

A Vision for VI Education:

Building blocks for change

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Foreword

At Thomas Pocklington Trust (TPT) we believe blind and partially sighted students should have the opportunity to thrive in their education.

This is why we are here. We work to improve outcomes for blind and partially sighted (BPS) students to ensure they can overcome the barriers they face and reach their full potential.

We are passionate about making this change. That is why I am delighted that to set out in this report five building blocks, that are needed to ensure that blind and partially sighted students get the right support that they need to engage fully in their studies and to be prepared as possible for life after education.

This report is informed by the voice and experiences of BPS students. Many of the students we work with are not receiving the right support and have to overcome unnecessary barriers to access the support they are entitled to.

The students all share a common theme of resilience and tenacity in just trying to get through education every day. However, this constant battle of getting their needs and support in place can take its toll both academically and on their wellbeing.

We are calling on the new government to follow our five building blocks and to meet with blind and partially sighted students and TPT to work towards ensuring that we have an inclusive education system in which every individual can thrive.



**Tara Chattaway, Head of Education
Thomas Pocklington Trust**

“I’m always astonished with the amount of research and care put into TPT’s reports. The advice is never on a surface level or focused on only one sight condition. Instead, all of the reports successfully cover a broad range of circumstances. From my personal experience, following TPT’s recommendations has significantly improved my study journey.”

Aleks, BPS student

Introduction

It is generally understood that the England Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system is in crisis. Vision Impairment (VI) education services are under significant pressure. This is culminating in blind and partially sighted (BPS) students struggling to get the education they are entitled to.

Gaps in education support is contributing to a system that is leaving BPS students without the skills, knowledge and experiences needed to thrive into adulthood. The cost of this is significant. Impacting all areas of a young person’s life including their aspirations, personal finances, social inclusion, independence and emotional and mental wellbeing.

We welcome the Government’s announcement of the Children’s Wellbeing Bill and review of the National Curriculum. To work this must include a focus on improving experiences of the whole education journey for children and young people, including those with low incidence disabilities such as vision impairment, who will require specialist support and access to technology to truly thrive in education.

This report highlights what we at Thomas Pocklington Trust see as the most significant issues facing BPS students in secondary, further and higher education (HE) and sets out the priority building blocks for government.

Shockingly, only **27%** of sight impaired, or severely sight impaired people are in work, compared to employment for non-disabled people at **81%**, and for all disabled people **52.7%** [1] Employment for BPS people | RNIB.

The building blocks

We must now do something to ensure that BPS children and young people have the right support to enable them to thrive in adulthood. That is why we are setting out five building blocks for Government, that we believe have the potential to transform the lives of blind and partially sighted people, through enabling access to education and the workplace:

1. Embed the Curriculum Framework for Children and young people with Vision Impairment in policy
2. Provide adequate ringfenced funding for statutory vision impairment services in further education
3. Develop a strategy for assistive technology and mainstream technology to ensure blind and partially sighted children and young people can access their education and have the right skills in preparation for employment
4. To include VI education in their work towards the development of a Children's Wellbeing Bill, review of the National Curriculum, and to rapidly review the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement plan to ensure improvements in education provision for BPS children and young people are achieved.
5. Make the Disabled Student Commitment mandatory for Higher Education Providers and the wider Higher Education sector.

We are calling on the government to work with blind and partially sighted students and the vision impairment sector, to understand their education experience and implement policy for change.

Building Block 1:

Embed the Curriculum Framework for Children and young people with Vision Impairment (CFVI) in policy

The Curriculum Framework for Children and young people with Vision Impairment (CFVI) sets out all the specialist support required by BPS children and young people in their education journey. The CFVI was developed through rigorous research and was produced in partnership with parents, young people, specialist practitioners and many others. It centres on the needs and voice of BPS children and young people and is designed to enable independence and to empower them to shape their journey to adulthood.

The CFVI sits alongside and is integrated within the mainstream academic curriculum. It focuses on the importance of developing essential lifelong skills such as:

- **The use of technology, for example the ability to touch type and read back using a screen reader**
- **Habilitation, such as the ability to use mobility and orientation skills**
- **Literacy, for instance the development of braille literacy areas.**





Without access to mobility training how might a BPS person navigate their way to their education setting? Without access to assistive technology training how might they access an application process?

The learning defined in the CFVI is essential to enable successful transitions through education, into adulthood and the workplace. It is vital that the CFVI is adopted into policy across the UK, allowing for consistent support to be provided to all, no matter where they live.

It should be guaranteed that the CFVI is followed by all educational settings supporting children and young people with vision impairment and their families, in partnership with vision impairment specialists. It should be central to local authority service commissioning and delivery frameworks.

All BPS children and young people should be guaranteed access to the specialist curriculum set out in the CFVI, and this shouldn't be dependent upon where they live.

What we are doing

- **We continue to work with policy decision makers in government towards embedding the CFVI into policy**
- **We continue to work with key roles in local authorities to ensure as many people can benefit from the CFVI as possible**
- **We continue to work to raise awareness of the CFVI amongst children and young people, Parents/ Carers and education professionals.**

We are calling on the government to recognise and reference the CFVI in England SEND policies, including the new Children's Wellbeing Bill, SEND national standards and Change Programme.

Building Block 2:

Ringfenced funding for statutory services in Further Education

Local authorities (LA) have a statutory responsibility to deliver specialist VI services, including Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (QTVIs) and Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialists (RQHSs). However, inconsistent funding and fluctuating LA budgets make it impossible for BPS children and young people to access this support, leading to negative effects on their confidence and ability to access employment opportunities. (Freedom of Information Reports | RNIB).

BPS children and young people should be empowered in their education to make the choices towards the future they envision for themselves. However, they are often limited in their options as they find themselves making decisions about next steps in education depending upon where they will find the support they need.

As emphasised in the CFVI, it is important that specialists are in place to support children and young people to prepare for adulthood, and that this support starts early. However, this support is not consistently delivered, and can drop off completely as BPS students enter post-16 education. Consequently, BPS students are finding themselves locked out of college and apprenticeship provision.

Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide SEND support to all children and YP aged 0-25. However, when a young person reaches 16 their support either drops-off or vanishes.

Give Me Access to College report, TPT

BPS children and young people should have equitable access to education, for this to happen the barriers to accessing further education must be addressed.

What we are doing

- We continue to work to develop evidence about the impact of the barriers to post-16 education, and to use this evidence to call for change
- We continue to work with policy decision makers in government towards a better understanding of solutions to barriers to post-16 education
- Our Student Support Service provides information, advice and guidance for BPS students about post-16 education, as well as online resources
- We run events for BPS students about transitions to and studying at post-16
- We train non-specialist VI professionals about best practice support at post-16.



Building Block 3:

Develop a strategy for assistive technology

Assistive technology is a game-changer for BPS people for their education and beyond. As well as making learning fun, it ultimately enables BPS people to access learning and enter the workplace, equalising the playing field.

All BPS students should be supported to complete their compulsory education with the skills and knowledge they need to use mainstream and assistive technology with as much independence as possible.

However, BPS students are not always made aware of the assistive technology available to them. This can include mainstream technology adaptations, such as using inbuilt magnification, adjusting colour schemes, and enlarging icons and text, as well as specialist assistive technology, such as screen readers.

Technology training should be scaffolded throughout children and young people's education, including preparation for the different ways technology will be used as they progress through education and into the workplace.

BPS children and young people rely on the professionals supporting them to advise about mainstream and assistive technology, however these professionals don't always have the knowledge or capacity to do this, and it remains unclear where the responsibility sits.

I had never used assistive technology until at university. Because I have been introduced to it so late, I am now struggling to integrate assistive technology into my workflow whilst at university, to the point where I don't use it as much as I should be. More emphasis must be put on training blind and partially sighted students to use assistive technology, especially from a young age. So that as they progress in their education it doesn't become a burden to learn.

BPS Student

We are calling on the government to ensure that adequate ringfenced funding is available to deliver statutory services to blind and partially sighted students in all post-16 education settings.

“All I ever really got taught on technology is touch typing. I can use an iPad quite well as my dad taught me the accessibility features on that. I got a little from the IT department at school, like an accessible calculator but I never got taught anything about assistive technology, I think because I was okay with my iPad it was ignored. I don't know who I should have learnt it from because I didn't learn it! I'm not going to have an iPad in the workplace and even using an apple computer at work is different, the chances are I'd be put on Windows but I don't know how to use that.”

BPS young person

A review of assistive technology training in education is necessary to ensure all BPS children and young people get access to this vital skills development. The review must seek to define responsibilities and ensure trained professionals are in place to deliver this essential teaching for BPS children and young people. It is also necessary to provide more clarity on who is responsible for funding this technology.

What are we doing

- **We continue to work with policy decision makers to promote awareness of assistive technology and the gaps that exist for BPS students**
- **Our Student Support Service provide advice, guidance and support about assistive technology**
- **Our website includes a range of resources for BPS students, including information about technology in education.**

We are calling on the government to develop a strategy for assistive technology and mainstream technology to ensure blind and partially sighted children and young people can access their education and have the right skills in preparation for employment.

Building Block 4:

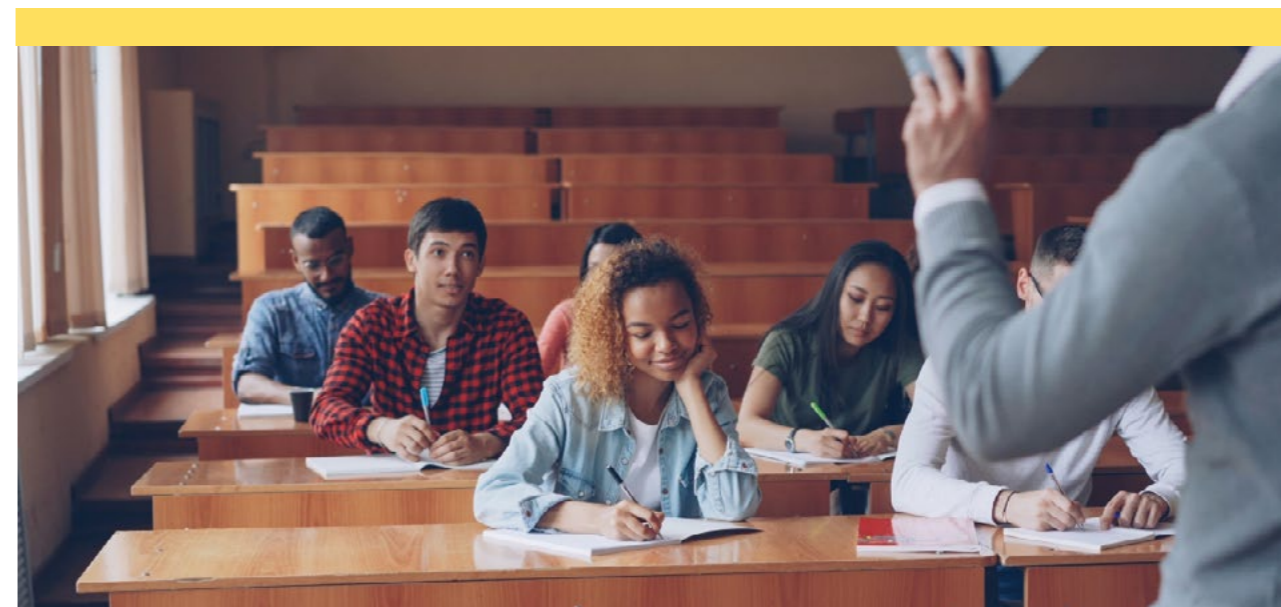
Ensure education policy delivers for BPS children and young people

It's vital that the government act quickly to secure necessary improvements in SEND education. We welcome the announcement towards a new Children's Wellbeing Bill, review of the National Curriculum, and await further news about the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (2023). The new Bill and improvement plan must achieve improvements in VI education however, we are uncertain how this will be achieved.

The 2023 improvement plan and its change pilots had been long awaited, yet the impact of any changes are yet to be felt. All the while children and young people continue to be let down by a system which is not supporting them; this cannot continue.

The plan lacks emphasis on low incidence disabilities, such as vision impairment, and it remains unclear how the needs of this group will be considered in the reforms.

(TPT SEND improvement plan response)



As part of the work towards a Children's Wellbeing Bill, review of National Curriculum and the current SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement plan, a rapid review is essential to ensure:

- The plans take into account the voice of BPS children and young people and address known issues in their support
- That LA Sensory Impairment Education Services are included in testing and implementation of changes
- That BPS students have access to the statutory support they are entitled to, including access to specialists and removing gaps in support in further education
- The implementation and enforcement of the existing SEND legal framework (Children and Families Act 2014 and SEND Regulations).

What are we doing

- We continue to work with VI and disability sector partners to understand what needs to change
- Using an evidence-based approach we continue to work with policy decision makers as a pro-active and informed voice of change.



We are calling on government to include VI education in their work towards the development of a Children's Wellbeing Bill and review of the National Curriculum. This should include a rapid review of the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement plan to ensure improvements in education provision for BPS children and young people are achieved.

Building Block 5:

Make Higher Education accessible

At Thomas Pocklington Trust we regularly hear from BPS students who are struggling to access their university education. Universities can be slow to put the right support in place and there can be a lack of accountability amongst university staff to implement reasonable adjustments recommended by disability services. Overlaid with this is a complex Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) process, which students are often not aware of until they have started their university course.

The Disabled Student Commitment sets out how the university sector can better meet the needs of its disabled students.

It asks universities to take a strategic approach to reviewing its practices to enable a more inclusive education for all.

We believe that the Disabled Student Commitment has the potential to transform HE for BPS students. Presently there is little impetus for universities to adopt this and therefore its impact is not where it should be – the government can change this.

What are we doing

- We continue to work with HE sector partners, through our membership of the Disabled Student Commitment Partnership Group, to support the implementation of the Commitment
- We continue to work the Office for Students to raise awareness of the challenges BPS students face in HE
- Our Student Support service provides advice, guidance and support for BPS students about university education, as well as online resources
- We train non-specialist VI professionals about best practice support at university.

“I think it's fair to say that higher education for blind and partially sighted people in the UK is not where it should be.”

BPS Student

BPS people with a degree or higher, still only have the same chance of getting a job as someone with no qualifications in the general population. **RNIB** ([Employment status and sight loss 2017](#) | [RNIB](#) | [RNIB](#))

We are calling on the government to make the Disabled Student Commitment mandatory for Higher Education Providers.

Case study: Sarah

Sarah is about to go into her final year currently studying Creative Writing at Anglia Ruskin University.

“My sight severely deteriorated when I was at sixth form, I was registered severely sight impaired and I got access to a QTVI (Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment) and that was really helpful. Now that I’m at uni I haven’t got a QTVI anymore and I think that’s one thing for me that would have been really helpful as somebody who gets my VI and education.”

“My uni have been absolutely brilliant with making things accessible. I’ve got a summary of reasonable adjustments that takes all of my medical conditions into account. For me this includes things like all classrooms to be on the ground floor and most of the time the adjustments are made.”

Despite feeling positive about her support, there have been barriers to getting this support in place.

“My uni uses this online platform called Canvas, and even when my laptop is zoomed in, I just cannot read it, and I can’t use tracked changes as it also doesn’t work with my magnifier. Nine times out of ten this is accounted for by my tutors. I spoke to my disability advisor and requested for no track changes to be included in my summary of reasonable adjustments and it’s now in there, which makes me feel much more reassured.”

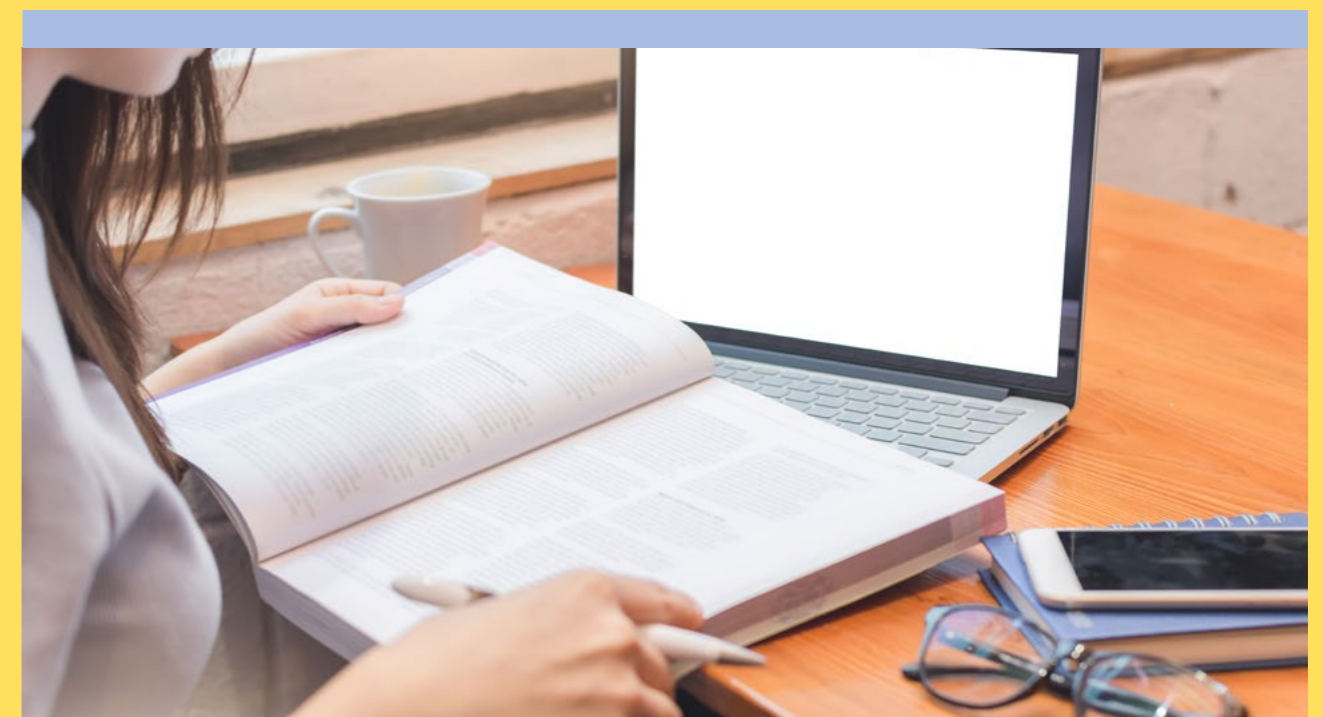
“My journey to uni also wasn’t the easiest because I was originally going to go to another uni. I changed my mind a few weeks before I got my results though because the original uni had just said to me, ‘oh, the support’s not going to be in place in time, you’ll have to do your lectures and stuff from your room.’ And I was like, no, I don’t want to do that! That was one of the main reasons why I switched to the uni that I’m at now and honestly, that was the best decision I’ve ever made, especially now, I’m doing independent living during term time. But it also meant that there was a bit of a rush to get everything in place.”

“I got off to a bit of a rocky start in terms of DSA support. But I got there eventually. Some of my support has taken time to get in place. I didn’t get a study skills tutor until January because they just could not find somebody who could give this support face to face so I had to go most of the first term without this. They eventually found one and they are an absolute lifesaver.”

“I had a field trip in my first term, and I got told the day before that my sighted guide now couldn’t come. The agency couldn’t find anyone else, so my course leader and tutor ended up having to help and be the sighted guide, that was not ideal. And then at the end of my first term my sighted guide left without telling me. It was only when I sent them my timetable for the next term that they said, ‘I can’t continue working with you because I’ve got another job somewhere else’.

If I hadn’t emailed them my timetable, I probably wouldn’t have been told. This was a week and a half before term started.”

“I ask the new government to make sure they listen and take action. There are inefficiencies and gaps that can be addressed if they listen to young people and actually take action on what they say.”



Conclusion

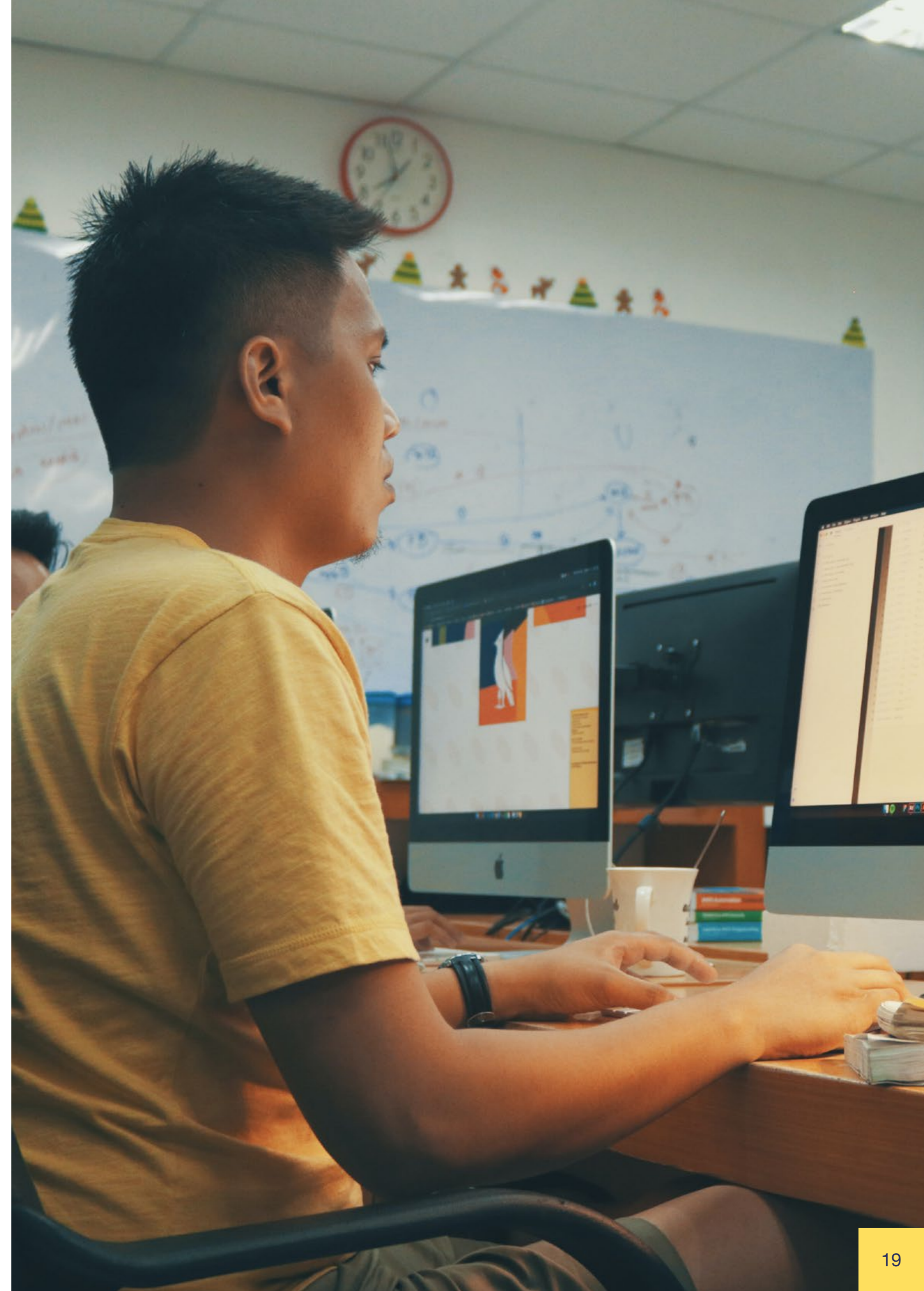
BPS children and young people should have equitable access to opportunities in life, however, all the evidence tells us that their education is currently failing to deliver this. The building blocks we have set out can change this!

The barriers to education are many and long standing. The government have recognised the need for change through commitments to raise educational standards and break down barriers to opportunity. This must include attention to the BPS student experience of education.

Investment in VI education, through the adoption of the building blocks we set out, is an investment for the long term. Not only will we see BPS students better able to reach their educational potential, but we will also see them thriving into adulthood and the workplace, with as much independence as possible.

We are committed to working with the government towards the implementation of the building blocks and to continue to amplify the voices and experiences of BPS students.

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4. To include VI education in their work towards the development of a Children's Wellbeing Bill, review of the National Curriculum, and to rapidly review the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement plan to ensure improvements in education provision for BPS children and young people are achieved.
5. Make the Disabled Student Commitment mandatory for Higher Education Providers and the wider Higher Education sector.





About Thomas Pocklington Trust

Thomas Pocklington Trust is a leading advocate for equality of blind and partially sighted people. We are a charitable organisation with a dedicated staff team, over half of whom are blind or partially sighted, and we have over 200 dedicated volunteers who have lived experience of sight loss. Our mission is to support blind and partially sighted people to bring about equity and inclusion in every aspect of society.

Together we are changing mindsets and advocating for better services, equitable access and improved accessibility.

To find out more about our education policy and campaign work you can contact the TPT Education policy team at [**EducationPolicy@pocklington.org.uk**](mailto:EducationPolicy@pocklington.org.uk).

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