

# **Give Me Access to College:**

**Blind and Partially Sighted Students'  
Remain Locked Out of College**

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# Foreword

From our previous ‘Give Me Access to College’ report, we found an inconsistent delivery and access to specialist vision impairment (VI) support in post 16 settings. We have revisited this report, because nothing has improved, and Further Education (FE) continues to be forgotten as government looks at how to improve access to education for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The Government has demonstrated a commitment to look at the access to employment for disabled people and are concerned about the number of children and young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).

We believe it to be a glaring oversight not to look at access to post 16 education as part of this discussion. Without giving blind and partially sighted children and young people access to a range of post 16 opportunities, and without the right support and training, we continue to raise these issues to Government.

We have worked closely with many within the FE sector, and I would personally like to say ‘thank you’ to those who have shared their experiences to build and strengthen our post 16 campaign.

In the report we make several recommendations to Government for post 16 reforms that enable blind and partially sighted young people to succeed, both in their academic and personal development.

We hope that MPs and ministers get behind this report and reach out to speak to blind and partially sighted children and young people to listen to their experiences and start to set out a clear plan of action.



Tara Chattaway, Head of Education  
Thomas Pocklington Trust

# Looking back

Our previous Give Me Access to College report highlighted a ‘black hole’ of provisions for blind and partially sighted young people in post 16 education.

We found that

- 24% of local authorities provided different post 16 provision depending on whether a young person studied at a Further Education (FE) college or sixth-form college
- 61% of local authorities offered statutory services to blind and partially sighted young people in a sixth form setting, but only 44% offered services to young people studying in a FE college.
- 25% of FE colleges had to buy in their support, compared to only 10% of sixth form colleges [1].

These issues persist, and with the overhaul of reforms to post-16 qualifications, funding to the FE sector, and the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan [2, 3], we remain concerned about the impact these changes could have on blind and partially sighted young people accessing a robust and broad post 16 education provision.

Whilst accessibility for students with SEND has been a much-debated point, post 16 education is often overlooked, including in the 2023 SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan.

‘The departments Equality Impact Assessment acknowledges that some students with protected characteristics may be disadvantaged by the (qualification) reforms as they may no longer be able to progress on to level 3.’

The future of post 16 qualifications;  
Education Select Committee [2]

In England there are approximately 31,000 children and young people who are blind or partially sighted. They have specific needs which can be significantly different from other disabilities [4].

# Through the college lens

Several colleges opened their doors to us and shared their experiences of delivering teaching and learning to blind and partially sighted students. We engaged with college tutors, Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), and other educational staff.

Those within the FE sector shared frustrations that the sector has not been included in discussions about SEND. This seems to be a missed opportunity to gather the knowledge and experiences to help address the issues of funding, access to specialist workforce, and students transitions into post 16 education [5].

‘It cannot be right to treat one phase of a young person’s education as more important than another. Today’s young people will soon become adults, so if poor decisions are made about SEND provision now, they will limit their life chances for decades to come.’

**David Holloway, Senior Policy Manager for SEND, Association of Colleges [5]**

## Qualification reform

There has been an ambitious series of reforms aiming to improve post 16 qualifications, including the introduction of T-Levels, and reviewing and merging existing Level 3 qualifications. Strengthening post 16 qualifications is welcomed, however we are concerned that there has not been a formal student experience evaluation carried out for students with SEND, including experiences for blind and partially sighted young people. Experts within SEND education have noted students are likely to be further limited in their progress to level 3 qualifications due to the reforms and more likely to fall into NEET [3].

As a low incidence, high need disability, blind and partially sighted young people are distinct, and their needs must be considered. The Department for Education (DfE) must ensure reforms to the post 16 system are meeting the needs and aspirations of young people with a VI, enabling them equitable access to opportunity [6].

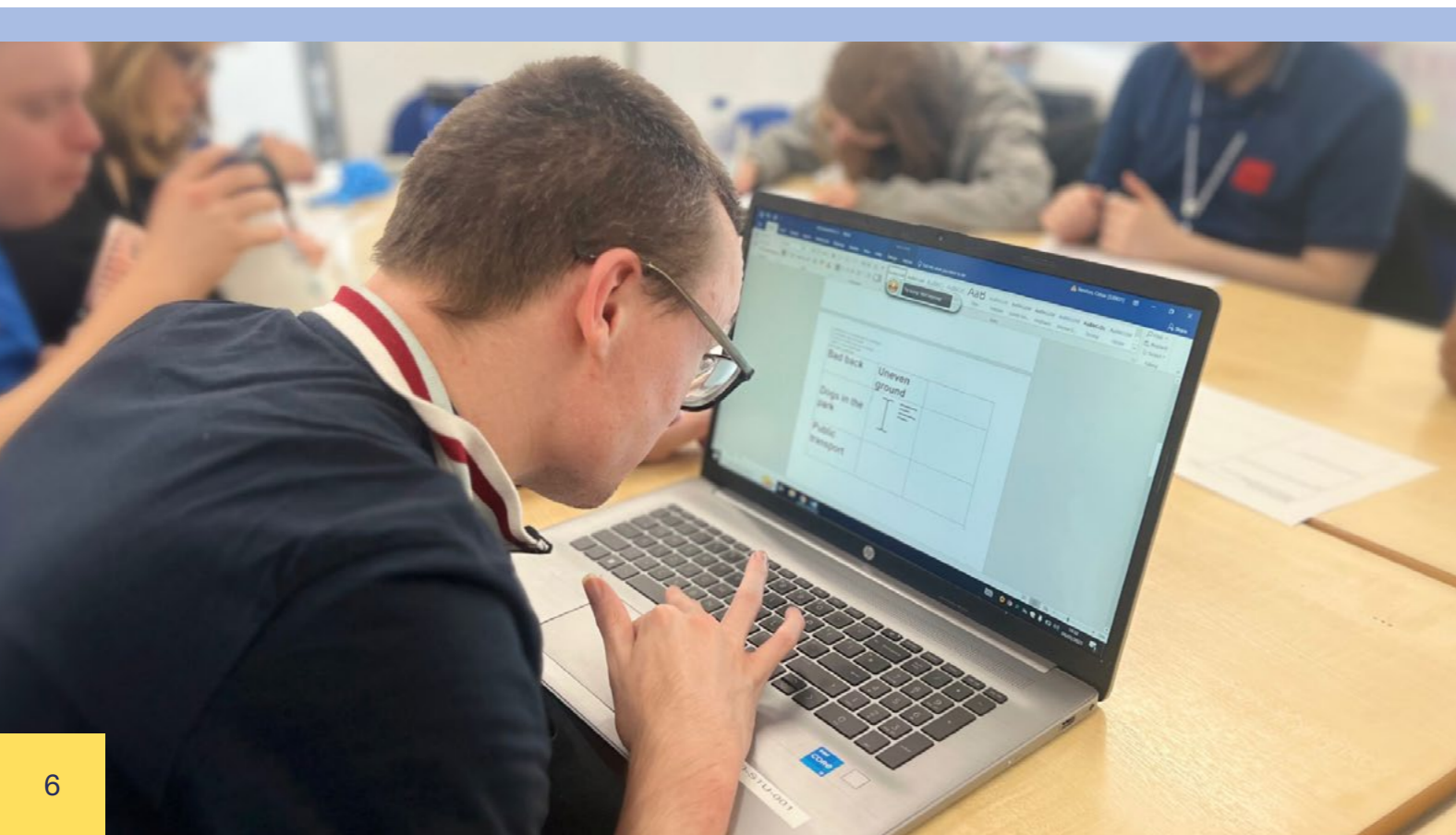
‘With vocational courses, course content and what learners would encounter should be shared in advance to ensure learners have access to the course. For example, a learner enrolled onto a beauty course not being able to see. They were able to meet a lot of the criteria but not all and therefore were not able to complete the course.’

**Qualified Teacher for Children and Young People with a vision Impairment (QTVI)**

‘There is currently no data showing that T-Levels are accessible, scalable nationally, and are more effective than the qualifications they replace at promoting social mobility.’

**Education Select Committee [2]**

**We call on the Government to review the effectiveness of T-Levels for students with SEND, including blind and partially sighted young people.**



# Funding: What does it get you?

Colleges and local authorities have experienced reduced funding over several decades [7]. Through our engagement with the FE sector, it was indicated that inconsistent support is being delivered to blind and partially sighted students within FE colleges.

“I feel that post 16 support is a bit of a mess at present, at least in our area of the country. The disparity between sixth form and college support is unequitable and makes no sense. We are highly stretched as it is and making longer journeys to support students in other authorities seems counter-productive, especially if it is also working in reverse. It seems impossible for anyone to agree on who needs the support and why.”

**QTVI**

Some colleges receive little to no support from specialist VI professionals in the local authority. This leaves many FE colleges without the statutory support for blind and partially sighted students. [1]

As a result, FE settings have inconsistent access to Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with a Vision Impairment (QTVIs); struggle to implement reasonable adjustments; can lack knowledge about assistive technology and have varying processes for transitions into post 16 settings. We are concerned that this is leaving blind and partially sighted students locked out of college.

“A QTVI contacted the service regarding a student’s T-Level exam not being provided in a correct format. The student’s usual way of working is with a hard copy paper, size 48 font, modified paper (A3), extra time, and rest breaks. In the exam of concern, the student did not have access to a hard copy modified paper. The exam board had sent an unmodified enlarged version of a regular sized paper. The QTVI acted as reader/scribe, but the student was not practised with this kind of support. Attempts were made for the student to access the paper via laptop and JAWS but the college had lost power that day so this could not be provided. Our service advised for the student to apply for special consideration in this case to re-sit the exam.”

**Education Advisor, TPT**

# Sensory Support Professionals

Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with a Vision Impairment (QTVIs), are teachers with additional specialist mandatory qualifications.

**Working in partnership with mainstream educators QTVIs play a critical role in:**

- **Establishing strategies for young people to access their course to learn independently.**
- **Guiding teaching staff on how to best support a blind or partially sighted young person.**
- **Assessing and teaching specialist skills that will help with learning.**
- **Working with mobility and rehabilitation specialists.**
- **Advising on special arrangements for exams or assessments.**

As VI is a low incident disability, many staff will not have experience of working with blind and partially sighted student, QTVIs and mainstream academic staff must work in partnership to provide appropriate support, teaching and learning. QTVIs play a vital role in advising non-specialist professionals how to create an accessible education environment.

Specialist professionals told us some of the challenges they faced when working with FE colleges. Along with FE settings having large campuses they often have various sites, and consequently we hear stories where professionals would not be aware of where blind and partially sighted young people are based.

Additionally, QTVI’s often tell us there can be reluctance from mainstream staff to implement advice, impacting support for blind and partially sighted young people.

Some of these barriers include lack of specialist knowledge within college settings, no Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) equivalent to support transition and course access, and lack of understanding of specialist skill development.

“The college environment does encourage independence, however the attitudes of lecturers when it comes to independent skills development for blind and partially sighted learners differs from QTVI’s.”

**QTVI**

“Challenges include multiple sites with multiple people looking after them. Too big of a campus. A central team would support.”

**QTVI**

“Young people can change colleges or course or drop out of FE. Can be difficult to track where they are and can be time consuming.”

**QTVI**

Over the past year 57% of local authorities have reported a decrease or freeze of the number of QTVIs, despite the rising number of caseloads into VI services, currently approximately 31,000 children and young people. This will likely affect support for almost half of all children and young people accessing specialist support. Due to this, many authorities are either freezing or decreasing their resource levels, resulting in support becoming increasingly stretched [7].

## The Two-Tier System for Sensory Support

Currently, VI specialist support is not being consistently delivered amongst post 16 settings, creating an informal two-tier system.

Local authorities provide the funding for specialist VI services (QTVIs) to support specialist colleges and sixth form provision. Yet, young people wanting to attend FE college struggle to access the same statutory support, due to FE settings being expected to buy in support.

In our previous report we found 26% of FE settings were required to buy in specialist VI support, and that colleges often struggle to find the resources to do so. However, we know also that some local authority sensory service teams do provide statutory support without any additional costs to FE settings because they recognise the importance of consistent access to specialist support [1]. This unreliable distribution of VI support continues to occur across England and impacts essential support being delivered to blind and partially sighted young people. Without this specialist provision blind and partially sighted young people cannot build and develop skills to access teaching and learning.

“When working with students moving into post 16 settings it was always a hard call as what to advise. If they stayed within sixth forms, the support from the local authority VI Team would continue. But if signposted into FE; the same input wasn’t guaranteed. It felt like a two-tier system within one local authority.”

**Specialist Professional**

“Our service has supported in post 16 since 2015. But I am aware that lots of other services are not able to do this or do it base on a payment model. That should not be the way. If they have a vision impairment they should be supported.”

**QTVI**

In 2023 FE and skills had seen the largest cuts across all areas of education spending since 2010 [8]. This has particularly placed FE colleges in a difficult situation, as colleges have become reluctant to source and buy in VI support from specialists. For blind and partially sighted young people decisions about their future should not be based on the availability of support and how it is distributed across different local authorities.

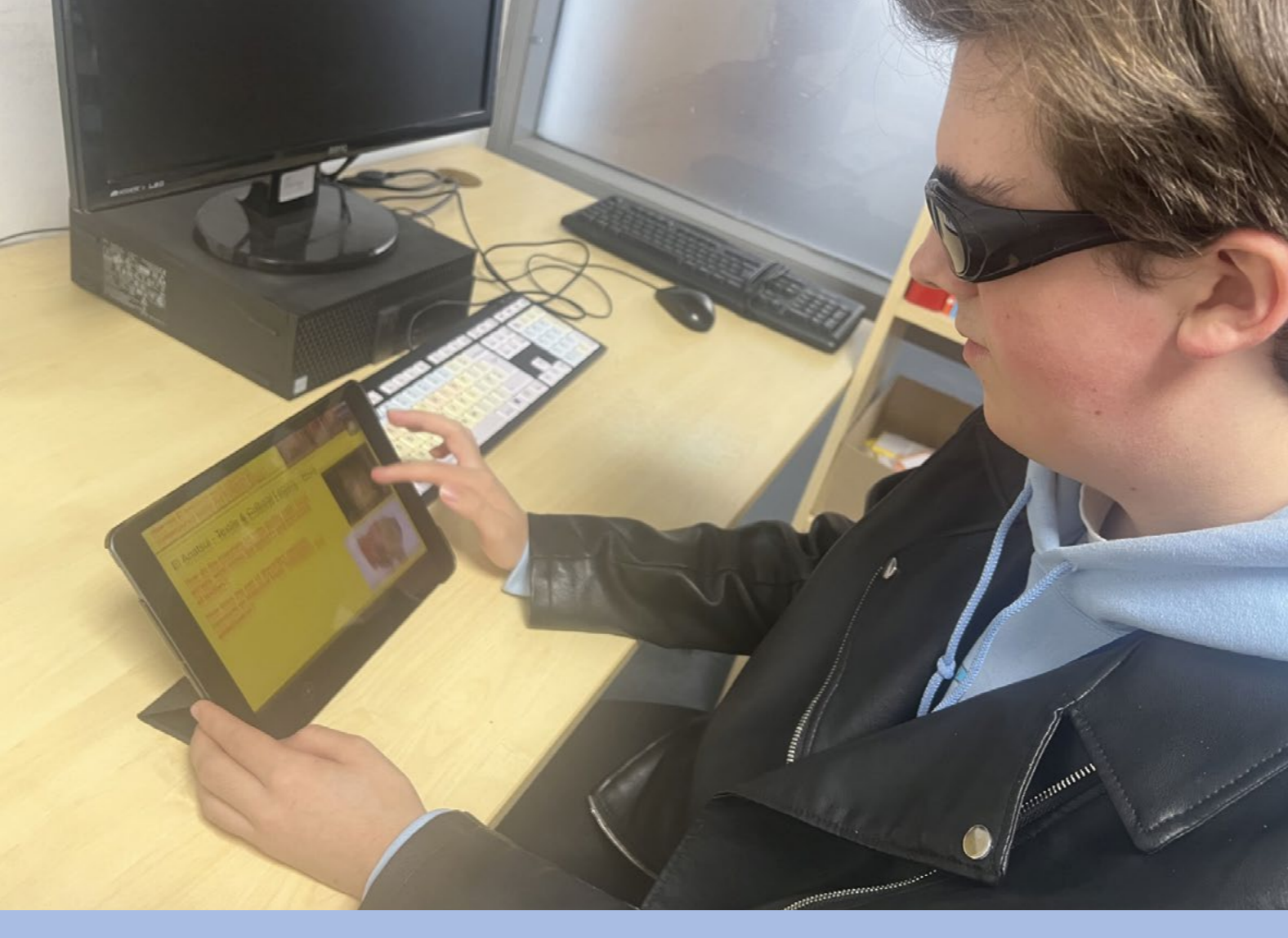
“I was at mainstream and the resources had to be created by my teaching assistant. Whereas at the (specialist) college in Worcester the teachers created the resources themselves. I had better access to textbooks, diagrams, things like that. They were already prepared before the lesson. Instead of them being made as and when they were needed. In mainstream I just used an iPad because I didn’t have a laptop whereas at Worcester, I use a laptop which has given me more access to equipment.”

**Blind and partially sighted young person**

“I found the only reason I ended up going to a specialist college was because a lot of the colleges and sixth forms in my area, we got in touch and all said ‘nope! We don’t get it. We can’t meet his needs’. I think there is a certain level of understanding to be achieved of various visual needs because I feel like there is that same old argument of, we have had a student of that condition, so why is that different for you then. And that kind of one size fits all that mainstream colleges try and go for.”

**Blind and partially sighted young person**





Local authorities must be held accountable to their statutory duty to provide specialist support for young people up to the age of 25 years under the [SEND: Code of Practice](#). We see no accountability for local authorities which is permitting them to fail their legal duty.

This funding is crucial for blind and partially sighted young people to have access to the necessary resources and support throughout their educational journey.

“I think my one message to the Education Minister would be reevaluate the budget cuts to SEND because if you want us to stay at home and not have to seek specialist support elsewhere at least support our colleges.”

**Blind and partially sighted young person**

**We call on the Government to provide adequate ringfenced funding for statutory vision impairment services in FE and ensure there is accountability within the system for local authorities to deliver.**

## Are EHCPs the ‘Golden Ticket’?

Our previous report, [Give Me Access to College](#) identified the arbitrary use of Education, Health and care Plans (EHCPs) within FE settings. We found that many local authorities require blind and partially sighted young people to have an EHCP to access statutory provisions in mainstream FE college settings, when this would not be required in a sixth form setting [1]. This creates an additional barrier, preventing many from accessing FE.

Within recent reforms to SEND and the FE sector, we have seen no attempts from the Department for Education (DfE) to rectify this issue, despite it supporting DfE’s agenda to make support easier to access.

Recently DfE has been working to reduce the number of EHCP’s, in recognition that for many, support should be able to be provided as part of a setting’s ordinary available provision [9]. Attaining an EHCP is difficult, and the process can be lengthy and adversarial. Requiring this simply because a young person chooses to study at an FE college represents significant wastage in the system with a financial and resource cost to local authorities, and the impact of deterring young people from studying in FE college settings, as they do not know with or without an EHCP whether they will get the support they are entitled to.

‘...with an increase in the number appealed, from 6,000 in 2018 to 15,600 in 2023. Of these, 98% of decisions found in favour of parents, contributing to low confidence, and which the Department recognises as indicative of poor value for money.’

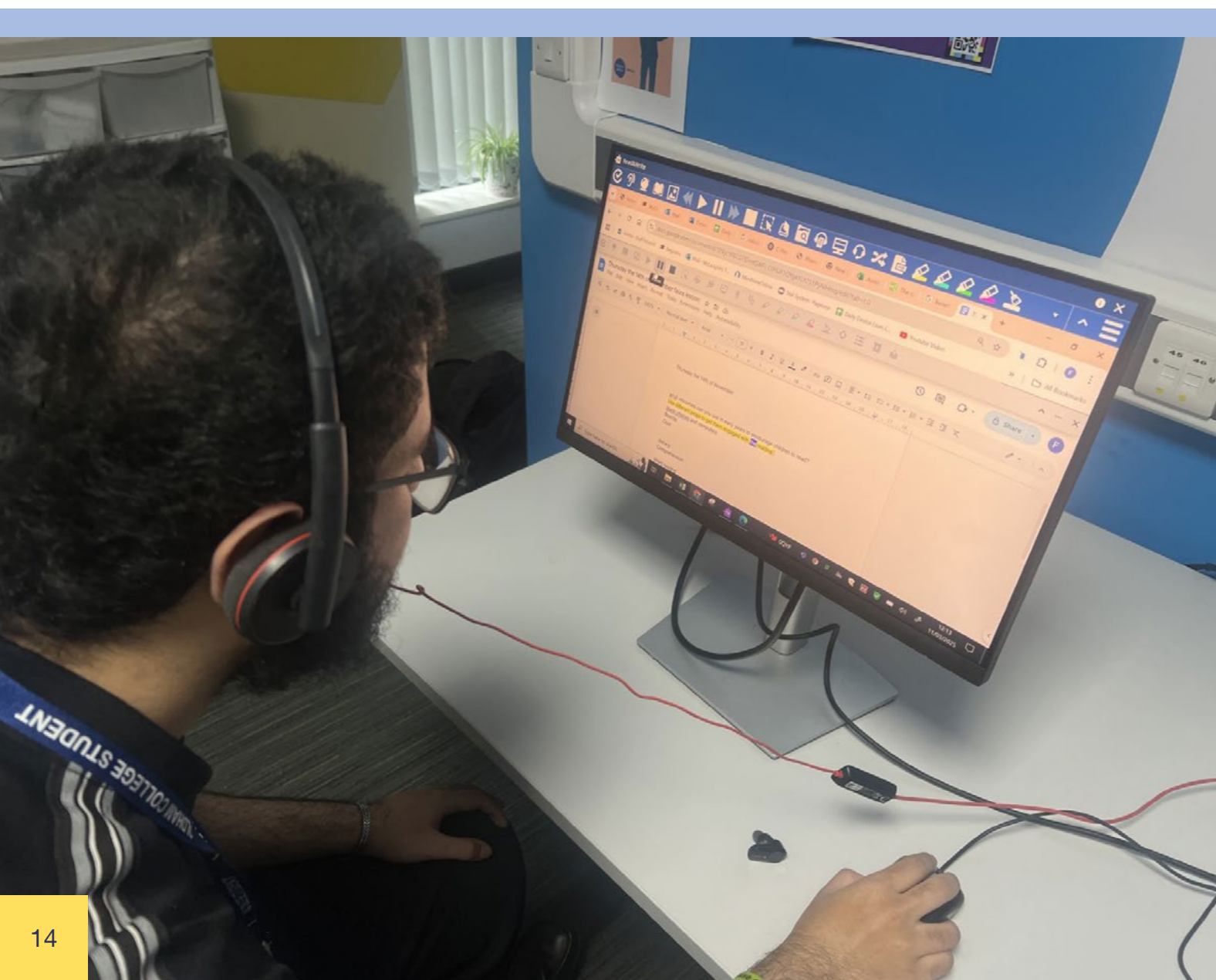
**Public Accounts Committee [9]**

The data available from DfE does not give a complete picture of the journey of blind and partially sighted students. We support the call from the Public Accounts Committee for this data to be improved.

‘The department should urgently improve its data and then use this information to develop a new fully costed plan for improving the SEN system, with concrete actions, and clear interdependencies, alongside metrics to measure outcomes.’

**Public Accounts Committee [9]**

**We are calling on the Government to remove the arbitrary use of EHCPs for blind and partially sighted young people to access vision impairment support in mainstream FE college settings.**



## Preparing for Adulthood: Is this happening?

Transition to post 16 education is a critical period for blind and partially sighted young people. The transition often comes with additional barriers, particularly when the process of ‘Preparing for Adulthood’ is not being met [10]. The absence of proper transition planning and support can affect educational experiences, wellbeing, and future opportunities.

“Transition should not be viewed as a single moment in time. Rather, transition is an ongoing process through which the young person is facilitated to develop the skills and experiences they need to be successful as they move from one setting to the next.”

**Douglas et al (2019) [11]**

Colleges are not consistently meeting the needs of blind and partially sighted students, and we see the evidence of this, through the enquiries we receive from students to our education advice

service. Common barriers include access to technology, failure to implement reasonable adjustments within lessons and exams, and not providing resources in accessible formats.

“A student enquired about options for when leaving college and technology advice as this was not covered by their college. This included options on residential living including appliances, ways in which they could make iPhone/iPad accessible and funding for a personal laptop. We were able to direct them to a range of resources both from TPT and other organisations including RNIB grants and TAVIP. For residential living they were advised on the assessment process.”

**Education Advisor, TPT**

The SEND: code of practice stresses the importance of high aspirations for successful transitioning with long-term goal planning starting well before Year 9. The process must be enforced to ensure young people leave education with the relevant skills, including self-advocacy, use of assistive technology and mobility skills.

Regrettably, this process is failing to consistently deliver. As we have explored, many local authorities do not offer sensory support when a student moves to FE, leaving many blind and partially sighted young people without support from specialists. As the SEND: Code of Practice clearly states it is a system which supports children and young people from 0-25 years. Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to ensure support is provided within this age bracket, regardless of the type of post 16 setting. This makes it challenging for many blind and partially sighted young people to access college, leaving them with limited options and at risk of becoming NEET.

This is where the [Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with a Vision Impairment \(CFVI\)](#) is essential.



“They basically always say we are preparing you because when you go to college you won’t get as much support, especially if I am going to mainstream. You won’t get the same support as I am getting at my current school. Only because there is so much going on at college, you can’t really have one person focusing on you, creating your worksheets, or helping you access things. Basically, saying we are teaching you all this now so when you go to college you can kind of help yourself and you can talk to your teachers and tell them what needs to be done to make the teaching accessible.”

#### **Blind and Partially Sighted Young Person**

The CFVI sits alongside and is integrated within the academic curriculum. It focuses on the importance of developing lifelong skills which enable young people to navigate today’s society. It is known to over 130 local authorities and implementation of elements of the framework are being used by specialist professionals. However, due to the inconsistent access to specialists at post 16, the framework is not being universally used to support students in FE colleges. Where it is being used the impact is significant.

“In Sheffield the VI Service are commissioned to support learners with VI in their post 16 setting. This enables us to continue to build on the specialist curriculum taught during the child’s school years and support the young person at whatever stage they are at to further develop independence.

As a QTVI we would plan timely delivery of specialist skills outlined in the CFVI that are relevant to support access to the young person’s post 16 course, progression to adulthood and possible employment.

An example of this would be - a severely sighted young person may need to learn to develop and expand skills by switching from using a braille notetaker device to using a laptop with screen reader technology to ensure they can meet all course requirements such as using excel spreadsheets when presenting data. Through intervention teaching delivered by QTVI on how to use the screen reader with different applications ensures that the young person can keep up with the demands of the course whilst also increasing employability skills relating to their area of study.”

#### **QTVI**

QTVIs have raised their concerns about a lack of understanding of the learning needs of blind and partially sighted young people when transitioning into FE colleges. The CFVI and access to a QTVI, are key enablers to ensure college staff can better understand and support young people with a VI to access their learning, and the importance of learning how to access the world around them.

A more holistic approach needs to be considered during the transitions process for blind and partially sighted young people. This can be ensured by implementing the ‘Preparing for Adulthood’ process correctly throughout education. As part of this the CFVI should be referenced and scaffolded at appropriate stages of education, to guarantee relevant skills are developed at the right time.



# Technology is still the hot topic

Technology is vital to the success of blind and partially sighted young people's education and life beyond.

From conversations with FE colleges, we have learnt many are equipped with appropriate technology. However, we have seen a lack of knowledge and understanding from staff about how technology can be adapted to a young person's needs. In some circumstances small adjustments, such as colour contrast, enlarged icons, in-built narrator and magnification are required and for others specific assistive technology is needed.

There is an inconsistency in the provision of technology support and how funding of this is prioritised. With some QTVIs with technology knowledge and others lacking in this area, fully aware that they are without the time or resources to change this. This considerable inconsistency across the nation needs to be addressed as young people with a VI are placed in a disadvantaged situation.

"I think if the CFVI is nationally recognised it would absolutely be a godsend. Continuity and consistency of specialist VI education is a big challenge."

**QTVI**

**We call on the Government to strengthen the current 'Preparing for Adulthood' process to ensure positive transitions occur for blind and partially sighted young people.**

**In addition, we call on the Government to embed the CFVI within policy. Integrating the CFVI into policy will ensure blind and partially sighted young people receive a consistent and inclusive education.**

"Using assistive technology has enabled me to study more independently, this allows me to study outside college hours which is vital around exam times! Now that I am confident utilising assistive technology in lessons, I am less dependent on my teaching assistant and don't need her with me in class as much. This makes me feel more confident and independent!"

**Youth Champion AAA campaign**

"A real challenge is that no college has a clear understanding of assistive technology and the relevance of IT for blind and partially sighted learners."

**Sensory Service Team**

"For colleges IT skills (for blind and partially sighted learners) is difficult and getting equipment."

**QTVI**

It is an inconsistent picture from both colleges and local authorities. We met with one sensory service team equipped with expertise of specialist technology, and the mechanisms to fund it. In contrast, a college had no linkage between their blind and partially sighted young people and assistive technology, including no real engagement with the local authority.

This places some blind and partially sighted young people in a disadvantaged situation, not being able to develop independent learning skills through the use of technology.

“If it is not reasonable for the college to provide the equipment, an application is made to the LA, there is an understanding that equipment over £500 would be provided by the LA and anything less than that by the setting.”

**Sensory Service Team**

“From my perspective in terms of low vision learners, I’ve not actually worked that much with low vision learners. We do have two specialists, so I have kind of worked with them previously on some of the technology that they use with those learners, but because they work with those learners, I’ve never really had any personal referrals.”

**Technology tutor**

The 2025 [Employment White Paper](#) signals a move towards developing a more comprehensive strategy for FE and skills. Now is the time to support blind and partially sighted young people develop these skills.

“It’s difficult for them (blind and partially sighted students) to make transitions into the workplace afterwards because you could potentially go from college to work, or training and they don’t have the skills to actually do it. Everywhere you go they are going to use laptops computers, its all-digital.”

**College tutor**

“Every student is different, and so will their tech needs be. There is no one best piece of tech, so having options and considering different pieces of tech is essential. I was lucky to receive a demo at the beginning of my time at secondary school and was able to choose the tech I wanted to work with going forward. Never assume what might be best for everyone.”

**Education Technology Coordinator, TPT**

We are encouraged by the 2025 announcement of introducing assistive technology training within Initial Teacher Training. This has the potential to improve understanding and awareness of how mainstream and assistive technology can support blind and partially sighted young people to access their education independently [12]. However, the Government must go further and extend this to include FE settings.

**We call on the Government to develop a strategy for mainstream and assistive technology. A comprehensive strategy is needed to ensure blind and partially sighted young people can access technology required to participate fully in education and gain skills for future employment.**

## Access and Assistance for All

Further Education settings are accountable for creating and ensuring their online and IT systems are accessible to all learners. This is where the [Access and Assistance for All \(AAA\)](#) campaign has a role.

The AAA campaign, designed and developed by young disabled people, aims to improve assistive technology and accessibility by design in FE colleges, to improve the lives and educational experiences and outcomes for those young people with learning differences and disabilities.

It encourages FE colleges to make small changes which can have a beneficial impact, and it can be achieved by signing up to the five simple pledges.

“Recently we delivered a CPD session to our staff, giving them the skills to make the content they produce accessible from the outset, such as considering the use of colour contrast, fonts, file type and language and using an accessibility checker routinely. The AAA Campaign acts as a useful support and source for inspiration to allow us to keep progressing further.”

**AAA College Supporter**

**We call on colleges to sign up to the Access and Assistance for All campaign, to ensure their IT systems and programmes are accessible to young people with learning difficulties and disabilities using assistive technology.**

# Bringing it all together

We hear how the FE and SEND sector are in crisis and urgent action is needed. However, the current system and proposed reforms continue to fail to understand that SEND and FE need to have a cooperative approach.

The barriers we have set out need to be resolved urgently, otherwise we will continue to see another generation of blind and partially sighted students locked out of college.

We are committed to working with the Government to deliver a more equitable and inclusive post 16 system and continue to champion the voices and experiences of blind and partially sighted young people.

## We call on the Government to:

- 1. Review the effectiveness of T-Levels for students with SEND, including blind and partially sighted young people.
- 2. Provide adequate ringfenced funding for statutory vision impairment services in Further Education and to ensure there is accountability within the system for local authorities to deliver.
- 3. Remove the arbitrary use of EHCPs for blind and partially sighted young people to access vision impairment support in mainstream further education college settings.
- 4. Strengthen the ‘Preparing for Adulthood’ process to ensure positive transitions occur for blind and partially sighted young people.
- 5. Embed the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with a vision Impairment (CFVI) within education policy.
- 6. To develop a strategy for mainstream and assistive technology.

### In addition:

- 7. We ask colleges to sign up to the Access and Assistance for All (AAA) campaign, to ensure their IT systems and programmes are accessible to young people with learning difficulties and disabilities using assistive technology.

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# About Thomas Pocklington Trust

We believe blind and partially sighted children and young people should have the opportunity to thrive in their education. That is why we are here. We work with blind and partially sighted children and young people to address barriers in accessing education.

To follow our work, you can sign up to our newsletter, or for a more in-depth conversation you can contact us at **[EducationPolicy@pocklington.org.uk](mailto:EducationPolicy@pocklington.org.uk)**.

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