

**Training Needs Analysis for additional Vision Rehabilitation Specialists in Wales: a case for inclusion on the apprenticeship scheme.**

**The value and importance of rehabilitation services**

“Vision is the most fundamental sense we use in living our daily lives. From the moment we wake up and wonder what time it is and choose what clothes to put on, to the moment we get into bed and reach for a book to read to calm us to sleep. Losing sight in a sighted world is not something most people can imagine and, for many, is a truly frightening prospect. Yet it happens to at least 100 people a day.

“If this happened to any of us we would surely want the support of a trained professional who can listen to our anxieties and fears, who can give calm, practical advice from the outset and who can teach us new skills as we learn to adapt to our new circumstances. That professional is the Rehabilitation Officer for Visually Impaired People (ROVI). Given that 100 people lose their sight each day it may surprise you to learn there are just 38 such professionals working in Wales today.”[[1]](#footnote-1) [[2]](#footnote-2)

**To note:** Throughout this paper, the term used will be Vision Rehabilitation Specialist or VRS however, as the qualifications needed are the same as the ROVI, it is simply a change in name; the role and the specialisms remain the same.

**Rationale for training needs analysis**

There are currently only 31.1 FTE out of the recommended 44.9 FTE Vision Rehabilitation Specialists currently employed across Wales[[3]](#footnote-3) (the recommended number is 1 per 70,000 residents[[4]](#footnote-4)). It is essential that new Vision Rehabilitation Specialists are trained as half (15) of the current workforce is set to retire in the next 5 years.

We are also aware that there are high waiting lists across many local authority areas and that it is difficult or impossible to recruit qualified staff. We recognise that this is not necessarily the fault of the local authority and that in the summer of 2022 we asked a series of questions to get a clear picture on the current situation and develop clearer referral pathways into this critical service. The data collected is detailed within this report.

This document provides evidence of the need for additional Vision Rehabilitation Specialists across Wales and for Rehabilitation Work [visual impairment] - Foundation Degree (FDSC) level 5qualification to be funded through the apprenticeship scheme in Wales, delivered by BCU as a satellite course, in partnership with a Welsh-training provider. It has been informed by the report ‘**REHABILITATION OFFICERS FOR VISUAL IMPAIRMENT - Addressing a workforce crisis in Wales**[[5]](#footnote-5)’

The creation of the satellite Rehabilitation course can help to address the shortage of trained Vision Rehabilitation Specialists. The apprenticeship model, as used in England, would offer a cost-effective way of getting people trained up when demand for new officers is anticipated. The needs analysis provides evidence for a similar apprenticeship model in Wales.

9 local authorities stated that they would be interested in sending someone on the Vision Rehabilitation Specialists course, if it was paid for through the apprenticeship scheme in Wales. We have also identified an additional 5 trainee VRSs that would benefit from a course in Wales starting in 2023.

**Sight loss key data**

There are 111,000 people with sight loss in Wales of which 2,000 are children and young people. 13,137 are registered as Sight Impaired (SI) or Severely Sight Impaired (SSI) [2018/19][[6]](#footnote-6). This number is projected to grow as our ageing population increases and as referral pathways develop.

Last year Low Vision service Wales (LVSW) carried out 7,855 assessments, of which 654 referrals were made to Vision Rehabilitation Specialists who are managed by sensory loss team within Social Services. LVSW received 1,220 Certificates of Vision Impairment (CVIs).

**Role of the Vision Rehabilitation Specialist**

The role of the Vision Rehabilitation Specialist is to build confidence; provide emotional support; regain lost skills and teach new skills; and maintain and promote independence and choice. These skills will enable people with sight loss to live safely and contribute to society as active citizens.

Rehabilitation is about helping people to do things for themselves and live safe, independent lives. Early intervention is crucial to reduce the need for ongoing support from already overstretched services. Early intervention also helps to tackle loneliness and social isolation, which are priorities for Welsh Government.

All Vision Rehabilitation Specialists practicing in Wales adhere to professional standards[[7]](#footnote-7), code of ethics and receive on-going CPD ensuring that people with sight loss receive specialist support (see appendix 2).

**Risk**

Vision rehabilitation covers many aspects of day to day life that can include a substantial amount of risk to somebody with a vision impairment. The main goal of a Vision Rehabilitation Specialist is to assess and address the risks associated with these activities and to try and mitigate these risks, through training, provision of equipment or changing the environmental factors relating to the risk identified. This in turn can reduce the need for more costly ongoing care and support, reduce hospital admissions, and promote one’s independence.

In Wales it is a statutory duty for assessments to be carried out by a qualified worker (Vision Rehabilitation Specialist), much of this is done by our third sector partners through LA contracts.



**Table 1: Pie chart data:**

Total 33 Vision Rehabilitation Specialists

18 directly employed by a local authority

11 employed by the third sector as part of a local authority contract

1 is self-employed and has a contract with a local authority

3 are students studying Rehabilitation Work (VISUAL IMPAIRMENT) – FDSC at Birmingham Central University

There are several Vision Rehabilitation Specialist assistants and trainee Vision Rehabilitation Specialists employed by third sector partners and local authorities across Wales.

**Our concerns**

We are concerned, as a sector, about the reducing numbers of Vision Rehabilitation Specialists in Wales and that this critical role is being subsidised by non-specialist members of staff in some authorities.

Many blind and partially sighted people are failing to receive the vision rehabilitation support that they need in a timely manner (see table 2).

The recommended number of Vision Rehabilitation Specialists is 1 per 70,000 residents. However, we recognise that this figure could change depending on rurality and where there is complementary third sector support. Only 8 local authorities currently meet these minimum standards down from 12 in 2018. In the early 1990’s there were only 12 qualified posts in Wales. This number grew steadily with 50 fully qualified ROVIs employed in every local authority, either through directly employing workers or via contracted workers, in 2010. In 2018, the number of practising Vision Rehabilitation Specialists fell to 34.2 FTE. This number has fallen further over recent years. In actuality, there are 31.1 FTE out of the recommended 44.9 FTE Vision Rehabilitation Specialists currently employed.

This shortfall will exacerbate an already challenging scenario where Covid restrictions have created both a backlog of cases and additional cases due to lost skills and the impact of reduced services in primary and secondary healthcare. The impact of the pandemic has resulted in more people living with sight loss feeling isolated and lonely as a result of a reduction in confidence and life skills.

It is essential that local authorities invest in this workforce now as almost half (15) of the current workforce is set to retire in the next 5 years.

There were 1,270 blind and partially sighted people waiting and a further 761 people on an active case list (data received from 18 out of 22 local authorities).

**Case studies demonstrating the value of the recommended minimum requirements**

Gwynedd Council has a contract with North Wales Association for the Blind to assess and provide advice and support for individuals in Gwynedd. A new screening and allocation service was established in 2021 by North Wales Association for the Blind to ensure that all referrals receive a “what matters” screening call within 5 working days of a referral being made.

In the 12-month period until end of December 2022 a total of 472 referrals were received. Of those referrals 309 were allocated to the Rehabilitation Officers for full assessment. The remaining 163 referrals were allocated to other services within the Charity.

As a result, during the past 12 months 100% of all referrals were seen within the recommended waiting times.

Carmarthenshire only had 2 practising ROVIs: the minimum standard was 2.7. Since reporting, Carmarthenshire has outsourced an additional ROVI that now means that they are operating at the recommended minimum standard. This has enabled the authority to reduce their waiting list slightly (330) despite an increase in the rate of incoming referrals post pandemic. Carmarthenshire, recognising the critical role of the ROVI, has identified 2 trainee ROVIs to enrol on a course in 2023.

**Work force planning**

There will be variations in the minimum standard of 1 Vision Rehabilitation Specialist per 70,000 such as where referral pathways to and from the third sector and LVSW are well established. In addition to this, many rural counties will require more than 1 Vision Rehabilitation Specialists per 70,000 as much of their time is spend on the road. These factors will need to be considered by each local authority when developing a workforce plan. It is recommended that local authorities invest in this workforce and develop a workforce plan for the next 3, 5 and 10 years.

Table 2 shows the number of referrals received, assessments carried out by a Vision Rehabilitation Specialist, and Certificates of Vision Impairment (CVI) received. 17 out of 22 local authorities reported a total of 2,891 referrals received; 1,708 assessments were carried out by a ROVI and 1,030 CVIs were also received.

The CVI is a gateway document and should be seen as a referral directly to a Vision Rehabilitation Specialist. Out of the 15 authorities that provided information on their registration process 9 local authorities stated that Vision Rehabilitation Specialists carried out registration calls. The remaining 6 local authorities reported that other methods are used.

The Vision Rehabilitation Specialist offers a full assessment visit to all individuals who have been referred via CVI.

There is a variety of referral pathways across Wales. We would suggest that all registration calls are carried out by Vision Rehabilitation Specialists as they are the professionals best placed to provide information and advice at this crucial time. This is hugely beneficial to people with sight loss and the Vision Rehabilitation Specialist planning their caseload.

**CVI in Primary Care – increased workload for Social Care**

A crucial Welsh Government initiative is in allowing LVSW accredited optometrists to complete the Certificate of Visual Impairment on behalf of patients. This is to take the pressure off secondary care where it is currently completed following an appointment with an ophthalmologist. This CVI is an important document for the patient: it gives them access to a range of concessions and benefits to reduce the impact of disability on their everyday cost of living. We know this is one of the early priorities of optometry reform and we will see increased referrals to social care. This will put even more pressure on an overstretched service and will further highlight the need for more Vision Rehabilitation Specialists.

While we do expect an increased pressure on rehabilitation services the plus side is that, should we meet this demand, it brings about savings in other areas of social care. When VRS support is given we see direct savings in care support. For example, a lady was provided with care support to help with her washing, as she was unable to use her machine or safely access her garden. A VRS visited her and provided accessible markings on her machine, as well as arrange for the edges on her step to be painted white. They also provided colour pegs so that there was a contrast between the pegs and the washing line. Relatively expensive ongoing care was no longer needed and the lady was able to independently do her own laundry. This reinforces the invest-to-save model within Social Care, as well as directly promoting the social model of Disability by enabling independence and control.

**Training more Vision Rehabilitation Specialists will fulfil the aims of the apprenticeship scheme by focussing on the following priorities:**

* addressing skills shortages by developing apprenticeships in growing and emerging sectors
* developing higher level skills by focusing on apprenticeships at level 4 and above
* increasing the number of people of all ages who are able to access apprenticeships
* focusing on the achievement of meaningful and sustainable employment
* ensuring that opportunities are easy to access, to apply and recruit for
* delivering Welsh and bilingual apprenticeships
* establishing a system to make sure apprenticeships meet the needs of employers

A Welsh-based apprenticeship model will also contribute to the Welsh economy.

**A Wales-focused apprenticeship**

A Welsh-based course will enable students to learn Welsh legislation. The **Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014** came into force on 6 April 2016. The Act places a statutory duty on local authorities for the first time to provide a preventative approach to meeting people’s care and support needs, including minimizing the effects of impairments. It is not possible to deal with sight loss without Rehabilitation as those new to the situation have to learn new ways to accomplish essential tasks and to be introduced to a range of equipment and techniques to avoid injuries and fallsand mitigate or defer the need for longer term care. The Codes of Practice to the Act provide specific advice to health boards and local authorities about reablement and habilitation (Part 2 Code of Practice paragraphs 182-186) [4].

In **Healthier Wales** the Welsh Government sets out the ambition to bring health and social care services together, so that they are designed and delivered around the needs and preferences of individuals, with a much greater emphasis on keeping people healthy and well

We will also work with Low Vision Service Wales to raise awareness of the work of optometrists and the critical referral pathway established between LVSW and Social Services.

**Employers of Vision Rehabilitation Specialists in Wales**

The introduction of a satellite course in Wales, funded through the apprenticeship scheme here in Wales, will provide an opportunity for trainee Vision Rehabilitation Specialists and assistants to become fully qualified.

All Vision Rehabilitation Specialists in Wales meet the Qualification Framework guidelines set out by Social Care Wales as an allied professional. The qualification required is **Certificate in Rehabilitation Work in Visual Impairment (CRWVI).**

Professional registration requires all Vision Rehabilitation Specialist to continue with their professional development and gives the public reassurance by providing oversight into the levels of risk involved in this role.

The register of qualified Vision Rehabilitation Specialists can be found here:

<https://www.rwpn.org.uk/page-18124>.

**Staff recruitment and retention**

We are aware of a large number of local authorities that have experienced difficulties in recruiting and retaining Vision Rehabilitation Specialists. Suggested reasons for this are applications from unqualified candidates, financial restrictions imposed on LAs and a shortage of Vision Rehabilitation Specialists across Wales and the UK. Moreover, the general shortage of qualified workers in this area is well known and the establishment of a Welsh-based satellite course, as part of the apprenticeship scheme, will remedy this shortage. Promoting the apprentice scheme to local authorities will also help to raise awareness of the profession.

**Support for Wales-based Vision Rehabilitation Specialist degree**

We have explored the possibility of running a Wales-based Rehabilitation Foundation Degree in an attempt to address the concerns documented around workforce planning. It was felt by many that a course delivered in Wales would be both more accessible, being closer to the workplace, and address the particularities of services in Wales.

There is broad overall support for bringing a satellite version of the Birmingham City University Rehabilitation Foundation Degree to Wales.

This course is currently the only recognised vocational qualification in the UK. It is proposed that BCU provide a satellite course to be delivered in Wales, in partnership with a Welsh-training provider (we have approached Cardiff Metropolitan University who are keen to explore this further). The course will be delivered with a minimum of 10 students per year and we hope the first two-year intake would begin in September 2023.

In England, the on-the-job training element of the apprenticeship mirrors the Foundation Degree programme. <https://www.bcu.ac.uk/courses/rehabilitation-work-visual-impairment-fdsc-2021-22>.

We would want to see this operating in Wales under the Welsh Government apprenticeship support. More information on the Apprenticeship in England is given at <https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/rehabilitation-worker-visual-impairment/>

Without centralized support for apprenticeships the onus is placed on Local Authorities and the Third Sector providers to pay for the training themselves. Additional cost is known to be a barrier to increasing the workforce. We would like to see Welsh Government providing financial assistance to support this apprenticeship model.

The preferred option for Wales is detailed below:

**A Birmingham Central University satellite Foundation Degree.**

* Birmingham City University (BCU) course has been running for many years and is accepted universally as the qualification towards employment as a rehabilitation worker in local authorities and non-statutory agencies across the UK.
* Tutors are already in place. We would just need to source local Vision Rehabilitation Specialists for the placements and mentoring.
* The BCU course recognized by RWPN.
* Existing Vision Rehabilitation Specialist could achieve a full degree via top-up modules (working with DeafBlind clients and children).
* Modules are already developed (including on-line material as a result of the pandemic).
* Training materials are devised and updated by BCU.
* Since the BCU course is generic and does not provide a focus on Wales, we would need to address this by including a focus on Welsh-based services such as LVSW, Optometry, Social Care and the Third Sector.
* The model is sustainable. It can be run as and when demand dictates.

**On-the-job training.**

We want to see Local Authorities funding on-the-job training to become a rehabilitation officer. Because the profession is small in Wales (45 Vision Rehabilitation Specialists FTE needed according to the SSIA Benchmarking Guidelines) there is little point in encouraging it as a career option for school leavers. It would be more effective to encourage the role amongst existing social care employees. We have identified a number of people who would be keen to undertake a Wales-based course. To support this approach, the BCU entry requirements specify that a set written paper may be submitted in lieu of formal qualifications for applicants with relevant and significant work experience in the disability sector.

Local authorities would be well advised to make provision for a trainee to take over prior to a specialist retiring, and not to wait until the person has left. With 12 out of 22 authorities with one Vision Rehabilitation Specialist FTE or fewer it is essential that workforce planning takes place at the earliest opportunity.

Sustainability could be achieved through a model that brings Birmingham City University in as required. Evidence shows us that this would need to commence in September 2023 with a minimum of 10 students. With minimum standards suggesting we should have 45 FTE Vision Rehabilitation Specialists across Wales, in the knowledge that we expect 15 to retire in the next 5 years, we would want to see 30 Vision Rehabilitation Specialists trained between 2023-26.

**Working with children and young people and dual-sensory loss**

There is a shortage of specialists working with children and young people, and people with dual-sensory loss. A Vision Rehabilitation Specialist could achieve a full degree via top-up modules (working with DeafBlind clients and working with Children). These top-up modules align to the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act and would add further value to the role of the VRS by being added to the apprenticeship scheme in Wales. In addition to this, the top-up module for children would help deliver the [Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI) - RNIB - See differently](https://www.rnib.org.uk/health-social-care-and-education-professionals/education-professionals/curriculum-framework-children-and-young-people-vision-impairment-cfvi). In a nutshell this framework refers to all of the skills that children and young people need to acquire to be prepared for adulthood.

**Conclusion**

As stated above, the creation of the satellite Rehabilitation course can help to address the shortage of trained Vision Rehabilitation Specialists. The apprenticeship model, as used in England, would offer a cost-effective way of getting people trained up when demand for new officers is anticipated. This paper is submitted as a case for inclusion of the role of the VRS within the apprenticeship scheme in Wales.

This document has been prepared in consultation with the Welsh Rehabilitation Officers Forum and members of the Wales Vision Forum.

If you require this document in alternative formats, contact Wales Council of the Blind.

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**Appendix 1 - Numbers of Vision Rehabilitation Specialists employed in Wales (updated summer 2023)**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Local authority** | **No. of ROVIs (FTE)** | **Population estimate** | **Minimum standard****(1:70,000)** | **Comp. to min. standard** |
| Isle of Anglesey | 1\* | 68,944 | 1 | Met |
| Gwynedd | 1\* | 117,072 | 1.7 | -41% |
| Conwy | 1\* | 114,828 | 1.6 | -37% |
| Denbighshire  | 2.6 | 96,046 | 1.4 | +86% |
| Flintshire | 0.6\*\* | 155,076 | 2.2 | -72% |
| Wrexham | 2 | 135,132 | 1.9 | +5% |
| Powys | 3.5 | 133,557 | 1.9 | +84% |
| Ceredigion  | 1 | 70,658 | 1 | Met |
| Pembrokeshire | 2 | 123,669 | 1.8 | +11% |
| Carmarthenshire | 3\* | 188,191 | 2.7 | +11% |
| Neath Port Talbot | 1\*\*\* | 141,931 | 2 | -50% |
| Swansea  | 1.5 | 237,834 | 3.4 | -56% |
| Bridgend  | 3 | 145,760 | 2.1 | +43% |
| RCT | 2\* | 237,497 | 3.4 | -41% |
| Merthyr Tydfil | 0.8 | 58,866 | 0.8 | Met |
| Cardiff | 1 | 359.512 | 5.1 | -80% |
| Vale of Glamorgan  | 1 | 132.534 | 1.9 | -47% |
| Caerphilly | 2.2 | 176,005 | 2.5 | -12% |
| Blaenau Gwent | 0.6 | 66,993 | 1 | -40% |
| Torfaen | 1 | 92,453 | 1.3 | -23% |
| Monmouthshire | 1.4 | 93,194 | 1.3 | +8% |
| Newport | 1 | 159,658 | 2.3 | -57% |
| **Totals** | **34.2** | **3,105,410** | **44.3** | **-23%** |

\* 1 FTE trainee VRS (undertaking Rehabilitation Foundation Degree at Birmingham University); \*\* outsourced from commissioned provider;

\*\*\* Mobility Officer.

[Population estimates sourced from StatsWales.](https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Population-and-Migration/Population/Estimates/Local-Authority/populationestimates-by-localauthority-year)

**Appendix 2 - Professional Standards**

**National Occupational standards**

Professionals are trained to broad criteria laid out within the Sensory Services National Occupational Standards (NOS). The NOS were published in 2008 by Skills for Care and are available here <https://socialcare.wales/nos-areas/sensory-services>. It is a credit to Social Care Wales that these standards have been adopted across the UK.

Four of the eleven standards relate directly to rehabilitation/habilitation work and working with deafblind people. Standard nine is the most relevant to defining the skill-set of rehabilitation and habilitation work.

**Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct**

All Vision Rehabilitation Specialists registered in Wales adhere to RWPNs Code of Ethics:

[RWPN Rehabilitation Worker Code of Ethics](https://www.rwpn.org.uk/resources/Documents/RWPN%20Code%20of%20Ethics%20and%20Professional%20Conduct.docx%20%281%29.pdf)

**Continuing Professional Development (CPD) scheme**

RWPN's Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct and the National Occupational Standards require that professionals demonstrate continued learning in their professional practice.  To do this we require that registrants document and submit, when required, CPD under a formal scheme CPD.

The document [RWPN CPD scheme description](https://www.rwpn.org.uk/resources/Documents/RWPN%20CPD%20scheme%20description%202020.doc) provides an outline description of the requirements, examples of what might make for good CPD, how we encourage reflective practice and guidance on how we monitor and assess portfolios.

**Core Skills [Source: RWPN website]**

**This report stresses the fact that the Vision Rehabilitation Specialist is the only qualified worker to make an assessment of need in the case of people with sight loss and to deliver specific interventions.**

If we recognise that the Vision Rehabilitation Specialist is the worker who can provide the necessary assessment and delivery of interventions, we must also recognise that there is a crisis looming. Wales is already under-resourced and the impending loss of workers through retirement creates a crisis situation where local authorities will be failing people with sight loss.

The following core competencies will inform the content of the apprenticeship scheme in Wales.

* **Assessment**: specialist assessment of a person’s functional vision and the relationship of this to all aspects of daily life and its impact on any other disability the person may have; identifying strengths, needs and possible solutions; agreeing goals and an ‘action plan’ to achieve those goals.
* **Eye conditions**: knowledge of eye conditions that can cause sight loss, in order to understand how those conditions may affect how a person uses their sight and the implications of their diagnosis for the future.
* **Low vision**: specialist knowledge and skills in using low vision devices such as optical magnifiers, high-tech video magnifiers, computers and close circuit TV; the use of non-optical devices, and training a person to make the most of their vision by using specific sight strategies.
* **Orientation and mobility**: working with people to increase their confidence to move around safely both indoors and outdoors; providing training in the use of mobility aids, such as white canes; route training in specific areas e.g. teaching the route to the shops or work; learning orientation skills to know where you are in your environment and to be able to interpret what the environment can tell you.
* **Independent living skills**: developing a person’s activities of daily living e.g. preparing and cooking meals and drinks; managing household tasks, such as laundry, cleaning, personal finances and money transactions; personal care, such as applying make-up, shaving, cutting nails and dressing; identifying and taking medication appropriately.
* **Communication skills**: developing communication and information skills for a visually impaired person may involve using a number of formats such as print, audio or tactile systems like Moon or Braille. It may also encompass a number of platforms or settings including computer, tablet or smart phone with or without specialist access-software.

**Dual sensory loss add-on for qualified Vision Rehabilitation Specialists:** Communication-skill development is of particular importance when working with someone who has dual-sensory loss. An additional 1-year add-on enables qualified rehabilitation officer to work with children and young people.

1. Simon Labbett, Chair, Rehabilitation Workers Professional Network - **REHABILITATION OFFICERS FOR VISUAL IMPAIRMENT -** Addressing a workforce crisis in Wales [Williams & Bowers, July 2021]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To read personal stories from across Wales on the positive impact rehabilitation makes visit: <http://wcb-ccd.org.uk/downloads/appendix_2_ROVI_workforce_in_Wales_Case_Studies.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Appendix 1 – Numbers of ROVIs employed in Wales [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Good practice guidelines – Rehabilitation - <http://wcb-ccd.org.uk/benchmarking/guide/3> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.wcb-ccd.org.uk/downloads/addressing_a_workforce_crisis_in_wales.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 20 out of the 22 local authorities reported - [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Appendix 2 – Professional Standards [↑](#footnote-ref-7)