

# Meeting the needs of children with vision impairment as schools and colleges re-open

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Date: July 2020

## INTRODUCTION

The UK governments have set out different plans and ambitions for when and how children will return to school and colleges. We know that professionals will share our ambition that children with vision impairment (VI) should return with the same opportunity to achieve as other children.

Professionals will be carrying out risk assessments to determine how their own setting will re-open. These risk assessments may raise questions over how any specialist support that children with VI receive can be provided in a way that minimises any potential risk to public health. This briefing sets out a number of questions that settings will want to consider, along with some possible mitigating actions, to inform any such risk assessment they may be carrying out.

Whilst it is not our role to give public health advice, it is our expectation that there will be a consideration around the risks to individual children with VI if they do not receive specialist support as usual, and that such, risks are balanced against any public health concerns. We believe that any reduction in specialist support should be a last resort, given that it may fundamentally undermine how children with VI are able to access learning in the classroom. It may also have a significant impact on the mental health of children with VI if they are unable to follow what is being taught or have support navigating the school surroundings whilst at school.

This briefing focuses on support for children with VI in mainstream schools. However, many of the principles and suggestions may also be helpful in other types of education settings. There is currently a gap in information to support a family or professional who receives a recommendation that 'a young person requires tactile signing'. This paper aims to start to fill that gap.

This paper helps to signpost people to some of the existing resources that are available and it deals with initial questions that people who receive that recommendation may have.

This document has been produced alongside VIEW's *Students with vision impairment returning to school after the lockdown: considerations for risk assessments* (June 2020)<sup>1</sup> and HabVIUK's *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Habilitation and Risk Assessment Guidance* (May 2020)<sup>2</sup> which provide further detail.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://viewweb.org.uk/coronavirus/covid19-school/>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://habilitationviuk.org.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-habilitation-mobility-risk-assessment-guidance/>

## PRINCIPLES

Later in this briefing, we set out some specific questions that schools and colleges may want to consider. We do not provide any definitive answers, as this will depend on the individual context. However, there are a number of principles that we believe should be considered in making any decisions:

- 1** **There should be no blanket policies** (for example, a ban on all external visitors). Instead, we believe that any policies should consider the individual needs of children with VI, and, as set out earlier, balance the risks to public health against the risks to individual children not getting the support they need.
- 2** **Teachers of Vision Impairment should be involved in any decisions** on how support will be provided.
- 3** **Parents and children with VI should also be involved** in any such decisions and kept fully informed. Parents and children with VI may have their own suggestions for how support could be provided, which should be taken seriously.
- 4** **There should be a can-do and inclusive approach.** We encourage professionals to continue to be creative, pragmatic and flexible in ensuring that individual children with VI receive the support they need, as much as possible.
- 5** **Any reduction in specialist support should be a last-resort and with a full awareness of the impact that it will have on individual children with VI.** Putting children with VI in a situation where they cannot access the work and teaching from their teachers or the peers should be seen as both unacceptable and untenable. Where a decision has been made there is no other alternative but to temporarily reduce some specialist support, we expect there to be a clear audit trail in place that sets out what mitigating actions are being put into place. There should be clarity about when decisions will be reviewed. Actions should be SMART. We also expect there to be a plan in place to ensure support is provided to enable children with VI catch up. This might involve additional catch-up support or one-to-one tuition that is tailored to their individual needs. Tactile signing is a method used by people who cannot access sign language through the use of vision, or who would benefit from the use of additional tactual information.

## Key issues and risks

The below table sets out some specific issues and risks, key questions to explore in considering this risk and possible mitigating action. It is not intended to be exhaustive and it is hoped it will prompt discussion and collaboration between schools, Teachers of children with Vision Impairment, children and young people themselves, and families. As set out earlier, we encourage professionals to be creative, pragmatic and flexible in ensuring that individual children with VI receive the support they need, as much as possible.

The areas covered in this document are listed below, and this is cross-referenced with the VIEW risk assessment guidance for further information.

## Contents

Topic	Cross-reference: more detailed guidance available in the <i>VIEW Risk Assessment Guidance</i> <sup>3</sup> section:
Specialist support (QTVIs)	Need for specialist support in the classroom
Access to Habilitation Services	Environment, orientation and mobility in school
Technology, resources, equipment and tactile access	Environment, orientation and mobility in school Equipment Resources
Teaching assistants	Need for specialist support in the classroom
Specialist support for children in resource provisions	Need for specialist support in the classroom
Temporary or altered learning spaces	Environment, orientation and mobility
Accessibility of remote learning	
One-to-one tuition and catch up programmes	
Social, emotional wellbeing and mental health	SEMH
Face masks and coverings	General guidelines
	<b>Additional areas covered in VIEW guidance:</b> Lunch and social times Transport Transition to a new setting

<sup>3</sup> See <https://viewweb.org.uk/coronavirus/covid19-school/>

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
<p><b>Specialist support</b></p> <p>Reduced access to specialist support where this is provided by external specialist (e.g. a peripatetic Teacher of Vision Impairment)</p>	<p>What is the impact to the individual child if the Teacher of Vision Impairment or any other external specialist is not able to provide face-to-face support to an individual child and/or school staff?</p> <p>Is there a risk that reduced access will impede the child’s ability to access learning?</p> <p>Note that, in England, government guidance states that peripatetic teachers can move between schools<sup>4</sup>.</p>	<p>To carry out any meetings in the school in a well-ventilated room that can be easily cleaned afterwards. Meetings outside may be problematic for children with VI due to uncontrolled lighting and unfamiliar setting.</p> <p>To ask visitors to confirm they will follow social distancing requirements and provide records for any test and trace efforts that may be needed.</p> <p>To conduct meetings, including one-to-ones with pupils, virtually. This assumes that the child or school staff will be provided with the necessary IT equipment and time to be able to do this effectively. Any IT equipment provided will need to include the pupil's usual access technology etc. Safeguarding policies should be followed and should be proportionate to the situation and balanced against the risk to individual children if they do not receive the specialist support they need. Safeguarding precautions that could be followed might include, for example, ensuring children are in a ‘shared space’ for any virtual meetings.</p> <p>Where social distancing isn’t possible as they enter the school, asking Teachers of Vision Impairment or other external specialist staff to wear a face covering as they enter and move through the school. The face covering should be removed when engaging with the child with VI.</p>

<sup>4</sup> ‘Supply teachers, peripatetic teachers and/or other temporary staff can move between schools. They should ensure they minimise contact and maintain as much distance as possible from other staff. Specialists, therapists, clinicians and other support staff for pupils with SEND should provide interventions as usual.’...

‘Where it is necessary to use supply staff and to welcome visitors to the school such as peripatetic teachers, those individuals will be expected to comply with the school’s arrangements for managing and minimising risk, including taking particular care to maintain distance from other staff and pupils.’ [www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools)

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
<p><b>Access to Habilitation Services</b></p>	<p>Habilitation remains an essential aspect of the support and provision for children with VI. Social distancing expectations need to be considered alongside the ongoing need for children to practice and learn routes, navigation and everyday life skills. If Habilitation provision is not regularly maintained there is a risk that acquired skills and techniques are not maintained or even reduce.</p>	<p>HabVIUK have produced a risk assessment<sup>5</sup> to enable provision in the context of COVID regulations.</p> <p>Plans should be made to sensitively consolidate or revise any skill level or progress that has been lost during the lockdown due to lack of provision or lack of ability to practice – either by revising targets or providing ‘catch-up’ intervention.</p>

<sup>5</sup> See <https://habilitationviuk.org.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-habilitation-mobility-risk-assessment-guidance/>

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
<p><b>Technology, resources, equipment and tactile access</b></p> <p>Reduced access to specialist equipment that needs to be passed between individuals (such as access technology)</p> <p>Importance of access to tactile means of learning and mobility which are affected by concerns about shared surfaces and transmission of virus.</p>	<p>What is the impact to the child, both in terms of access to education and their emotional wellbeing, if they are not able to access learning materials and their teacher fully?</p> <p>For any children who rely on tactile methods of access, communication, mobility and support, what steps can be taken within the school to ensure that staff are able to support ongoing access to tactile means of learning and support and maintain touch access for the children who rely on it.</p>	<p>Emphasise usual hygiene requirements – i.e. regular handwashing.</p> <p>Provide hand gel with any equipment so that a teacher can easily clean their hands each time they handle the equipment</p> <p>Provide wipes so that equipment can be cleaned before and after it is used. Note that this must be done carefully, following guidance provided by manufacturers, to avoid damage to the device. You should seek advice and support from your local specialist education service for children with VI on this.</p> <p>Emphasise usual hygiene requirements – i.e. regular handwashing.</p> <p>Emphasise regular cleaning of any communal touch areas, such as tactile panels, trailing walls, specialist equipment which is shared such as Perkins Brailleurs. Further guidance is available in the <i>VIEW Guidance Document (Resources Section)</i><sup>6</sup></p> <p>It is crucial that mitigating factors are not prohibitive or off putting to child when using sense of touch, and that both the child with VI and his or her peers are reassured that a child with VI is able to have safe and permitted access to surfaces and objects to avoid misunderstanding or ‘peer-policing’</p> <p>If toys or resources have been removed from classrooms to lessen transmission via surfaces, provision of alternative or reserved materials for a child with VI may be necessary, including consideration of play time activities.</p> <p>Use of a symbol cane instead of trailing using the hand.</p>

<sup>6</sup> See <https://viewweb.org.uk/coronavirus/covid19-school/>

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
<p><b>Trouble-shooting technology issues</b></p>	<p>For younger children, what steps can be taken within the school to ensure that staff are able to troubleshoot any issues with the child’s technology (where they have already been trained to do so)?</p> <p>What is the impact to the child, both in terms of access to education and their emotional wellbeing, if their technology stops working whilst at school?</p>	<p>Ask parents to carry out basic checks before the school day. The child’s Teacher of Vision Impairment should be able to provide advice on what this should involve for each child. It might be helpful to lessen the extent to which equipment is taken between home and school to limit movement and transfer between settings.</p> <p>Depending on their age, encouraging children to be as independent as possible in using their technology.</p> <p>Where it is necessary for school staff to troubleshoot any issues during the day, ensuring that the usual hygiene requirements are in place – i.e. regular handwashing before and after handling the equipment.</p> <p>Provide parents with information on how they can trouble-shoot any basic issues with technology if issues become apparent at home.</p> <p>Further guidance about managing technology between home and school is provided in the <i>VIEW Guidance Document (Equipment Section)</i><sup>7</sup></p>

<sup>7</sup> See <https://viewweb.org.uk/coronavirus/covid19-school/>

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
<p><b>Teaching assistants</b></p> <p>Reduced access to specialist support within the school (e.g. teaching assistants or support workers)</p>	<p>It is acknowledged that some teaching assistants may be asked to lead small groups or ‘bubbles’ of children, under teacher supervision</p> <p>What will the impact be on a child with VI if they do not receive the usual support from a teaching assistant?</p> <p>What is the risk that reduction in this support will result in the child not being able to understand or access learning?</p> <p>In England, guidance limits the redeployment of teaching assistants for children with SEND<sup>8</sup></p>	<p>Where teaching assistants or support workers have a specific role in directly supporting individual children with VI, they should not be redeployed to other roles. In many cases, the support from a teaching assistant or Habilitation officer may be listed in a child’s Statement or Plan. Steps should be taken to ensure that any teaching assistant with responsibility for ensuring a child with VI can participate in school is in the same ‘bubble’ as the child.</p> <p>Any re-allocation or change in teaching assistant arrangements must ensure that any teaching assistant supporting a child with VI receives specialist training from a QTVI at the earliest opportunity to ensure that the quality of support is maintained.</p> <p>Additional flexibility with the curriculum to ensure targeted catch-up support or individual one-to-one tuition is in place.</p>

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Schools should ensure that appropriate support is made available for pupils with SEND, for example by deploying teaching assistants and enabling specialist staff from both within and outside the school to work with pupils in different classes or year groups.’ ...  
‘Teaching assistants may also be deployed to lead groups or cover lessons, under the direction and supervision of a qualified, or nominated, teacher (under the Education (Specified Work) (England) Regulations 2012 for maintained schools and non-maintained special schools and in accordance with the freedoms provided under the funding agreement for academies). **Any redeployments should not be at the expense of supporting pupils with SEND.**’ (Emphasis ours See: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools))

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
<p><b>Specialist support for children in resource provisions</b></p>	<p>Children in resource provisions traditionally receive specialist support in a range of different ways, between the mainstream classroom and in the resource provision. Support in the resource provision may be provided to children with VI of different age groups.</p> <p>In England, guidance allows for the intermixing of children of different age groups for the purpose of specialist support<sup>9</sup>.</p>	<p>Schools with resource provisions will need to think carefully about how this specialist support can continue to be provided whilst adhering to social distancing principles as much as possible.</p> <p>Ensure social distancing and hygiene principles are followed when children with VI enter the resource provision classroom.</p> <p>Considering timetabling of lessons to minimise changes and intermixing, where possible.</p>

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Both the approaches of separating groups and maintaining distance are not ‘all-or-nothing’ options, and will still bring benefits even if implemented partially. Some schools may keep children in their class groups for the majority of the classroom time, but also allow mixing into wider groups for specialist teaching, wraparound care and transport, or for boarding pupils in one group residentially and another during the school day...Endeavouring to keep these groups at least partially separate and minimising contacts between children will still offer public health benefits as it reduces the network of possible direct transmission.’ See: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools)

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
<p><b>Temporary or altered learning spaces</b></p>	<p>We understand that, in some areas, consideration is being given to deliver teaching and learning in temporary learning spaces to create additional room, or to delivering lessons outside</p> <p>What will the conditions be like in any temporary learning spaces used? Portakabins and village halls, for example, are known to be poorly lit.</p> <p>Has a child's usual learning environment been altered, re-organised or relocated?</p>	<p>Identify which rooms have optimal learning conditions e.g. lighting and ensuring that groups or bubbles with children with VI are prioritised for such rooms.</p> <p>Ensure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- that children's visual access needs are taken into account when considering seating position whether in usual but rearranged classroom or in a new environment.</li> <li>- that information is delivered and presented in any temporary learning spaces in an accessible format/method e.g. consideration of lighting, seating position, proximity to visual information etc.</li> </ul> <p>Seek advice on the visual environment of any temporary learning space from a Teacher of Vision Impairment and/or Habilitation Officer.</p> <p>Allow a child to familiarise themselves with a new learning environment at a quiet time, without other children in the first instance. If new routes or independent mobility skills are required to navigate a new environment a Habilitation Officer's input will be essential.</p>

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
<p><b>Accessibility of remote learning</b></p>	<p>We understand that in some areas a blended learning approach will be in place, where children are onsite for part of the time and then at home for the other. There is also a possibility that some schools may be forced to close again temporarily in the event of any local lockdowns.</p> <p>What steps will be taken to ensure that online materials are both suitably differentiated for children with VI and also accessible to them?</p> <p>In England, guidance sets out the need to provide additional support for children with SEND<sup>10</sup> for any remote learning</p>	<p>Seek advice from Teachers of Vision Impairment on differentiation of home learning materials, drawing on advice from UK Governments and specialist organisations such as VIEW, Guide Dogs, HabVIUK &amp; RNIB.</p> <p>Close liaison with families, as appropriate, so that they are able to support their child’s learning as much as possible.</p> <p>Arrange for specialist support to be provided remotely (e.g. Teacher of Vision Impairment). Steps should be taken to ensure that both parties have robust IT equipment in place to allow this and any other necessary equipment.</p> <p>Ensure that children can take equipment home to use to access any remote learning opportunities. Ensuring that children with VI have any necessarily additional equipment (e.g.Perkins Braille etc) Asking families and children with VI to sign an agreement to ensure that equipment is brought back to school.</p> <p>Where signposting to online learning resources or using school produced videos, checking that these are accessible to children with VI. Teachers should only use any visual presentations that are fully described or supported by descriptive text.</p> <p>Where live virtual lessons are taking place, the choice of platform should be driven by the young person as much as possible and practical. Consider how a child with VI is able to manage the interactive aspects of a live lesson – for example if hands are to be raised or chat functions used, it is likely that the child will need additional or alternative means of participating, either in terms of training to use access features of the software or alternative strategies.</p> <p>Enable children with VI to use access technology at home so that they can access any online learning.</p>

<sup>10</sup> ‘In developing these contingency plans, we expect schools to... recognise that younger pupils and some pupils with SEND may not be able to access remote education without adult support, and so schools should work with families to deliver a broad and ambitious curriculum.’/

. See [www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools)

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
<p><b>One-to-one tuition and catch up programmes</b></p>	<p>Many children with VI will be eligible for formal tuition and catch-up programmes of the kind that is delivered to all children.</p> <p>What steps will be taken to ensure that the person delivering tuition or catch-up is VI aware and that any such intervention is tailored to the needs of children with VI?</p>	<p>Provide tutors with VI Awareness information and training, as well as clear advice on the impact that VI has on individual children’s learning.</p> <p>Advice from a Teacher of Vision Impairment should be sought to support this.</p>

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
<p><b>Social, emotional wellbeing and mental health</b></p>	<p>Children with VI are already known to be at risk of lower emotional wellbeing. Lockdown is likely to have had a negative impact on many children’s emotional wellbeing. Children with VI may have felt particularly isolated and lonely during this time</p> <p>Is there a need to carry out an assessment and/or to amend the child’s statement or plan?</p> <p>Does the need for close contact (e.g. for sighted guiding or support in accessing learning materials) cause anxiety either for the child themselves or peers?</p>	<p>Establish peer support programme for children with VI, as appropriate and in line with social distancing requirements. In addition it is vital that family are involved in the changes so as to provide support etc as required.</p> <p>Where classes are broken up into smaller groups or ‘bubbles’, ensuring that a child with VI is in a group as one or two friends who the child gets on with and who can provide peer support.</p> <p>All children can be made aware that sighted guiding and requirements for close teaching support e.g. regarding braille tuition or support with technology may mean that a child with VI will not maintain social distancing. This should be supported and explained to everyone in a bubble to avoid any confusion or misunderstandings or “peer-policing” over compliance with expected hygiene regulations.</p> <p>Ensure that any pastoral/support programmes or interventions take into account the needs of children with VI. Similarly, ensuring that any school counsellors are aware of VI and are able to meet the needs of children with VI. Some interventions such as ‘virtual circle time’ may be inaccessible to children with VI and risk causing distress. Advice from the child’s Teacher of Vision Impairment should be sought.</p> <p>Consider if the school or service needs to make a referral to further support, including from CAMHS (England) or any nominated contacts for mental health support for children with VI in your area.</p> <p>Further guidance is available in the <i>VIEW Guidance Document (SEMH Section)</i><sup>11</sup>.</p>

<sup>11</sup> See <https://viewweb.org.uk/coronavirus/covid19-school/>

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
<p><b>Face masks and coverings</b></p>	<p>Expectation and regulation of the use of face masks and coverings is subject to rapid changes in policy. Any changes which introduce greater use of face masks should be considered against the impact on children with VI.</p> <p>The use of face masks or coverings would have an impact on the ability of children with VI to use any residual vision to discern facial expressions.</p> <p>Many children with VI have additional sensory or learning needs and need to be given as full access to communicate with others as possible. The use of masks causes a likely reduction in visual access to another person's face, and the possibility of muffling voice or preventing lip reading.</p>	<p>If a decision was made for teachers to wear face masks in education, we would recommend that a meeting take place between the education setting, the family and a Teacher of Vision impairment to identify the risks to children with VI 's access to learning and emotional wellbeing, also taking account of any additional SEND which may also be impacted.</p> <p>Staff wearing masks can be encouraged to consider what the child with VI might be incidentally missing, such as facial expression, and this can be communicated in other ways or reactions and emotions made clearer through language.</p>

## Statutory plans and reasonable/best endeavours – a quick note

Under the Coronavirus Act (2020)<sup>12</sup>, local authorities in England and Northern Ireland are able to instead use reasonable or best endeavours if coronavirus prevents them from being able to meet the requirements set out in a child's Education, Health and Care plan or statement. The Coronavirus Act (2020) allows local authorities in Wales to do the same. However, at the time of writing, these powers are not in force.

These are or will be time-limited powers. At the time of writing, in England, the suspension of EHC plans is expected to end at the end of July.

There are a number of key considerations to bear in mind if a decision is made to exercise reasonable or best endeavours:

- Education settings and local authorities must look at each case individually to see what could be reasonably provided if what is normally provided or required is no longer possible. Specific levels of need or vulnerability should be taken into account. There should be no 'blanket' policies or wholesale cancellation of support, plans or statements across an area.
- Education settings and local authorities should work with families as much as possible to agree any changes. Families may have their own suggestions and ideas for how things could be done differently.
- If what is normally provided or required is no longer possible, families should be given the reasons for this in writing, along with an explanation of what reasonable or best endeavours the local authority have used to ensure that the required support is still, as much as possible, provided, along with details of what will be provided instead
- A consideration of how to respond to the individual needs of children in creative and flexible ways, as many education settings and local authorities already are. This includes drawing on the wider skills of other staff or other families as appropriate.
- Whether any reasonable or best endeavours themselves are likely to be accessible to children with VI and young people. It is important to recognise that the needs of children with VI will vary – what is accessible to one child may not be accessible to another.
- The new laws do not give local authorities the power to amend the contents of a plan or statement. This means that, once any suspension is lifted, a child's plan/statement will have the same legal status that it did before. This is the case even if a parent accepted that changes were needed in the short-term, in response to the spread of coronavirus.

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<sup>12</sup> See: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2020/7/contents/enacted>

#### 4. More information

**VIEW** have a repository of guidance available at <https://viewweb.org.uk/coronavirus/covid19-school/> relating to the impact of COVID 19 on school and education services.

**RNIB** are publishing guidance for education professionals relating to Covid-19 at <https://www.rnib.org.uk/health-social-and-education-professionals/education-professionals/coronavirus-how-we-can-help-you>

A collation of COVID discussion threads is collated in the Friday bulletin of the **VI Forum** every week. See: <https://siforums.org.uk/4-the-vi-forum>

The **Sight Advice FAQ** at <https://www.sightadvicefaq.org.uk/coronavirus-information/CYPF> has a new section for parents with advice relating to COVID 19, including information about education and service provision.

**RNIB CYPF & Education team** can provide advice and information to children, young people, families and professionals who work with them. Please contact 0303 123 9999 or email [cypf@rnib.org.uk](mailto:cypf@rnib.org.uk)