

**CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND LIFELONG LEARNING
DECISIONS
23 July 2024**

PROCEDURAL MATTERS – PUBLIC QUESTIONS

1. Question submitted by Rocio Santamaria

As a parent of a blind child, I have been increasingly concerned at the erosion of the support available to blind students in Surrey. Early intervention with blindness training skills is essential for later independent living, however there is a lack of trained professionals and lack of disability awareness training in schools. Blind children are being failed and the consequences of this are inadequate preparation for adult life.

In particular we are concerned at the closure of George Abbott school VI centre, and the insufficient support offered at Oxted School. Blind children are encouraged to name schools with 'specialist' provision in their EHCP, often travelling far from home to access this provision, only to find that the offer falls short of what is promised.

What are the plans to support blind children going through education in Surrey County Council? Are specialist units being supported enough? are they going to disappear?

Reply:

Visually Impaired (VI) children and young people may be supported in their mainstream classroom or in one of Surrey County Council's (SCC) four VI specialist provisions:

Sythwood Primary School, Woking – has an Ofsted grading of GOOD (2021). The Sythwood VI Unit has seven spaces and is dedicated to fostering a nurturing and inclusive environment for visually impaired children, with a focus on enhancing support and inclusivity.

St Stephen's CofE Primary School, Tandridge – has an Ofsted grading of GOOD (2022). The VI provision has nine spaces and those on roll in the centre are all fully integrated into the mainstream, with an intervention space for specific interventions and equipment.

Oxted High School, Tandridge – has spaces for eighteen VI students and has an Ofsted grading of GOOD with the outcome letter stating, '**The provision for visually impaired pupils is exceptional**'. (2022)
Students at Oxted are fully included in mainstream lessons and are withdrawn from some lessons to focus on specific skills such as mobility, life skills, Braille Maths, ICT support or touch typing. Work is adapted into the appropriate format and support is tailored to the needs of each individual student.

Woking High School (Woking) – has spaces for twelve VI students and has an Ofsted (2019) grading of GOOD with the outcome letter stating, '**Pupils with visual impairment achieve well and play a full part in school life because of the excellent support they receive**'.

The Specialist Resource Provision provides support and skill development for students with vision impairment to achieve their potential and work towards independence.

SCC did not decide to close the George Abbott VI Unit in September 2022 this was a decision taken by the school and the Learning Partners Academy Trust due to a lack of demand for the VI unit. The decision was taken following a formal consultation endorsed by the Regional School Commissioner through the agreed national process for academy schools. It was not the decision of Surrey County Council to close this unit.

Support for these specialist provisions and mainstream schools is provided by the Physical Sensory Support Service.

The Physical Sensory Support Service (PSS) is a team of qualified teachers of the visually impaired (QTVI), and specialist teaching assistants (STAs) employed centrally by Surrey County Council. PSS work closely with visually impaired children / young people and families in homes, early years settings, schools, colleges, and universities to help them achieve the best they can.

PSS collaborate with other professionals from health, social services, and voluntary organisations, as well as disability advisors and needs assessors. The aim is to ensure that children and students with visual impairment can access their learning environment and get the most out of their education.

In addition to the specialist provisions and PSS Service, Surrey County Council commission habilitation (mobility) support from a partner agency, Sight for Surrey. An example of the types of skills that may be taught on the habilitation programme are:

Body Awareness, Early Skills, Sensory Awareness, Environmental Awareness, Cane Skills, Road Safety, Transport, Orientation, Risk, Wheelchair, Clothing, Personal Care, Cleaning & Household, Food & Kitchen, Shopping, Time, Money Management, Staff training, ad hoc additional work.

All students attending our Specialist Provisions are encouraged to participate fully in all aspects of school life. Many VI students have gained Bronze and Silver Duke of Edinburgh Awards, have taken part in school productions and choir tours, and have joined school trips to Europe and the USA. They have been recognised as Young Achievers and represented their school as part of the choir. We have had VI students qualify for the Riding for the Disabled nationals and a number have been selected to play cricket for Surrey and one past student played for England.

There are no plans to change this offer of support for visually impaired children and young people living within Surrey.

Clare Curran
Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning
18 July 2024