

# What's on Offer?

The quality of information  
about habilitation within  
Local Offers



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## Executive Summary

Blind Children UK has undertaken this research following a new legislative requirement on local authorities in England to publish information about local services for disabled children. This provides an opportunity for parents of children with sight loss to be better informed about services. At the moment in some cases parents are receiving little or no information and/or support after diagnosis, including information about services such as habilitation. Furthermore we know that many children and young people with sight loss are not receiving habilitation support even though this is a vital service for many children.

Good quality information about local services for children and young people with a special educational need (SEN) or disability on local authority websites is important to enable families to learn about services which may be beneficial to their child, and to ensure they are accessing the services that they are entitled to. To support this, by 1<sup>st</sup> September 2014 all local authorities in England were required to publish a Local Offer setting out the support they expect to be available for children and young people with SEN or disabilities.

Section 4.40 of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0 – 25 years, encourages local authorities to include information about habilitation in their Local Offer, which Blind Children UK welcomed. The Quality Standards: Delivery of Habilitation Training (Mobility and Independent Living Skills) for Children and Young People with Visual Impairment<sup>1</sup> gives information on what quality habilitation training should cover. The Standards define habilitation as specialist mobility and independent living skills training for children and young people with a vision impairment.

Currently many children and young people with a vision impairment, who would potentially benefit from habilitation, are not accessing it<sup>23</sup>. Providing information about this service on the local authority's website through the Local Offer is therefore a valuable way of signposting parents to this service. This report looks at whether local authorities have included information about the habilitation service that they provide in their Local Offer, and, where they have included that information, how in-depth it is<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Olga Miller, Dr Karl Wall and Dr Malcolm Garner , (January 2011) Quality Standards on the Delivery of Habilitation Training (Mobility and Independent Living Skills) for Children and Young People with Visual Impairment

<sup>2</sup> Spencer Du Bois (2014) Survey completed by 146 respondents including 130 parents, 2 relatives and 14 young people with a vision impairment – unpublished research showed that only 43.1% of respondents stated that their child had had life-skills and mobility training.

<sup>3</sup> A forthcoming piece of Guide Dogs' research on habilitation provision also indicated that some parents were not being provided with any actual support from vision support services following the diagnosis of their child's vision impairment. Furthermore, over half of respondents stated that the most helpful information or support of any kind that they had received since their child's vision impairment was diagnosed was from sources other than their local authority: such as other parents and charities.

<sup>4</sup> See Methodology for full details

As of 31<sup>st</sup> October 2014 we were able to view 150, out of 152, Local Offers on local authority websites. Encouragingly just over half (78) of published Local Offers included a reference to specialist mobility training for children and young people with a vision impairment (often this was referred to as habilitation, or as mobility and independent living skills training).

We examined the Local Offers to see whether they addressed the six questions that Blind Children UK had sent to all English local authorities asking them to address (see methodology) and found some examples of detailed information about the habilitation services available, however many Local Offers did not address either some or all of the six questions. We therefore feel that there is still progress to be made. We wish to encourage all local authorities to include thorough information about habilitation in their Local Offer, and recommend that they address the six questions that Blind Children UK has produced which are based upon the Quality Standards.

## Introduction

By 1<sup>st</sup> September 2014, all local authorities in England were required to publish a Local Offer. The SEND Code of Practice: 0 – 25 years defines a Local Offer as 'setting out in one place information about provision they expect to be available across education, health and social care for children and young people in their area who have special educational needs or are disabled, including those who do not have Education, Health and Care plans. In setting out what they 'expect to be available', local authorities should include provision which they believe will actually be available.'

In section 4.40 of the Code of Practice local authorities are encouraged to include information about habilitation in their Local Offer<sup>5</sup>. The Quality Standards on the Delivery of Habilitation Training (Mobility and Independent Living Skills) for Children and Young People with Visual Impairment<sup>6</sup> give in-depth information on what quality habilitation training should cover<sup>7</sup>. Habilitation combines both mobility and orientation training with the teaching of the life skills needed to perform everyday tasks. The skills and strategies taught by Habilitation Specialists help children and young people with vision impairments to develop in line with their sighted peers – enabling them to achieve the greatest possible independence and to maximise their educational outcomes and life chances. However, research has shown that 38% of children and young people with a vision impairment report that they are not getting out as much as they would like to but felt that virtually all difficulties with access could be overcome with habilitation training<sup>8</sup>.

This report looks at how many local authorities have acted on the recommendation within the Code of Practice and included information about habilitation in their Local Offer, and, where they have included information on the habilitation service that they provide, whether the information addresses the six questions provided by Blind Children UK based on the Quality Standards<sup>9</sup>. Previously published research found that the majority of parents (57 percent) did not feel that they received sufficient information on services such as habilitation following their child's diagnosis of a vision impairment<sup>10</sup>. A forthcoming piece of Guide Dogs' research on habilitation provision also indicated that some parents were not being provided with any actual support from vision support services following the diagnosis of their child's vision

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<sup>5</sup> Department for Education (2014) Special Educational Needs Code of Practice: 0 – 25 years, section 4.40

<sup>6</sup> Dr Olga Miller, Dr Karl Wall and Dr Malcolm Garner (January 2011) Quality Standards on the Delivery of Habilitation Training (Mobility and Independent Living Skills) for Children and Young People with Visual Impairment

<sup>7</sup> Habilitation describes the acquisition of new skills and development of independence (Miller et al., 2011) and is distinct from re-habilitation which describes the regaining of skills and independence following illness or injury (United Nations, 2008). It is defined in the Vision 2020 strategy as follows: "the acquisition of mobility, orientation and other independent living skills in relation to children and young people born with vision impairment or who acquire it during childhood." (Vision 2020 UK, 2013)

<sup>8</sup> Guide Dogs (2008) Functionality and the Needs of Blind and Partially-Sighted Young People in the UK: A Survey of Young People, Parents, Educators and Mobility Specialists, pg 177

<sup>9</sup> See Methodology for full details

<sup>10</sup> Guide Dogs (2008) Functionality and the Needs of Blind and Partially-Sighted Young People in the UK: A Survey of Young People, Parents, Educators and Mobility Specialists, section 3.1

impairment. Furthermore, over half of respondents stated that the most helpful information or support of any kind that they had received since their child's vision impairment was diagnosed was from sources other than their local authority, for example other parents and charities.

Furthermore additional research found that, due to a lack of information, families were researching services themselves and the majority stated that they use the Internet as their main source of information<sup>11</sup>. This underlines the importance of high quality information being included within the Local Offer.

## **Methodology**

In the months leading up to local authorities' requirement to publish a Local Offer, Blind Children UK wrote to all English local authorities asking them to include information on the habilitation service they provide (if they provide one) in their Local Offer. This letter referred local authorities to six questions based on the Quality Standards published on the Blind Children UK website,<sup>12</sup> and asked that the information published addressed these questions. These six questions were based on the Quality Standards: Delivery of Habilitation<sup>13</sup>. The Quality Standards were developed from research and consultations undertaken at the Institute of Education, University of London, by Dr Olga Miller and Dr Karl Wall. The consultations undertaken included extensive research with Habilitation VI UK (then called MISE) the professional body for habilitation specialists, and others from the sector. This report is an analysis of the quality of information published in Local Offers as of October 31<sup>st</sup> 2014 against those six questions.

The questions Blind Children UK asked local authorities to address in their Local Offers are:

1. Is habilitation training available in your local area? If no – when are you planning on providing this service? We recommend you contact your local Blind Children UK mobility team to find out whether they can support the delivery of habilitation services in your local area. If yes we have put together the following further questions that would be useful for you to include in your Local Offer:
2. What does habilitation training in your area cover? Does your habilitation service include the teaching of early movement skills, sensory, spatial and body concepts as well as cane training, route learning and independent living skills?
3. Who is eligible to access habilitation in your local area? Is your service unrestricted by criteria such as level of sight, type of visual impairment, registration or

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<sup>11</sup> Spencer Du Bois (2014) Survey completed by 146 respondents including 130 parents, 2 relatives and 14 young people with a vision impairment – unpublished

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.blindchildrenuk.org/how-to-get-involved/campaign-with-us/writing-your-local-offer>

<sup>13</sup> Dr Olga Miller, Dr Karl Wall and Dr Malcolm Garner (January 2011) Quality Standards on the Delivery of Habilitation Training (Mobility and Independent Living Skills) for Children and Young People with Visual Impairment

possession of statement or EHC plan? Is your service available to babies and pre-school children and also to those with complex needs?

4. Who will do habilitation training? Do you employ a qualified Habilitation Specialist - or a Children's Mobility Instructor who is working towards registration as a Habilitation Specialist with MISE, the professional body?

5. When can my child access habilitation training? Is your service available to children and young people in home, school and community settings and during school holidays?

6. How can families with a child who has a visual impairment access a habilitation assessment? Do children and young people with vision impairment in your area receive habilitation assessments as a matter of course at key stages, such as when transferring between schools or settings?

This analysis of the Local Offers looks at the quality of information published not the service provided. We are aware of a number of areas that have not included information about habilitation in their Local Offer but do provide a habilitation service. Good quality information in a Local Offer does not necessarily mean a good quality habilitation service. However, good quality information is a valuable tool for children and young people with a vision impairment and their families, enabling them to enquire about services which may be beneficial.

## **The Findings**

### **Inclusion of habilitation**

As of 31<sup>st</sup> October 2014, out of 152 local authority websites we were able to locate, 150 published Local Offers. We found a reference to habilitation, or a service which we believed to be habilitation but described using terms such as ‘mobility training’ and ‘rehabilitation’<sup>14</sup>, included in 78 Local Offers.

We found that it was often very difficult to locate Local Offers on a local authority’s website. Even though we had a very clear idea of what we were looking for in many cases we had to search for quite some time before locating the Local Offer. Additionally once we had located the Local Offer it was also often difficult to find relevant information about sensory services, services for children with a vision impairment, or habilitation or mobility training for children with a vision impairment. If a Local Offer is difficult to find on a local authority’s website or is if it is difficult to search for services on, then this undermines the important role that the Local Offer plays in informing children and young people with a vision impairment and their families about the services that may be available to them.

### **What does habilitation training include?**

‘Habilitation’ is still a relatively new term, only brought into common use in 2011 with the publication of the Quality Standards. It is therefore very important that Local Offers explain what habilitation is for it to be a useful resource. An example of good information is Birmingham’s Local Offer<sup>15</sup>, which provides an explanation of a wide range of skills covered during habilitation training such as the teaching of early movement skills, sensory, spatial and body concepts as well as cane training, route learning and independent living skills.

In our analysis of the 78 Local Offers that included a reference to Habilitation, 36 percent (28 Local Offers) included a reference to just ‘mobility training’, ‘habilitation’ or the staff - for example a ‘mobility officer’ - with no further explanation on what this included. 29 percent (23 Local Offers) included further details about the service and that at least two skills were being taught, for example stating that ‘mobility and independence training’ was available, or referring to a specific skill being taught e.g. long cane training.

35 percent (27 Local Offers) of Local Offers which published information about habilitation provided more in-depth information about what is involved. One such example is Enfield’s<sup>16</sup> Local Offer which via a local school’s website lists all the skills

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<sup>14</sup> Habilitation describes the acquisition of new skills and development of independence (Miller et al., 2011) and is distinct from re-habilitation which describes the regaining of skills and independence following illness or injury (United Nations, 2008). It is defined in the Vision 2020 strategy as follows: “the acquisition of mobility, orientation and other independent living skills in relation to children and young people born with vision impairment or who acquire it during childhood.” (Vision 2020 UK, 2013)

<sup>15</sup> <http://accessstoeducation.birmingham.gov.uk/index.php/SS/mobility-service.html>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.joseph-clarke-sc.co.uk/page/?title=What+we+do&pid=164>

that are covered by their habilitation service. This is positive, as the publication of clear information on what habilitation training is supports children and young people with a vision impairment and their families to learn about the breadth of ways that they can receive support to develop their mobility and independent living skills. It may also help children, young people and their families to gain some understanding about habilitation, if they are not already familiar with the term/provision.

### **Who is eligible for habilitation training?**

Clear eligibility criteria supports children and young people with a vision impairment and their families to access the services that they are entitled to. When local authorities are clear about eligibility criteria this helps to ensure a fair and needs led assessment system. Therefore the inclusion of eligibility criteria for habilitation within a Local Offer is an important aspect to providing clear information. Of the 78 local authorities that published information about habilitation in their Local Offer, 83 percent (65) included some reference to the services' eligibility criteria, for example saying that all children with a vision impairment living in the local area are eligible for an assessment. Three Local Offers included an explanation of the assessment process but no information about the eligibility criteria used.

### **Who will carry out habilitation training?**

The Quality Standards include information on the delivery of habilitation. However, previous research has suggested that habilitation is not always being carried out by professionals fully trained in meeting the needs of children and young people. Research published by Guide Dogs in 2008 found that of 40 surveyed mobility officers only 59 percent reported having a formal qualification related to working with children<sup>17</sup>. The skills needed to teach children and adults mobility and independent living skills are very different. Therefore, in line with the Quality Standards, we looked to see if Local Offers included information about whether habilitation is provided by a qualified Habilitation Specialist, or a Children's Mobility Instructor who is working towards registration as a Habilitation Specialist with the professional body, Habilitation VI UK<sup>18</sup>.

Of the 78 Local Offers that included a reference to habilitation, 22 percent (17 Local Offers) included no information about who would carry out the habilitation training. Just over a third (37 percent or 29 Local Offers) included a generic description of the professionals involved such as 'mobility officer', a Qualified Teacher of the Visually Impaired (QTVI) or a 'rehabilitation worker' with no further information on specialist habilitation training or training relating to children and young people.

However, 41 percent (32 Local Offers) made reference to habilitation training being carried out by someone qualified in teaching children and young people habilitation.

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<sup>17</sup> Guide Dogs (2008) Functionality and the Needs of Blind and Partially-Sighted Young People in the UK: A Survey of Young People, Parents, Educators and Mobility Specialists, pg 175

<sup>18</sup> Previously known as MISE



For example, references were found to ‘habilitation officers’ and to ‘mobility officer’ with additional information about their relevant qualifications. Examples of good information can be seen in Rotherham<sup>19</sup>’s Local Offers which states that habilitation training is done by Qualified Habilitation Specialists (with MISE<sup>20</sup> accreditation).

### **When can children access habilitation training?**

The Quality Standards: Delivery of Habilitation state that habilitation should take place in school, at home and in public settings. However, evidence suggests that habilitation is not always available in a wide variety of locations and times. Many services are restricted to an educational setting and only take place in term time, which can hinder learning<sup>21</sup> as it can limit the number of places that children and young people learn to move around independently in. Previous research has found that when children and young people with a vision impairment were asked what more they would like from their habilitation training they identified additional training in specific mobility skill areas or environments. The words of this student capture the need for school as well as home area based mobility training: *“I would like to have been given mobility lessons at home but my area doesn't do it so I know my way around at school but not where I live at home - that's silly is it not?”* 13 year old girl<sup>22</sup>. Where information about the settings that habilitation takes place in is not easily available it limits families’ ability to hold the local authority to account.

Of the 78 Local Offers that included information about habilitation services, 23 percent (18 Local Offers) included no information about the setting or time (term and holidays) that people can access habilitation training. Of those that did include information about the time or setting of habilitation in line with the questions that Blind Children UK posed, 29 percent (23 Local Offers) included both information about the setting of habilitation and the time of the training – although some of these stated that their services were only available during the term time.

However, many others did not include the complete range of information. 5 percent (4 Local Offers) included information about the time of the training e.g. Monday – Friday or ‘term time only’ but did not include information about the settings. 41 percent (32 Local Offers) included information about the setting of habilitation but not the time of the training. One Local Offer stated that the time and location of the provision depended on assessed need.

Of those that include information about when children can access the habilitation service, 22 percent (17 Local Offers) provided information about whether they

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.rotherhamsendlocaloffer.org>

<sup>20</sup> Now known as Habilitation VI UK

<sup>21</sup> Guide Dogs (2008) Functionality and the Needs of Blind and Partially-Sighted Young People in the UK: A Survey of Young People, Parents, Educators and Mobility Specialists, Section 6.1

<sup>22</sup> Guide Dogs (2008) Functionality and the Needs of Blind and Partially-Sighted Young People in the UK: A Survey of Young People, Parents, Educators and Mobility Specialists, pg 48.

provide services both during term time and the school holidays (although sometimes that was to say that they only provide support during the term time).

We also looked to see if there was information about whether children with sight loss could access habilitation in their homes. In addition to the above statistics, 45 percent (35 Local Offers) stated that they provide home based support throughout the young person's childhood. An additional 12 percent (9 Local Offers) stated that they only provide home based support during preschool years. One Local Offer stated that the setting and time that habilitation is offered 'varies according to individual needs and circumstances'. The remaining Local Offers did not include information about whether habilitation is available at home or not.

### **How can families with a child who has a vision impairment access a habilitation assessment?**

Earlier in this report we referenced the importance of a clear eligibility criteria in supporting all children that are assessed as needing a service being able to access it. To support that, clear information on how to access an assessment for habilitation is equally important. We therefore looked to see whether information about how a child or young person with a vision impairment could access a habilitation assessment was included within Local Offers.

Of the 78 Local Offers that included information on habilitation, only 6 percent (5 Local Offers) included no information on how to arrange a habilitation assessment. A further 19 percent (15 Local Offers) included generic 'contact us' information.

Nearly a third (31 percent or 24 Local Offers) stated that referrals for habilitation assessments go through clinical and/or educational professionals. One of those stated that children and young people with a vision impairment were automatically referred to a habilitation assessment upon diagnosis. This is positive although a caution should also be to be raised for children who have a vision impairment that does not have a clear diagnosis, as there would also need to be a clear route to assessment for them as well.

44 percent (34 Local Offers) stated that in addition to referrals coming through professionals, parents could self-refer. This flexibility of being able to access an assessment means that if a need for additional mobility or independent living skills support is potentially identified, either by a parent or a professional, there is a route to getting an assessment. One example of good information in this area was in Sheffield City Council's Local Offer which stated that 'Once a child is diagnosed as having a vision impairment he/she will be referred to the Vision Support Service by the relevant health professional from the Children's Hospital or the Royal Hallamshire Hospital.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> [http://www.sheffielddirectory.org.uk/kb5/sheffield/fsd/service.page?id=PMqF2VmZ0xo&familychannel=7\\_3](http://www.sheffielddirectory.org.uk/kb5/sheffield/fsd/service.page?id=PMqF2VmZ0xo&familychannel=7_3)

## **Conclusion**

Habilitation training is vital to ensure that all children growing up with sight loss are able to meet their potential. Previous research has shown that upon a child's diagnosis of sight loss, families feel they don't get enough information about the services that are available to help their child. As a consequence many families are turning to the internet to help find that information. The requirement for local authorities to publish a Local Offer and a recommendation that it includes information about habilitation is a golden opportunity for more families to be able to readily access information about this important service.

Two months on from the date that Local Offers were due to be published there was a mixed story on information about habilitation. Whilst we recognise that the publication of the Local Offers was a very big undertaking for local authorities it is disappointing that only half included a reference to habilitation. The requirement for local authorities to keep their Local Offer under review provides an opportunity for this to be improved.

The inclusion of habilitation in 78 Local Offers is very positive. However, of the Local Offers that include information about habilitation there was a wide variation in the quality of that information based on the six questions recommended by Blind Children UK. There are pockets of good examples but many Local Offers do not provide enough information to give families a clear picture about what habilitation services in their local area are, who is eligible, and how to access them.

## **Recommendations**

To ensure that wherever children and young people with sight loss and their families live in England they are able to access good information about local habilitation services we recommend:

1. That in line with Section 4.40 of the SEND Code of Practice 2014 all local authorities include information about habilitation in their Local Offer
2. That to ensure that information is of a good quality, information about habilitation in Local Offers meets the six questions that Blind Children UK have produced which are based on the Quality Standards: Delivery of Habilitation Training

To support local authorities in the delivery of these recommendations the six questions can be found at [www.blindchildrenuk.org/localoffer](http://www.blindchildrenuk.org/localoffer).

## **Further Information**

If habilitation is not currently available in your local authority we recommend you contact your local **Blind Children UK mobility team** to find out whether they can support the delivery of habilitation services in your local area.

For further information about this report please contact Helen Honstvet, Senior Campaigns Officer at [campaigns@blindchildrenuk.org](mailto:campaigns@blindchildrenuk.org)