

Sensory Service Information and Guidance for Teachers of Students with a Vision Impairment

This is general advice which is intended to help you to consider how you can support students with vision impairment in your school and classroom. Please contact the Sensory Service for any specific queries you may have.

1. Communicate openly with children and parents

The wellbeing of children returning to school is of great importance. Children with a vision impairment may have more specific concerns than other children with regards to any changes. They will also have the same general concerns as their peers. Open conversations regarding these concerns will be necessary. Parents may also need reassurance and support from teachers.

2. Consult with your Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (QTVI)

The Sensory Service QTVIs provide specific advice and support for students with vision impairment within your school. It is extremely important to refer to the previous reports and advice provided to the school by the QTVI to ensure that any new routines or plans within school are appropriate for the student with vision impairment. You can contact your QTVI to ask for support and advice and to check that plans are safe and appropriate.

3. Think carefully about changes to the school layout

As changes are planned for moving around school, entering and exiting, and how classrooms are set out, it is important that teachers communicate these changes regularly to students who have vision impairment.

Identify which rooms have optimal learning conditions e.g. lighting and ensure that groups or bubbles that have a student with vision impairment are prioritised for such rooms. If necessary, seek advice on the visual environment of any temporary learning space from your QTVI.

Ensure that children's visual access needs are taken into account when considering seating position whether in the usual classroom or in a new environment.

Ensure that information that is delivered and presented in any temporary learning spaces is in an accessible format/method e.g. consideration of lighting, seating position, proximity to visual information.

Allow students to familiarise themselves with a new learning environment at a quiet time, without other children in the first instance.

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One-way systems

If children with a vision impairment have learned a way of moving around school, they may need more time to practise moving around using any 'one-way' system which may be implemented. Communicate your plans with parents and ensure that the child can practise this movement around school in a safe way. Now, more than ever, corridors need to be clutter free.

New classroom layouts

Guidance advises that all non-essential equipment should be stored, and classrooms should be decluttered. For a child with a vision impairment, the new layout may present challenges. They will need to learn and be taught what that new layout is like, and be given the opportunity to navigate through the classroom. Where possible, a student with vision impairment should remain within their familiar/usual classroom, to avoid having to learn new routes to places such as toilets.

Keeping doors open

Government advice suggests that classrooms should be adequately ventilated and that doors be propped open, where safe to do so (bearing in mind fire safety and safeguarding), to limit use of door handles and aid ventilation. It is important to consider if this would pose a risk to a child with vision impairment within your class.

Additional support

Some children and young people may need additional support to follow these measures (for example, routes around school marked in braille). It is important to note that large print signs will also be useful for those who are not braille users.

4. Consider hand-washing arrangements

There is an increased need to maintain good standards of personal hygiene, including frequent hand washing. Allowing a child with a vision impairment to go first or last will help to avoid difficulties with social distancing. If a child in your class requires support with maintaining personal hygiene, it is recommended that settings ensure that help is available for children and young people who have trouble cleaning their hands independently. Some children may need supervision and additional time.

5. Lunchtime and playtime arrangements

Lunchtime

Your school will have plans for the way that playtimes and lunchtimes operate. Packed lunches may be a way of limiting the movement at lunchtime, so it is worth considering

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what type of food children have in their lunchbox and communicating this with parents. A reminder to parents to choose drinks without straws that are difficult to put in, practise opening packets of crisps with their children and make all items manageable and mess free. This will be particularly important for children with a vision impairment.

Playtimes

Schools may be asked to devise ways for students to remain socially distanced at break and lunchtimes. All students will find this a real challenge, but for children with vision impairment, this will be even more difficult.

6. Social distancing measures, if required

In primary schools, most children will already be aware if there is someone with a vision impairment in the school; but, **with the consent of parents**, it might be worth a reminder to other children of the difficulties and challenges that may be faced by the vision impaired community when social distancing, both in and out of school. It may be a good opportunity for more education surrounding sight loss.

In post primary schools, this could pose a greater challenge with larger numbers of students. A change to timetables may mean that there is less opportunity for mixing on corridors, etc. therefore reducing the difficulties. Students could potentially be allowed to finish lessons earlier than classmates to safely move to the next lesson. This decision should be based upon individual needs. To assist with social distancing issues consider the following:

- Explain to the pupil in age appropriate language about social distancing and how it will be put into practice in the school setting.
- Sighted students should be made aware that it is their responsibility to social distance as a visually impaired pupil may not be able to.
- Teach sighted students to alert student with visual impairment that they are there by giving a verbal clue, such as "Hi, it's (name of student) here."
- The student with vision impairment may not be aware that everyone is following the guidelines and that it is not just them that is affected by the changes.
- Where appropriate, provide some visual/tactile clues of how far the recommended distance between people is, e.g. guidelines on the wall or floor.
- Reassure the student with vision impairment as they may be anxious/worried if their support assistant is not as near to them as usual.
- Reassure the student that assistance will be available when/if they require it although as always it is important to encourage their independence where possible.

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- It may be helpful to tell the student who else is in the classroom and advise them when someone leaves as they may be less aware of this if they are positioned further away than normal.
- Lessons should be prepared in advance to allow the materials to be adapted/modified to suit the student's requirements and enable them to have their own copy. This is normal practice for children with vision impairment.
- Carefully consider where to teach a student with vision impairment when following social distancing rules. A classroom with soft furnishings, curtains, low ceilings would be preferable rather than teaching a vision impaired child in a large open space, such as a hall, dining room or gymnasium.
- Describe to the student the layout of the classroom and keep them updated if anything is moved around.
- Position the student with vision impairment at the front, taking into account any peripheral vision problems (make the most of the student's useful vision).
- Say out loud what you are writing on the board. Enable screen mirroring when presenting on a Smart board or IWB, via Collaborate Ultra for children who have been provided with iPads as access devices.
- Try not to teach with your back to a window or light source as this puts your face in shadow making it harder to see you.
- Use precise verbal descriptions, use more descriptive words, including 'visual' terms and also be aware of non-verbal cues being missed by the student.
- Use students' names when addressing any student, so the student with vision impairment knows who is being spoken to.
- Ensure that any low vision aids e.g. angled work surfaces, video magnifier, lamp, laptop, iPad are available, turned on and working.
- Repeat contributions from peers as the student with vision impairment may miss part or all of these.
- Keep background noise to a minimum- turn off noisy equipment when not in use and shut out external noise by closing windows and doors.
- It may not always be possible to keep to social distance from adult to child, if hand over hand, hand under hand is required when teaching/supporting. If this is the case it may be appropriate to wear gloves and face mask.
- Social distancing will be particular difficult if the student requires to be sighted guided. If this is the situation then gloves and face masks may be required. If the student uses sighted guiding, the guide should avoid coughing into the sleeve.

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7. Resources and equipment

Reducing sharing of resources and equipment may be problematic. For a child with vision impairment, this may be difficult if they cannot see which equipment another child has used, and which equipment belongs to them.

As stated previously, this may be a good opportunity for sight loss to be discussed openly by teachers in the classroom and highlight the difficulties faced by the vision impaired community. Children tend to be really helpful and supportive when they know the reasons for doing something. It may not have occurred to other children that some individuals may have additional difficulties with things that they take for granted. Please consider the following:

- Continue to use the student's assistive equipment. If the student is confident to handle and set up the equipment, they may be the only person who needs to touch the equipment.
- Wash hands carefully before and after handling any equipment.
- Have hand sanitiser available if not possible to wash hands.
- Students should have their own copy of book/worksheet in appropriate format for their visual requirements.
- Clean any equipment/materials after they have been used.
- Encourage the student to use their cane if they have been provided with one and to clean it regularly.

8. Outdoor learning for children with a vision impairment

Outdoor learning will need to be fully risk-assessed on an individual basis. Resources will need to be accessible for those with a vision impairment. Differing levels of lighting outside could cause difficulties. Consult existing reports from the QTVI. Some of the things that have been non problematic within the classroom may require assessment to ensure that you are meeting visual needs in the outdoor environment.

If a child has a learning aid in the classroom, such as screen share, teachers will need to adapt lessons to ensure that the child has the same access to learning and resources in the outside learning space as they would within the classroom.

9. Practicing of independence skills

More than ever, students will be required to have increased independence within school. Now is a great time to remind parents of the need to practise some of those skills that will be more important than ever when back in school. Can they fasten their own coat, wash their hands independently, and go to the toilet by themselves? For some children, this may

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not be appropriate, but, for many, it would be a great time to try! Teachers should explain to parents why this will be necessary under the new rules and guidance.

10. Accessibility and remote learning

If a blended learning approach is required:

- Seek advice from QTVI on differentiation of home learning materials. Ensure close liaison with families, as appropriate, so that they are able to support their child's learning as much as possible.
- Ensure that children can take equipment home to use to access any remote learning opportunities.
- Where signposting to online learning resources or using school produced videos, check that these are accessible to students with vision impairment.
- Ensure good lightning conditions, with the light coming from the side or behind.
- Lighting levels should be even and adequate and should minimise glare. This will enable effective use to be made of residual vision, especially to detect contrasts in colour and tone and read high visibility signs.
- Ensure there is no unnecessary noise in the background (sensory overload) as children with vision impairment can be easily distracted. Young children may be less able than adults to filter out background noise. They need good acoustic conditions, as they are less accomplished listeners than adults.
- When presenting lessons virtually do not sit with your back to a window or light source. Make sure that the light is on your face so the student with some vision can see you. If possible, film against a plain background and wear clothes that contrast to the background.
- Make sure that the room where you are filming /recording has good acoustics in order to cut down on reverberation. Avoid rooms with lots of hard surfaces such as a kitchen. A smallish room with soft furnishings/ curtains or blinds is best.
- Shut the doors and windows and turn off any noisy equipment in order to reduce background noise.
- Some software includes a text/ chat box which can be activated to allow students to ask for clarification.
- Send any PowerPoints/new vocabulary to the student in advance so they are able to review this before the lesson. This helps to overcome the slower processing that a student with visual impairment may experience.
- If you are using PowerPoint/visual resources/pictures etc. as part of your video lesson, make sure that you clarify which slide you are using so the student with vision

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impairment can follow/find on their own copy. Use an accessible template. Make sure that there is good contrast in all resources presented to a visually impaired student, avoiding patterned materials. Give every slide a title.

- Reduce the amount of detail in visual information and avoid mixing pictures with text.
- Use the built-in Accessibility Checker in Microsoft Office 365 when creating presentations and documents.
- Some applications have a text to speech function which might be worth exploring with students that have a severe/ profound vision impairment. Immersive Reader, included in OneNote Learning Tools, is a full screen reading experience to increase readability content.
- Be aware that there is sometimes a time lag between the sound and picture on some video software applications which some students may find hard to follow.
- If you use videos or films as part of a lesson, please activate the audio description if available and make sure that the student is aware so that they can activate these. This is necessary for students with profound vision loss.
- When using conferencing over the internet, the audio quality is much better when there is no video. As such, if you do not need the video do not use it.
- With most conference platforms it is possible to record the session and access later to go over learning.
- It is possible to record a virtual lesson to be accessed by students individually so they are able to work at their own pace.
- When teaching, use precise verbal descriptions – what to look for, where to look, where going and why and use more descriptive words, including ‘visual’ terms.
- Allow the student time and allow breaks, as visual processing is tiring.

This guidance has been adapted from sources available on <https://viewweb.org.uk/coronavirus/covid19-school/> accessed on 06/08/2020.

Additional information:

<https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-support-services/sensory-service>

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