in post-16 education, to ensure that an equitable service is in place**
- **Review their eligibility criteria and policies to ensure that EHCPs are not required to access local authority sensory impairment services**
- **Join us in calling on government to ensure that all blind and partially sighted young people are given access to post 16 education.**

Conclusion

A blind and partially sighted young person should have the same opportunities as their peers in the choices they make. It is a legal requirement for all young people up to the age of 18 years to remain in education and therefore the support must be available to enable them to engage in their studies.

Our findings have shown a lack of available support for blind and partially sighted students in post-16 settings. The SEND review provides the Government with the perfect opportunity to review this and to ensure that we have a post-16 education provision and support that enables blind and partially sighted people to have equal access to education.

We already have a specialist workforce with large caseloads, so it is vital that the Government looks at how young people with low incidence disabilities such as visual impairment can receive the support that they need to succeed in post-16 education.

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- * These stories were collected as part of group to collect the experience of blind and partially sighted students that were in or had recently left further education. Some names have been changed.

About Thomas Pocklington Trust



Thomas Pocklington Trust (TPT)

Thomas Pocklington Trust is a national charity dedicated to enabling and empowering blind and partially sighted people of all ages to live the life they want to lead.

We are committed to increasing awareness and understanding of their needs and aspirations, to working with partners and to developing and implementing services which meet these needs to increase independence and improve lives.

Web: **www.pocklington-trust.org.uk**

Facebook: **[@thomaspocklingtontrust](https://www.facebook.com/thomaspocklingtontrust)**

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