

Cross-Party Group on Visual Impairment

**Wednesday 20 September 2023, 13.00-14.15,
Committee Room 1, Scottish Parliament and via
Teams**

Sederunt

Present – attending in person

MSPs

1. Neil Bibby MSP
2. Colin Smyth MSP

Invited guests

1. Rosie Dempsey, RNIB Children, Young People, Families & Education
2. Jane Sharp, RNIB Children, Young People, Families & Education
3. Michelle Cleasby, Depute Head Teacher, Royal Blind School
4. Professor John Ravenscroft, Scottish Sensory Centre, University of Edinburgh
5. Dr Margot Campbell, Visual Impairment Network for Children and Young People (VINCYP) Lead Clinician, NHS National Services Scotland

Non-MSP Group Members

1. James Adams, RNIB Scotland
2. Harriet Boyle, Office of Neil Bibby MSP
3. Catriona Burness, RNIB Scotland
4. Kirstie Henderson, RNIB Scotland
5. Lisa Kelly, SAVIE
6. Jo MacQueen, RNIB Scotland
7. Fiona McDonald, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
8. Declan McLean, Office of Neil Bibby MSP
9. Daniel Meikle, RNIB Scotland
10. Councillor Robert Mooney
11. Niall Foley, Guide Dogs Scotland
12. Rory Paterson, RNIB Scotland
13. Kirin Saeed

Present – attending online

MSPs

N/A

Invited guests – attending online

1. Lucinda Fass, Supporting Learners Team, Directorate for Learning, Scottish Government

Observers – attending online

1. Karen Mowat, Scottish Government

Non-MSP Group Members – attending online

1. Deirdre Aitken, Sight Action
2. Paul Bartley, Optelec
3. Salena Begley, Family Fund
4. Scott Cassidy, Blind Veterans UK
5. Kate Charles, Vision PK
6. Eileen Clarkson, RNIB Scotland
7. Jacqueline Cowan, Police Scotland
8. Elizabeth Docherty, Optometry Scotland
9. Claire Forde, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group
10. Amanda Foster
11. Laura Gray, Macular Society
12. Thelma Ingram
13. Joan Kerr
14. Siân Lower, Sight Scotland | Sight Scotland Veterans
15. Maureen MacMillan, Sight Action
16. Iona McLean, Macular Society
17. Carla Marchbank, NESS
18. Terry Moody
19. Mike Moore, Guide Dogs Scotland
20. Mary Rasmussen
21. Susan Robinson
22. Terry Robinson
23. Allan Russell, Connect Radio
24. Danny Sweeney, North Ayrshire Council
25. Mhairi Thurston, VI Charity Sector Partnership Mental Health Committee
26. Cirta Tooth
27. Jacquie Winning, Forth Valley Sensory Centre

Apologies

1. Jeremy Balfour MSP

2. Claire Black, NHS Education for Scotland
3. Miles Briggs MSP
4. Lesley Carcary, seescape
5. Bruce Christie, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group
6. Katy Clark MSP
7. Cindy Godfrey-McKay
8. Mairi Graham
9. Gillian Heavie, Scottish Government
10. Gillian Hallard, RNIB Scotland
11. Sheila Hands, NHS Tayside
12. Colin Hilditch, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
13. Laura Jones, RNIB Scotland
14. Margaret Jackson, RNIB Scotland
15. Matthew Leitch, Office of Stuart McMillan MSP
16. Sheila Mackenzie, Scottish Sensory Centre, University of Edinburgh
17. Elizabeth McCann, Scottish Sensory Centre, University of Edinburgh
18. Stuart McMillan MSP
19. Sally Paterson, Vision Support Service, Aberdeen City Council
20. Hussein Patwa
21. Nicoletta Primo, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
22. Lee Shennan, Scottish Government
23. Susan Shippey, Scottish Government
24. Alan Stewart
25. Mike Stewart, Scottish Government
26. Colette Walker
27. Lesley-Anne Watt, Scottish Government
28. Tess White MSP
29. Sandra Wilson

Agenda item 1 - Welcome, introductions and apologies

Neil Bibby, MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting, held as a hybrid event, online via Teams and in person at the Scottish Parliament. Introductions and apologies acknowledged, and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) statement was read out. Individuals attending who do not want to be named in minutes should let the Secretary know.

Agenda item 2 - AGM and Election of Office Bearers

Colin Smyth, MSP, facilitated the election of office bearers for the CPGVI. The AGM confirmed existing office-bearers in position:

Convener: Stuart McMillan MSP

Proposed: Colin Smyth MSP

Seconded: Neil Bibby MSP

Vice-Convener: Neil Bibby MSP

Proposed: Colin Smyth MSP

Seconded: James Adams, RNIB Scotland

Secretariat: RNIB Scotland

Proposed: Colin Smyth MSP

Seconded: Niall Foley, Guide Dogs Scotland

Neil Bibby, MSP, also expressed thanks for the contribution of Stuart McMillan, MSP, in his existing and continuing role as Convenor of the CPGVI, and on his behalf, extended thanks and appreciation to all of those who have contributed to the CPGVI over the last year.

Agenda item 3 - Approval of minutes of meeting of 16 May 2023

Proposer: James Adams, RNIB Scotland

Seconder: Colin Smith MSP

The minutes were approved.

Agenda item 4 - Matters arising and Action Points

Matters arising from the last meeting were acknowledged.

Agenda item 5 – Education in Scotland for children and young people with visual impairment

There were four contributions, taken together, providing valuable insights into Visual Impairment education in Scotland today. Full details are below:

1. Rosaleen (Rosie) Dempsey and Jane Sharp, Children, Young People, Families & Education, RNIB – “Key findings and

recommendations from RNIB’s FOI reports on VI Education Services across Scotland”

The speakers jointly provided information about the FOI request sent to all 32 local authorities across Scotland to request information on what support is available for pupils with visual impairment (VI).

Key findings from the FOI request include:

- As of 2023, there are 2,500 children and young people with visual impairment (C and YP with VI) on active caseloads who receive specialist input from Qualified Teachers of Vision Impairment (QTVI).
- Around one hundred cases are not on the active caseload but also have access to QTVIs for advice and information.
- These figures are an estimate at best –the numbers of C and YP with VI requiring support is likely to be much higher.
- Six Local Authorities provided case data but unfortunately it was unusable for the purposes of this research. This could signal that questions should be revised slightly for collecting data in the future.
- Overall, the findings point to a patchwork of provision of services available for C and YP with VI, which indicates variations of level and quality of specialist provision across Scotland. For example, one QTVI had an active caseload of 68 C and YP with VI whilst another had an active caseload of 11 C and YP with VI.
- Questions also sought to gain information on budgets available for Local Authority VI Services - over one third of responses pointed to a reduction or freezing of budgets at least once over the last three years. This suggests there is a need to protect funding and to provide it on a reliable basis across each local authority in Scotland.
- It also suggests there is a need to invest in the QTVI workforce and for local authorities to create structures for this to become a reality.
- Access to qualified QTVIs is essential to ensure successful learning and to embed the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment in Scotland (CFVI).
- There is also a need for a fully funded strategy for habilitation, so that this essential support is available to C and YP with VI in education and beyond. Again, variations occur, including waiting times for assessments, which can range from one week to three months across Scotland.

- In summary key recommendations include:
 - A need to invest in visual impairment support services for C and YP with VI in education and beyond.
 - Investment in the VI education workforce across Scotland.
 - Embedding the CFVI in Scotland to realise the Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) ambition for C and YP with VI in Scotland.

Neil Bibby thanked the speakers for sharing key findings from their research. He expressed concern about the variations in the support available and said that has major implications for C and YP with VI. This must be addressed at a national level.

2. Michelle Cleasby, Depute Head Teacher, Royal Blind School – “A QTVI’s perspective: The importance of specialist support in education for children and young people with vision impairment”

Michelle is based at the Canaan Campus, Royal Blind School, in Edinburgh, attended by 16 full time pupils. The level of need varies for each individual and some require a level of personal care.

A unique approach is crucial to understand learning and development for each pupil, and the learning environment is key to making this happen. The specialised learning environment includes quiet areas, wide corridors and the use of aids and approaches which enable pupils to develop and hone their skills, gain in confidence, and transfer these to other areas of life, including at home.

A range of practitioners are available to support pupils including specialists in visual habilitation, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Speech and Language Therapy. They all play a different role in support offered.

The service also includes an outreach component delivered over the last ten years across four local authorities in Scotland and serving around 300 young people. This can involve a split placement where a pupil remains at a mainstream school in their own local authority, with access to support from a specialist unit which provides other activities such as mobility training.

This approach enables a flexible use of the curriculum and the ability to meet the needs of pupils holistically. It also balances the need for support delivered in a specialist environment whilst also enabling pupils to gain appropriate support in mainstream education.

Neil Bibby, MSP thanked Michelle for offering her insights and introduced the third speaker online.

3. Lucinda Fass, Supporting Learners Team, Directorate for Learning, Scottish Government – "Refreshing the 2007 Guidance on Qualifications and Teacher Competences for teachers who work with children and young people who are blind/visually impaired, deaf/hearing impaired and deafblind".

Lucinda Fass spoke about joint work taking place on reviewing the teaching guidance for QTVIs, first published in 2007. A range of partners are supporting this work including the Scottish Government, the Scottish Sensory Centre (University of Edinburgh), the General Teaching Council for Scotland and COSLA.

Updates are necessary, including measures to reduce the attainment gap amongst C and YP with VI, and to improve the overall wellbeing of pupils. It is hoped that updated guidance will go out to consultation before the end of 2023. Final guidance will be published following the consultation analysis.

Neil Bibby, MSP, then introduced the fourth topic:

4. Professor John Ravenscroft, Scottish Sensory Centre, University of Edinburgh and Dr Margot Campbell, Visual Impairment Network for Children and Young People (VINCYP) Lead Clinician, NHS National Services Scotland - "A model for provision of eye care in special/additional support need schools in Scotland"

VINCYP are developing a model to deliver eye care to pupils within specialist school settings in Scotland. This would ensure pupils with complex learning and additional support needs can access eyecare in a setting familiar to them.

A similar programme has been running in England across 83 specialist schools in seven regions since April 2021 at a cost of £10 million. Optometrists and Dispensing Technicians come directly to schools to assess pupils.

Initial results have shown this model has a range of benefits, including:

- Establishing specialist eye tests for pupils with additional support and learning needs.
- Tailored solutions to meet individual pupil needs.

- Improving engagement and interaction of pupils whose learning has been affected by visual impairment.
- Avoiding obstacles of having to attend appointments elsewhere in unfamiliar clinic-based settings.
- Minimal disruption to routine which is important to pupils with neurodivergent needs.
- Cost effectiveness – including a reduction in the number of cancelled appointments in clinics and improvement in overall rates of follow up.
- Teachers have a greater knowledge and understanding of the impact vision can have on learning.
- 40 per cent of pupils have been prescribed spectacles. Findings suggest this has had a positive impact on their learning and interaction levels in class.

VINCYP hope a similar model could be rolled out across Scotland. This would enable equality of service provision across the UK. NHS National Services Scotland will support VINCYP to consider funding options and viable business plan.

More information on the NHS England service is here:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/PRN00196-ii-special-schools-eye-care-proof-of-concept-evaluation-report.pdf>

Q and A

Neil Bibby thanked all contributors and opened the discussion up to questions from the wider group.

Question 1: Robert Mooney spoke about his own experience and asked which four local authorities participate in the Royal Blind Schools' outreach programme. He spoke about the need for this type of support across every local authority in Scotland so that mainstream school settings can support C and YP with VI.

Response:

Michelle Cleasby said the four local authorities participating in the Royal Blind School's outreach programme are Midlothian, East Lothian, West Lothian and Orkney.

Question 2: Terry Moody asked how QTVIs and the structures around them can improve support for specialist subjects such as STEM subjects

(science, technology, engineering and mathematics). These may result higher levels of attainment amongst pupils with visual impairments.

Question 3: Mhairi Thurston mentioned a study she co-authored which highlights the need for eye health checks in school-based settings.

Response from Michelle Cleasby:

At present there is not a requirement for QTVIs to come from specialist subject areas. There is a general shortage of QTVIs in specialist areas, particularly in maths and science, which reflects the wider teacher shortage across Scotland. There is a range of teaching subjects and levels amongst QTVIs.

Professor John Ravenscroft also said that most teachers who complete the QTVI training at present tend to be primary school level.

At present current data does not report on levels of attainment amongst pupils with VI in certain subject fields. There are nuances within this, such as pupils with VI who also have other impairments.

Jane Sharp said that anecdotal evidence at a UK level suggests mainstream teachers have reduced confidence in teaching STEM subjects. Joint work between QTVIs and others that support pupils may enable participation in these areas.

Lucinda Fass said that a key role of a QTVI is making all aspects of curriculum accessible. However, this is often reliant on resources available within teams.

Question 4: Terry Robinson remarked that informal sports and physical education (PE) can provide a satisfactory level of interaction between peers. He was interested to know how these opportunities are open to C and YP with VI in specialist and mainstream settings.

Discussion and contributor responses following Question 4: Lisa Kelly added that to help with the retention rate of QTVIs in Scotland it may be beneficial to introduce a form of payment so teachers from all levels and subjects are encouraged to undertake the qualification. This incentive is offered in England.

In response to Terry's question, Michelle Cleasby said that social isolation amongst people with visual impairment and the wider community is a prevalent issue. There would be value in ensuring a

more regular type of socialisation and communication takes place with C and YP with VI amongst their peers.

The Royal Blind School is hoping to re-establish social programmes with schools in the local area, including James Gillespie's High School in Edinburgh and some primary schools. An outreach team within Sight Scotland are looking to create a social group for C and YP with VI. Within the curriculum there is specific provision for physical movement, delivered by Physiotherapists, Occupational Therapists and other sport practitioners. There is increased awareness of the need for exercise and physical activity amongst C and YP with VI.

Professor John Ravenscroft said that most C and YP with VI are in mainstream school settings. At Uddingston Grammar there is professional development so teachers can support the inclusion of C and YP with VI in physical activity.

Jane Sharp said sport and socialisation are included in the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Visual Impairment (CFVI) and are recognised as two key areas which require further development.

Lucinda Fass said that it is hoped that the updated guidance for QTVIs in Scotland will provide local authorities with a basis to improve retention of QTVIs. This may include a requirement to conduct Equality Impact Assessments (EQiAs) to help inform provision of services for C and YP with VI.

Dr Margot Campbell said that NHS National Services Scotland (NSS) has existing data on orthoptic screening uptake for pre-school eye-examinations.

Regarding eye care in special schools, there is no national data on follow-up, hospital appointments and non-attendance. It would be interesting to have this information. There is good practice already taking place in the Greater Glasgow and Clyde Health Board area where an optometrist goes into specialist schools, but this does not include dispensing. The Optometrist assesses eye health and issues a voucher for spectacles which must be taken to an optician in the community. However, again there may be no data on non-attendance/follow-up thereafter.

James Adams suggested, following on from the presentation by Professor Ravenscroft and Dr Campbell in relation to the provision of eye care to children attending special schools, that the CPG Office Bearers consider a letter to be sent from the CPGVI to the relevant part of Scottish Government providing information in relation to the model. Following discussion it was agreed that it would be more appropriate to send a letter to NHS National Services Scotland (NSS) in support of the model in the first instance. Neil Bibby MSP in the chair for the meeting said that Stuart McMillan MSP as Convener would be best placed to consider a letter with Office Bearers.

Neil Bibby MSP thanked all contributions from speakers and members of the meeting. He supported efforts to highlight this important work further and is keen to hear what Scottish Government have to say about what more can be done to support C and YP with VI.

5. Action point

James Adams and the CPGVI Secretary Catriona Burness to follow up with Stuart McMillan MSP and to draft a letter to the NHS National Services Scotland (NSS) in collaboration with Professor Ravenscroft and Dr Campbell.

Agenda item 6 - Any other competent business

6.1. Refreshing CPG mailing list – to remain GDPR-compliant and update the CPG mailing list, the Secretary will email asking all on the mailing list if they wish to continue to receive mailing by replying to either “opt in” or to “opt out.” All opting in will remain on the mailing list.

6.2. Mhairi Thurston asked if a survey exploring loneliness and isolation could be circulated to the CPGVI membership.

6. Action points

6.1. - The Secretary will email asking all on the mailing list if they wish to continue to receive mailing by replying to either “opt in” or to “opt out.” All opting in will remain on the mailing list.

6.2. - Mhairi will provide a link to the survey for distribution by the CPG Secretary.

Agenda item 7 - Date of next meeting

Tuesday 5 December, 18.00-20.00, Committee Room 3, Scottish Parliament and online.