

PE1747/A

Royal Blind submission of 9 October 2019

Royal Blind is Scotland's largest vision impairment organisation. Our vision is to see a community in which blind and partially sighted people, including those who have other disabilities, are fully included and lead fulfilling lives. We care for, educate and employ blind and partially sighted people from across Scotland and the UK. We support people of all ages - from babies and toddlers at our pre-school playgroup, children and young people at the Royal Blind School and Kidscene after school club, young adults through our supported accommodation and respite care, employees with vision impairment at the Scottish Braille Press and older people in our care homes.

Royal Blind supports the petition calling for adequate funding to support children with additional support needs. The Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 guarantees children the right to have education which is "directed to the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential". The presumption to mainstream can only deliver on this right if schools and teachers are properly resourced. In many instances schools are not equipped to achieve equal and inclusive education for learners with vision impairment. There is a lack of training for pupil support assistants in vision impairment and a gap in knowledge and understanding among teachers of its impact on the social and emotional development of children and young people. This can lead to blind and partially sighted pupils experiencing loneliness, isolation and continuing stigma, while it can also have a detrimental effect on the learning of their sighted peers. Royal Blind strives to address this through our vision impairment awareness training offered free of charge through the Learning Hub, as well as our national resource base of teachers who offer advice on a consultancy basis.

We are concerned that the main driver for decisions over the education for blind and partially sighted children and young people is based on budget, rather than where they will receive education which best meets their needs. Our experience working with pupils who joined the Royal Blind School after struggling in mainstream education suggests that a presumption to mainstream has become an assumption to mainstream, compounding exclusion rather than promoting inclusion.

The need to address these issues is made all the more urgent by the growing number of children and young people who have vision impairment. The Scottish Government's school census figures show that the number of blind or partially sighted pupils has more than doubled, from 2,005 in 2010 to 4,574 in 2018. It is vital that pupils benefit from learning approaches designed by specialist teachers with knowledge of delivering and designing a curriculum. A successful education for pupils with vision impairment must involve habilitation and skills for life, which too often are not being sufficiently provided through mainstream education. With research showing that up to 80% of learning takes place through our vision, the

importance of specialist additional support for pupils who are blind and partially could not be clearer.

In 2017 the Royal Blind School launched the vision impairment service for East Lothian Council, delivering specialist education and support to pupils with vision impairment across the local authority. The East Lothian Vision Impairment Service enables pupils to access learning through the use of braille, large print, specialist technology and adapted learning materials, such as tactile diagrams, while offering support in developing independence and social skills. The service also assists pupils and staff at crucial times of transition. Increased funding could be used to promote similar innovative approaches offering flexible provision and outreach provision.

Inadequate provision at school level can also have consequences when young people with additional support needs transition to further and higher education or employment. There remains an attainment gap between blind and partially sighted pupils and their sighted peers. In 2017-18, 87.8% of school leavers with a vision impairment progressed to further or higher education, training or employment, compared to 96% of whom move on to positive destinations. Appropriate support must be provided for a range of conditions at every age and stage in education. For pupils studying in a specialist school there could be more opportunities to spend an additional year in school to help ensure more effective transitions for these young people, and more flexible placements in mainstream and specialist schools.

While we warmly welcome the First Minister's announcement of an extra £15 million in additional support for learning in the coming year, it has been made against a backdrop of cuts in local education budgets for additional support needs. Despite the rapidly rising number of pupils with additional support needs, data collected in Local Financial Returns shows spending on additional support for learning has remained static at 12% of the overall spend on education in Scotland.

We urge the Committee to support the petition and take action to ensure appropriate funding and resources to help pupils with vision impairment and other additional support needs to realise their full potential.