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Specialist Support during Covid Times

RNIB, VIEW and BATOD recognise that, in the current challenging pandemic, specialist professionals continue to ensure that families and children/young people who are deaf and/or have a vision impairment receive support and guidance on areas such as accessing information, language and communication, technology, and on social and emotional development.

In response to a range of questions and issues that have been highlighted to us through surveys*, member feedback etc we would like to make the following points:

1. Remote working

The pandemic has seen many face-to-face visits in person from professionals (Qualified Teachers of the Vision impairment QTVI, Qualified Teachers of the Deaf, QToD, Qualified Teachers of Multi-Sensory Impairment QTMSI, Educational Audiologists, Habilitation Specialists etc) move to a remote model of working to support children/young people who are deaf and/or have a vision impairment, their families and professionals in education settings. Multi-disciplinary meetings have also been hosted remotely.

Professionals have reported to us that remote working brings a number of **benefits**, including:

- reduced travel time, leading to increased capacity as well as potential cost savings
- in some cases, improved engagement with deaf children/young people, families and professionals
- improved attendance in multi-disciplinary meetings.

It is important that when considering remote support, to consider the individual needs of children/young people who are deaf and/or have a vision impairment, and families. Whilst support can sometimes be provided remotely, this will not always be the most effective way of meeting the family's needs.

In making any decisions around whether and how to continue these remote ways of working, we believe that services and professionals should avoid any blanket policies.

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Face to face in the home are beneficial because

- Early Years support for children who are deaf and/or have a vision impairment and their families includes social and emotional development which includes play based sessions which can only be done in person. This is important to be able to coach and model good practice for parents so they develop the skills and for developing language, communication and play skills for children/young people who are deaf and/or have a vision impairment.
- Support for children who have a vision impairment or multi-sensory impairment involves a large portion of tactile skill development which can only be done in person.
- Support for children who are deaf or have a multi-sensory impairment involves targeted communication and listening support, including British Sign Language, which can only be done in person.
- There is a need to set-up, repair or check personal amplification systems and assistive listening devices (hearing aids, cochlear implants, radio aids) in person.
- Accurate and effective assessments can be carried out with the child and their family.
- Family may have limited IT and/or internet connections in the home to support effective virtual calls.
- The family may require emotional support that cannot be done effectively remotely, particularly in the early days of identification.
- Concerns about safeguarding and a need to see a child/young adult in person.

Face to face visits in education settings are beneficial because

- A positive and supportive rapport with the child/young person and the professionals who work with them can be nurtured and developed.
- Children/young people with vision impairment or multi-sensory impairment struggle to engage in virtual calls and/or there is need to engage interactively with the child/young person to support their learning.
- Support for children/young people with vision impairment or multi-sensory impairment involves a large portion of practical, hands on, tactile work which requires face to face support.

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- Support involves interactive activities (ie maths tasks/literacy vocabulary or phonics vocabulary) which can only be done in person due to the nature of a deaf child needing to see the professional demonstrating live and being able to see their faces for ease of communication at the same time, which is not easily done remotely.
- Deaf children/young people need to see faces clearly for speech-reading cues and/or sign language.
- Remote support is very tiring for children/young people who are deaf and/or have a vision impairment and they have to work harder to understand compared to face-to-face support.
- Accurate and effective assessments can be carried out.
- IT within the school may be unreliable, or the education setting is unable to provide appropriate facilities or supervision during remote support work.

When assessing the risks of conducting face-to-face visits, services and professionals must consider also the risks to a child/young person's development if support is not provided face-to-face.

Such risks are likely to be higher in the early years if families do not receive the provision they need to support a child who is deaf and/or has a vision impairment. Given the importance of early intervention services in the early years, we believe there needs to be a particular focus on restoring face-to-face support, as much as possible, where this is likely to benefit the child and family.

Government guidance* sets out the steps that can be taken to reduce risk, including social distancing, etc.

We acknowledge that, in some cases, there may be no alternative but to provide support remotely for a short period (for example, because of a local lockdown or if someone in the household has coronavirus symptoms). Professionals should ensure that support can still be provided remotely, where required.

We also recognise that many services and professionals are delivering a hybrid/blended approach of remote and face-to-face support.

2. Recovery/Catch-up support

Children/young people who are deaf and/or have a vision impairment have faced significant disadvantages in accessing education during the pandemic, with many struggling to follow online lessons or understand their teachers or peers where face

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coverings are being worn in classrooms or when socialising in the corridors during break times. There has been an increase in concerns raised by parents, carers and young people themselves regarding the need for emotional support. Ensuring these children/young people receive appropriate and accessible catch-up support must be a priority if we are to prevent further widening of the gap in achievements between other hearing/sighted children.

Children/young people who are deaf and/or have vision impairment will clearly benefit from many of the same catch-up strategies already being deployed in many schools and colleges – such as small groups, 1-1 support and extra-curricular activities. Particular intervention work will require specialist teacher input due to the nature of language and communication needs within the session as well as adapting teaching materials etc.

As with all education matters, we expect education settings to have regard to the individual needs of these high needs cohorts when developing or delivering recovery/catch-up programmes. Advice, support and guidance from a specialist teacher should be sought to ensure that any interventions are appropriate to this cohort of children/young people. This will be especially important if the intervention is being delivered by someone who has not worked with a child who is deaf and/or has a vision impairment before.

We also believe that UK Departments for Education* must ensure that there is sufficient ring-fenced funding available to local authorities to fully resource their Sensory Support education services to ensure that all children/young people who are deaf and/or have a vision impairment can receive appropriate and targeted recovery/catch-up support. They should also set clear expectations that QTVI/QToD/QTMSI should be involved in advising on strategies with these cohorts of children/young people.

Where **any recovery/catch-up support is being provided remotely**, education settings must ensure that the **following necessary reasonable adjustments** are made to ensure they are accessible and appropriate to these children/young people who are deaf and/or have a vision impairment:

- A robust Wi-Fi connection for sound and picture quality, to reduce listening fatigue and picture freezing for sign language input. We expect UK Governments to reiterate these messages in government guidance.
- Up-to-date computer equipment for both the QTVI/QToD/QTMSI and educational settings where the sound and picture quality is of a high standard.

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- Extra time allowed for children/young people who are deaf and/or have a vision impairment for remote support to allow for time to demonstrate activities and for the child/young person to focus to the teacher – they cannot perform a task, listen/watch the teacher and use a assistive technology/support from an supporting adult at the same time.
- An adult to support the child/young person who is deaf and/or has a vision impairment during the remote activity, and time allowed pre-remote session for the QTVI/QToD/QTMSI to prepare the adult supporting the child with resources and strategies etc, particularly if assessments are to be carried out.