



The Implications of Covid-19

on the

**Education of Pupils who
are Blind and Visually
Impaired**

Blind & Visually Impaired Students' Experience of Remote Learning During Covid 19 Pandemic School Closure

This submission is in size 11, Font Verdana in line with the Plain English guidelines

ABOUT FÉACH

Féach is a voluntary organisation set up in the 1980's to support parents and families of blind and visually impaired children. We are primarily a support group, however as a result of the shortcomings in the services available to our children; we have been involved in lobbying varying Government agencies on their behalf.

We successfully campaigned for free travel and companion passes for Blind and Visually Impaired children. We were instrumental in the setting up of the National Braille and Large Print Production Centre (now Reading Services), which is located in the grounds of ChildVision, Drumcondra, Dublin 9.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID19, as a pandemic, due to its rapid spread around the world. Ireland, took action and put in place plans to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus. One such action, announced on March 12th was to close all schools in Ireland. On May 1st, the Government announced a 'roadmap' to opening Ireland up again, which indicates that schools will not reopen until September at the very earliest and even then, only 1-2 days a week/at a reduced attendance/capacity (1).

Throughout this time the Department of Education and Skills (DES) has been silent on the learning support needs of children who are Blind/Visually Impaired until June 12th 2020. There has been no guidance from the DES on the provision of resource teaching remotely. Our children have lost months of the weekly 1:1 teaching they normally receive during resource hours. The additional skills they need such as Braille and Assistive Technology have not been addressed. The NCSE who oversee the Visiting Teacher service for Young People who are Blind/Visually Impaired have issued no guidelines for the role of Visiting Teachers under remote learning conditions.

As happy as we are with the inclusion of Blind and severely Visually Impaired children in primary school in the new Summer Provision, we cannot comprehend why blind/vi in post primary have been excluded. We also cannot forget the delay in this help being offered to our children. It is hugely important that these students get the correct help this summer and on their return to school in September

In response to a high number of concerns from parents, Féach conducted a survey from May 18th to May 22nd on the experience of Blind/Visually Impaired Students' of remote learning. The response was huge and swift; a reflection of the stress parents were under as they struggled to make the material being sent home accessible to their children. In total, 78% of our members responded to the

survey. The responses set out the educational supports children have received since school closure; the barriers they have faced and the support needed to/required to ease children back into school after such a long absence.

- (1) Government published roadmap to ease Covid 19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society, accessed at www.merrionstreet.ie

THE EXPERIENCE TO DATE

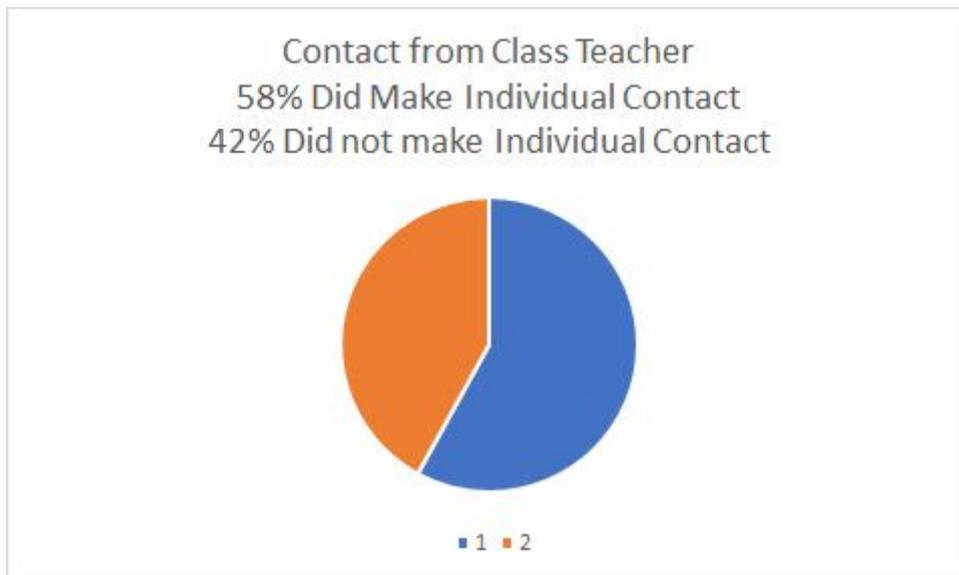
Lack of VI specific/differentiated work

On March 12th, teachers, pupils and parents were thrown into a unique situation with the almost immediate closing of schools. Parents were advised to support their children's learning at home. Teachers were told to send work home with their students (in some cases we know of, this did not happen) and to immediately prepare for a situation they had never encountered before.

While homeschooling has been challenging for most parents, it presents unique challenges when the child is blind/visually impaired. Our children require significant adaptations to make learning materials accessible. So not only have our parents had to contend with accessing and downloading a range of resources, they have had to struggle with making these accessible for someone with limited or no vision. In addition, the extra skills so important for independence, have largely been ignored these past months. Braille, screen readers, orientation and mobility (cane training), listening skills and other Individual Support Plan goals have been omitted from consideration during remote learning.

Our survey revealed that remote learning is not working well for most/a large number of students who are blind/visually impaired. Most parents do not have the specialised knowledge of Braille or assistive technology to help their children. (Many teachers seem not to have considered the unique access needs of their blind/visually impaired student when setting work for home.

LACK OF INDIVIDUALISED CONTACT FROM CLASS TEACHER



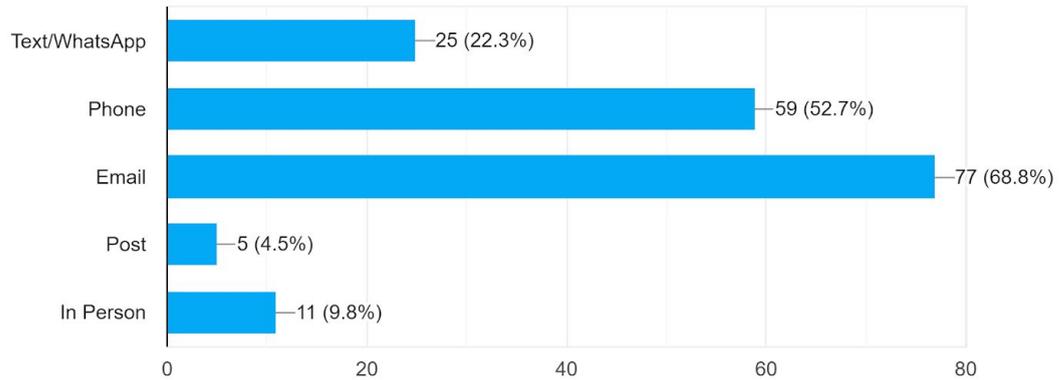
Only 42% of parents had received any contact from the class teacher to discuss the specific needs of their blind/visually impaired child.

When contact was initiated by the parent, the response was 'don't worry, they'll catch up next year...they can omit that part of the homework', rather than any attempt to make the material accessible. This is a worrying response of 'lowering the bar' for the student with a disability instead of striving to support equal access

to the curriculum content.

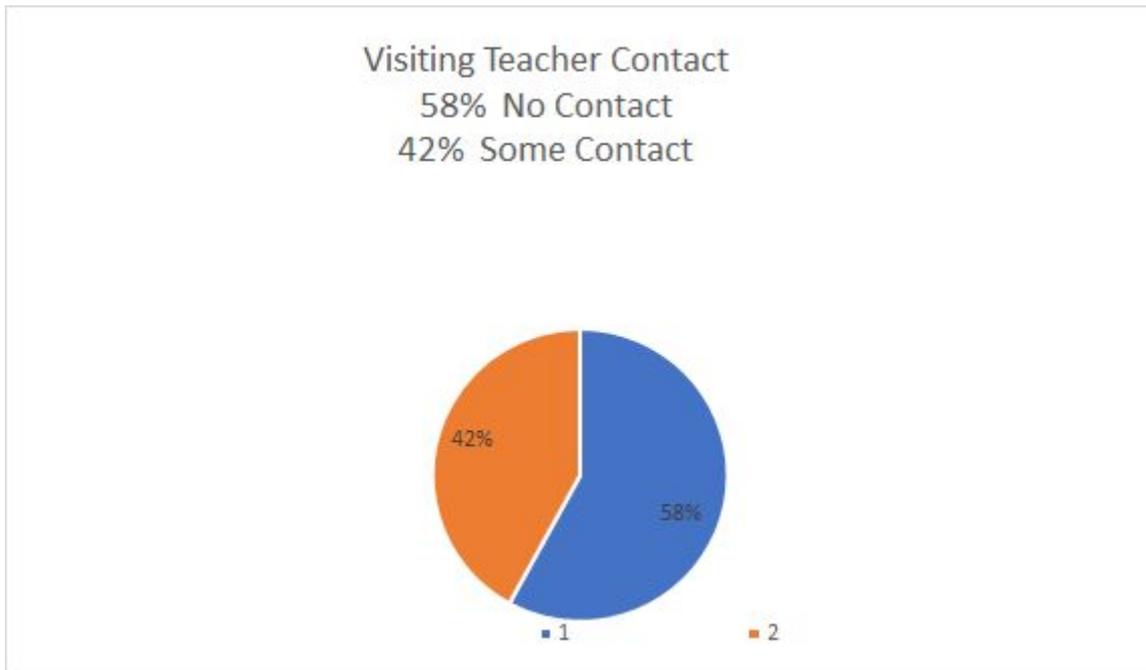
3. How was contact made? (tick all that apply)

112 responses



When contact has been made by the class teacher, the majority of contact (69%) has been made by email. With no personal interaction with the parent or student phone calls or video calls would have been preferable. This type of contact lacks clarity and clear guidance, often with no modification of the materials needed or consideration of the additional learning targets/individual goals of the student’s support plan.

35% of parents felt that the contact they had received from their class teacher was insufficient.

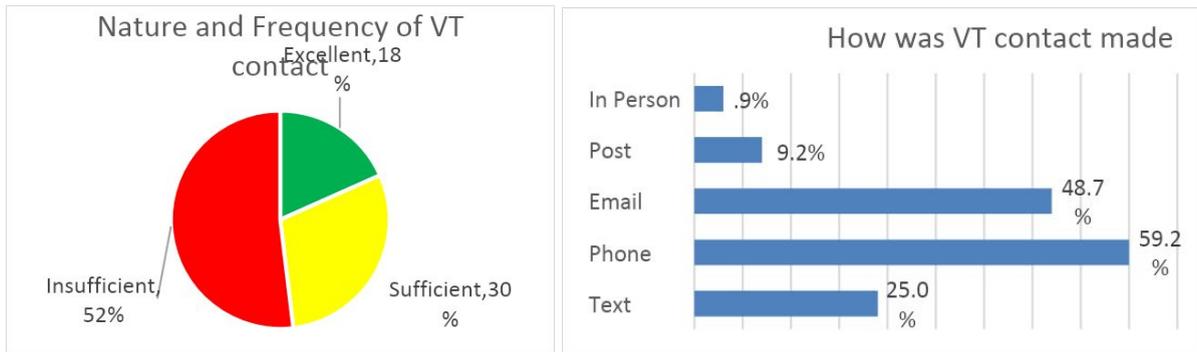


LACK OF CONTACT FROM VISITING TEACHER

Guidance from the NCSE is very poor with 58% of parents reporting no contact from their child's Visiting Teacher.

The Visiting Teacher service should be the liaison between school and child, advising the school on exactly how to support a student is part of their remit. As 58% did not contact their students to know how they were doing, this support was not given. Parents were left to muddle through alone. Clearly many schools struggled with this new system which is understandable, however the liaison between the Visiting Teacher and the schools was also very poor. The Visiting Teacher gave very little guidance to schools on how best to support Visually Impaired students at home.

For a significant amount of families, home education is not working for a variety of reasons. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) must carefully examine how it is supporting families of children with disabilities at this time. While many students and their families have been under stress, we feel the additional needs of students with disabilities have been overlooked. [Our children need individualised support to access the curriculum and they have additional learning goals if they are to learn to live independently. June 12th, three months into the lockdown, was the first communication from DES which mentioned special needs or blind/visually impaired students.



PARENTS EXPERIENCE WITH VT'S

- **VT has not been in touch with school to guide them on how they should support him and only contacted me by phone 7 weeks in, despite the fact that he is a state exam year student.** I feel totally abandoned by the Educational system. The only support agency who offered any support was NCBI - with personal contact, technical support and practical videos. This is not even within their remit. Sorry rant over but to say I feel let down is a total understatement.
- I have been very disappointed that in over 2 months neither VT for VI and D/HI have made contact
- Only one email from VT with link to Braille resources. No input at all. I emailed over a week ago to say device not working or charging (this has been ongoing since Feb) nothing done as yet
- I find it unbelievable that the visiting teacher has not been in contact with us and that I have a child with a vi that is about to head into 2nd year with no technology intervention. He has large print books and these were only made available to him in 6th class. Only started typing lessons in 6th class. Visiting teacher appears to be afraid of technology. What exactly is the job description of the visiting teacher. Surely now during the time of home schooling we should have at least received a phone call from Visiting Teacher
- I am disappointed we have had no contact at all from Visiting Teacher. I am also disappointed that I found out from my 5 year old that he was using an iPad linked to the whiteboard before school closed. This was set up by VT but I was never informed about it by her or the school. I do not know if my son needs larger print books for next year. I feel our school and teacher are doing their best but the service from the Visiting Teacher has been very lacking to sat the least
- I emailed the principal regarding lack of face to face online teaching & got no reply.
- Have emailed the school asking can SNA's help with subjects, have received no reply
- I contacted my VT about my daughters computer not working and am still waiting on her to come back...
- **We have had very little input if any from her VT infact she hasn't been seen by her visiting teacher in almost 3 years only for NBCI we would be totally lost.**

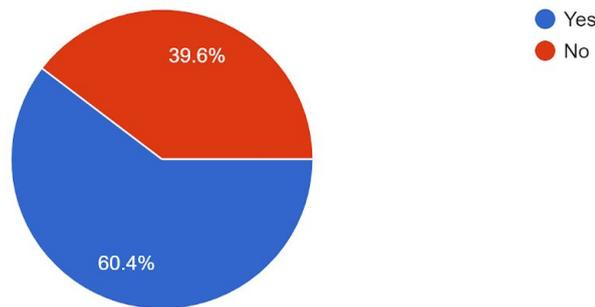
- **The general opinion from parents that I have contact with is that Visiting Teacher service is very poor in County XXXXX compared to other areas**
- **My child gets very little support from the VT. The visiting teacher has not made any contact with me during this academic year. it is very disappointing**
- **My son's VT retired last year and we have had absolutely no contact or information regarding her replacement since!!**

Lack of Resource Teaching Contact

Only 60 % of students heard from their Resource Teacher with nearly 40% having had no contact at all from their child's resource teacher since the school closure. While ⅔ felt the level of contact was satisfactory, ⅓ of families felt it was insufficient.

8. Has your resource teacher been in touch?

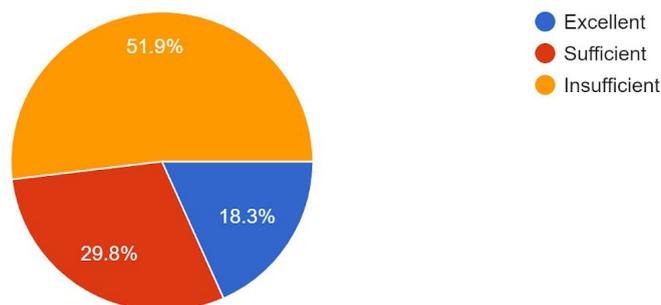
159 responses

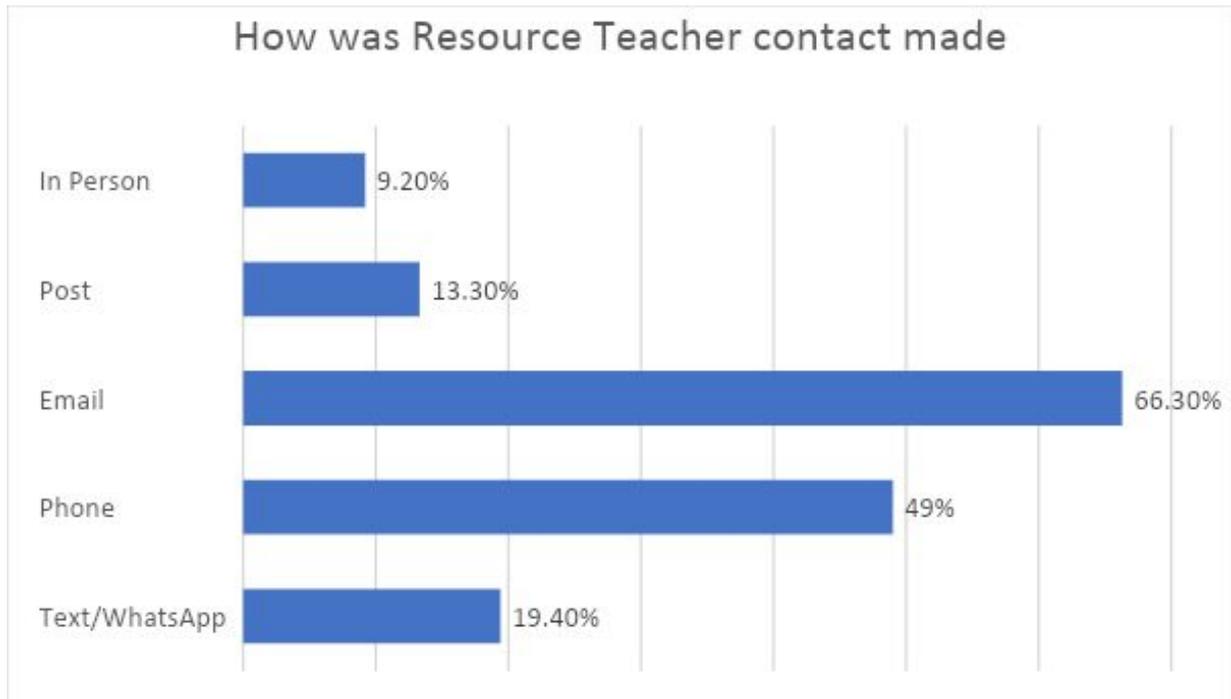


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7. How would you describe the frequency and nature of this contact?

131 responses





TECHNOLOGY – The cornerstone of Visually Impaired learning

At present the only method for teachers to contact their students is via technology. Most families have access to some form of technology such as a laptop, smartphone or iPad however some have no access to any technology at all for schoolwork, especially the assistive/adapted technology needed for Visually Impaired users. For some students their devices were not sent home and parents have not been allowed to collect them. For others there has been no support in their use. Many use highly specialised devices such as BrailleNotes with Perkins keyboards. It is impossible for parents to use these without training or support. So they are unable to teach these skills to their child or to help when the device does not work.

Technology is so important for Visually Impaired children. These children need to be supported immediately by the DES with technology training or access to in person s teaching as they have no access to education at present.

PARENTS EXPERIENCE

- **I have to change lessons because emails and links are not suitable so I must work ahead of his lessons as the emails, work, links are not suitable.** I've had to learn how to change settings on laptop to allow zoom and I read to him when it's not suitable. If he was expected to do this himself if I was doing a different job it would be a joke.
- I asked his teacher could I have my child's laptop, he said he would ask but have not heard a reply and that was weeks ago, his laptop was set up with so many features that would have been helpful, also my child had to learn his way around a different device. I am not great on IT so I have had to

spend hours assisting him. Teachers are sending out work but they don't think about children that would have any visual difficulties.

- **My daughter has had difficulty seeing the work sent home via the Seesaw app because our iPad is 9 years old and we can't update to the latest version of Seesaw. As some of her worksheets are created using the newer version of Seesaw she can't complete the work on the iPad. We look at it on the iPhone - but the text on the phone is too small for her to see even when we zoom in. Have told the class teacher the difficulty we are having and the reason for the problem but it has been shrugged off. No solution forthcoming.**
- I am left trying to figure out how my child can use a laptop when he can't even see the screen without holding it to his face. Things have to change. I don't understand why some kids seem to have lots of devices to use for school and have been given the opportunity to trial them and see what works and others get nothing. In my opinion this Visiting Teacher is setting my child up for failure instead of enabling him with independence in the educational system.
- **My son is in 3rd class. He used Connect 12 and we had to appeal the school policy to allow for his technology to be allowed home. This was granted but only after 8 weeks without it which was a shame. Since receiving it he has begun learning how to touch type daily.**

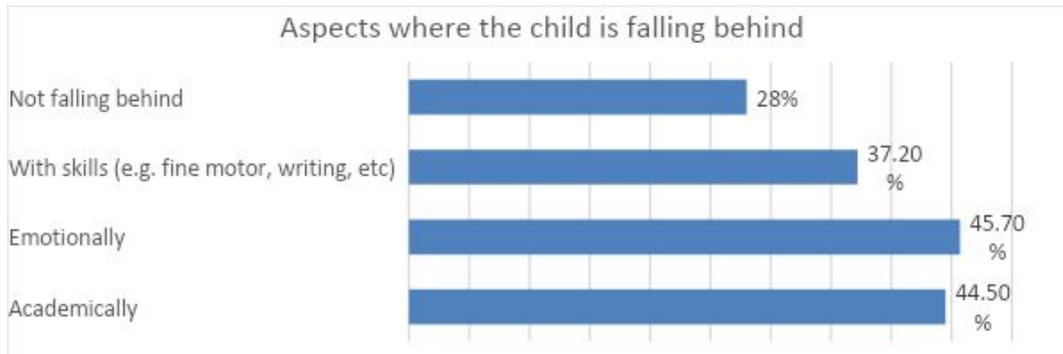
Inaccessibility of Materials

Almost half (49.7%) of all Visually Impaired/Blind students surveyed have not received adapted materials from the school or in some cases access to their large print school books at all. Visually Impaired children cannot work with the standard text books on the curriculum Many of the e-textbooks made available by publishers for free during the pandemic are not easy to read for people with visual impairments. Magnification reduces the clarity of image files. Screen magnifiers do not work well with most web pages and most of the e-textbooks are not formatted for screen readers. Some of the apps used for school-home communication, such as Aladdin etc are not compatible with assistive technology.

This has resulted in students trying to learn from home without books. This is simply impossible. For these students that is 3 months of education gone. They will struggle hugely to catch up when they go back if this gap is not bridged in the meantime.

68.3% feel their Visually Impaired child is struggling more than their non Visually Impaired Child

Nearly half stated their child was struggling academically and emotionally

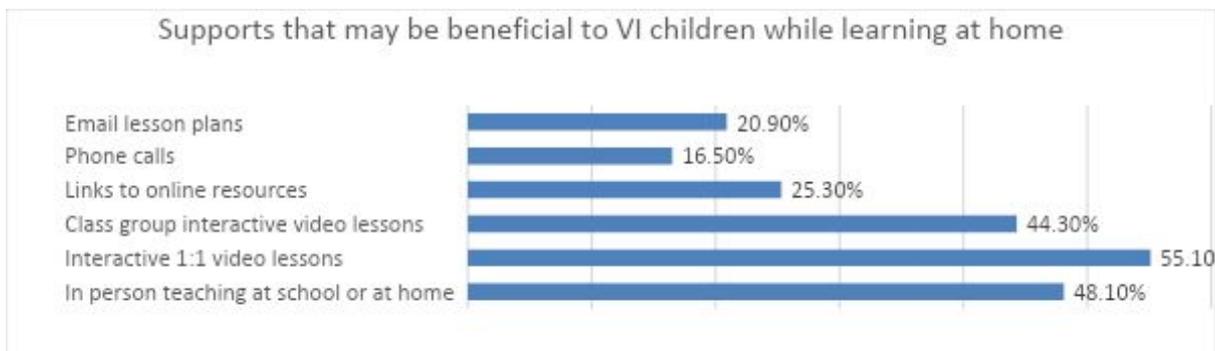


PARENTS EXPERIENCES

- Has missed 3 months of subjects that he needs support in - Science, Maths, Business, French. He will have missed some very key lessons and will probably have to drop some Honours subjects. I asked for 1 maths resource a week and was told it was not possible as she had to mind her child!
- I feel no effort is being made to solve what is probably not a difficult problem to solve. I am her mum - not her teacher. But I feel I am being asked to do the job the teacher should be doing (differentiating the work slightly, looking for solutions) when my daughter's needs aren't being thought about when worksheets are being created
- He is supposed to be accessing classes within the mainstream but with additional support for his VI and physical disabilities (physical disabilities, normal intellect). However, his mainstream teacher hasn't been in touch at all and when I contacted her she said that she is devising his lesson plans jointly with his special class teacher every fortnight. But when I said this to the special class teacher she said that she hadn't been in touch and didn't know what the mainstream class were doing. His special class teacher and SNAs do a 30 minute zoom session with him everyday 11-11.30am which gives his morning structure that he so badly needs. But it is so difficult to keep him engaged with school work overall and I do worry that the books that are read over zoom he can't see them etc.
- He was sent home with one reader book and one maths workbook at the start of the lockdown and that's it since. His special class teacher said that she doesn't use the books anyway with him in class much because the print is wrong for him. His writing is difficult given his CVI and physical disabilities so he was learning to type in school so this is also something I have to do every day with him on top of his writing, zoom class, reading, maths etc. It's an awful lot.
- I don't think my child is falling behind academically but I do think she is missing out on the resource teaching that she would get in school
- As the day is nearly complete and my daughter is starting to get tired from the days going on and with Congenital Nystagmus and optic nerve

Hypoplasia tiredness affects the vision therefore it's harder for her to complete same

SOLUTIONS AND POSITIVE EXPERIENCES



- The Summer Programme that the government has now included Blind and visually impaired children in will need guidance from VT's to create Lesson Plans for tutors and SNA's to use during the provision as many children will be getting a home tutor with little experience in VI.
- Some form of home tuition and direct contact with the teacher are the highest ranked supports parents believe their child requires going forward for the new school year.
- When teaching can not be done in person, remote lessons must be 1:1 for our children. (This can be provided by resource teacher, class teacher or visiting teacher but they need this support to catch up on materials they can't see and to learn the vital additional skills they need to learn in Braille and technology.).
- For a cohort of children with disabilities, direct access to teachers, SNAs and a structured lesson plan derived from the IEP (Student Support Plan Plus) is what is required.
- While this may not be in line with public health guidelines at present, these children need to be top of the priority list of children returning to school.
- When children are to return to school the DES must ensure that children with disabilities are not left behind
- ChildVision and NCBI have been great help to the parents and children during this time, mainstream schools and the DES have not been in our experience
- Post Primary Students are not included in the Government's plans for the summer and this needs to be addressed

CONCLUSION

Come September we need to see Visually Impaired and Blind children prioritised by the DES their individual needs recognised by schools. The children will need 1:1 teaching either in person or via video calls. If schools will be phasing students back into the classroom, our children need to be considered first so they do not lose any more resource hours or continue to struggle to access their textbooks and worksheets

PARENTS EXPERIENCE

- He needs 1:1 help with different areas of school work, he wouldn't engage well from video conferencing as a method of teaching if it was an option.
- My VT has been in touch and has offered to help with issues with his technology and I have found my school very good. He has all his large print books home so we work from them. Luckily he is only in 4th class so I can help him with all of his work.
- Communication via phone or video call 1:1 possibly would benefit
- I am very happy with *our school*. They are in constant contact with XXXX and myself to see how we are getting on. Lessons are sent in weekly along with feedback from Seesaw app and phone calls. Her main teacher, support teacher and SNA and vice principal have been excellent.
- My school has been more than supportive during Covid 19 with setting work via school email, Microsoft teams and one in particular livestream. I feel they have done their best and more. Couldn't have asked for more to be honest.