

# **Policy Brief: Education Access in Ireland (2025): Transforming Inclusion for Learners with Vision Impairment**

**November 2025**

## Purpose

To inform education policymakers in Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI) about evidence from the *Education Access in Ireland Project (2025)*, highlighting how targeted, **team-based professional training** improves inclusion, workforce capacity, and pupil outcomes for children and young people with vision impairment. It also outlines how modest investment by both jurisdictions can deliver major gains in equality, attainment, and participation.

### 1. Why this Matters

Across both jurisdictions, children and young people with VI continue to face avoidable and systemic barriers in accessing an equitable education. Despite strong legislative commitments, the SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan (NI, 2025–2030), the EPSEN Act (ROI, 2004), and obligations under UNCPRD and UNCRC, gaps in specialist capacity, training, assessment, and habilitation persist.

## System Pressures Across Both Jurisdictions

### Specialist Workforce Capacity

- Vision Support Services are operating beyond sustainable levels in both jurisdictions.
- NI QTVIs support **60+ pupils each**; some outreach teachers exceed **150**.
- ROI Visiting Teachers support **95+ learners** with VI.
- Recruitment, retention, and succession risks threaten continuity of provision.

## **Assistive Technology Access & Training**

- No island-wide standardised AT assessment framework.
- **58%** of staff rated AT knowledge as poor or very poor (pre-training).
- In NI AT allocation often relies solely on visual acuity, not functional vision.
- Maintenance and troubleshooting arrangements vary widely between regions and schools.

## **Braille Provision**

- No statutory or consistent use of **Learning Media Assessments (LMA)**.
- Braille teaching relies on a small number of overstretched specialists.
- Divergent device provision (RBDs in NI vs. notetakers in ROI) results in inconsistent digital literacy outcomes.

## **Examination & Assessment Access**

- Significant discrepancies between NI and ROI exam accommodations.
- NI Braille users can receive **100% extra time**; ROI limits to **15 minutes per hour**.
- Digital and timed assessments often exclude VI learners.
- NI transfer tests remain **inaccessible** to VI pupils.

## **Whole-School Confidence & Consistency**

- Up to **75%** of staff have never received VI-specific training.
- SNAs/Classroom Assistants frequently lack accredited preparation for their role.
- Post-primary settings struggle to maintain consistent adjustments across multiple teachers.

## Early Intervention & Habilitation

- Habilitation/O&M provision is extremely limited: only **1%** of NI pupils receive support; ROI provision remains inconsistent and geographically uneven.
- Delays in AT introduction and Braille readiness obstruct early independence.

## Post-School Outcomes

- **Blind and visually impaired students have the lowest participation rates in Higher Education** across disability groups in Ireland (AHEAD 2021, 2023b, 2024c)—even with DARE prioritisation.
- **38% of young people with VI in NI are NEET**, nearly double the general youth population.
- **Only one in four working-age adults who are blind or partially sighted is in full-time employment.**
- These outcomes reflect systemic inequities that extend across schooling, assessment, and transition planning.

## Rights-Based Implications

- These disparities are not merely service gaps—they constitute a **rights gap**, falling short of obligations under the **UNCRPD** and **UNCRC** to provide inclusive, accessible, and adequately resourced education.

## 2. Evidence of What Works: Cross-Border Training Impact

Between 2024–2025, Angel Eyes NI and Féach delivered joint whole-school training through the Shared Island Civic Society Fund, reaching **84 educators, teachers, SENCOs/SETs, and classroom assistants across both jurisdictions.**

## Results

- **100%** increased confidence and understanding of VI.
- **100%** improved ability to use assistive technology.
- **96%** said training benefits all pupils, not just those with VI.
- **100%** agreed whole-school, team-based training should be mandatory.
- **One-year-on:** every participant reported sustained changes in practice, many cascading learning across their schools.

## What participants valued

- Lived experience embedded in training
- Practical classroom strategies
- Cross-border peer learning
- Consistent, whole-team approach
- Authentic integration of ECC/CFVI principles

### 3. Persistent Gaps

Area	Key Gap	Evidence
<b>Specialist Training</b>	Most staff lack VI-specific or Braille training, leading to inconsistent support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>75%</b> had no VI training.</li> <li>• <b>95%</b> supporting Braille users had no Braille training.</li> </ul>
<b>Assistive Technology</b>	No standardised AT assessment or training; devices under-used.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>58%</b> rated AT knowledge poor/very poor.</li> <li>• Provision often based only on visual acuity.</li> </ul>
<b>Braille Literacy</b>	Limited specialist capacity and no routine Learning Media Assessments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>64%</b> had poor understanding of Braille learning journey.</li> <li>• NI: <b>16</b> Braille learners; ROI: <b>79</b>—all reliant on overstretched specialists.</li> </ul>
<b>Workforce Capacity</b>	Services overstretched; high caseloads limit quality and frequency of support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NI QTVIs: <b>~60 pupils each</b> (some &gt;150).</li> <li>• ROI VTs: <b>16 teachers for 1,520+ pupils.</b></li> </ul>
<b>Habilitation</b>	Minimal or inconsistent O&M/habilitation provision.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NI: Only <b>1%</b> of pupils received habilitation support.</li> </ul>
<b>Assessment Access</b>	Exam accommodations inconsistent; some assessments inaccessible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NI Braille users: <b>100% extra time</b>; ROI: <b>15 mins/hr.</b></li> <li>• NI transfer tests not accessible.</li> </ul>

#### **4. Joint Policy Recommendations**

- **Make VI Training Mandatory Across the Workforce**

Embed the whole-school, team-based Vision Impairment (VI) training model as *statutory, accredited CPD* and part of *initial teacher education* in both jurisdictions. Ensure public funding and delivery through Angel Eyes NI and Féach to guarantee consistent standards, lived-experience insight, and sustainable capacity across the system.

- **Enhance Braille Provision Through Specialists and Learning Media Assessments (LMAs)**

Create designated Braille Specialist posts within vision support services north and south. Introduce *mandatory Learning Media Assessments* to guide early literacy-medium decisions and ensure consistent, high-quality Braille teaching and progression monitoring.

- **Guarantee Early and Ongoing Access to Assistive Technology**

Introduce early AT assessment and regular review within each pupil's IEP/PLP/SSP. Establish Technology Specialist roles within sensory services and implement a standardised AT assessment framework with ring-fenced funding for devices, training, and maintenance.

- **Align Exam Access and Accommodations Across Jurisdictions**

Ensure the State Examinations Commission (ROI) extends RACE accommodations to mirror best practice in NI, particularly for Braille users, and commit to fully accessible exam and assessment formats across both jurisdictions.

## 5. Costed Recommendations for NI & ROI

Recommendation	Estimated Cost (per jurisdiction)	Responsible Bodies	Timeline	Expected Impact
<b>Statutory Whole-School VI Training Programme</b>	<b>£50,000 / €60,000 for pilot year;</b> scalable thereafter	NI: Angel Eyes NI  ROI: Féach	2026–27 pilot; scale-up from 2027	400+ staff trained; consistent whole-school practice; sustainable cross-border CPD model
<b>Designated Braille Specialist Posts &amp; Routine LMAs</b>	<b>€55,000</b> per specialist per year (one post per jurisdiction)	ROI: NCSE	2026 onwards	Earlier literacy-medium decisions; improved Braille progression; system expertise strengthened
<b>Early &amp; Continuous Access to Assistive Technology (AT)</b>	<b>£65,000 / €75,000</b> (Technology Specialist posts + AT assessment framework)	NI: Angel Eyes NI  ROI: Féach	2026–27	120+ Standardised AT assessments; improved device uptake; reduced digital exclusion
<b>Alignment of Assessment &amp; Exam Accommodations</b>	Minimal (policy reform and administrative adjustments)	ROI: SEC / DoE liaison NI: JCQ (DE / EA)	2025–26	Equitable exam access; consistency across island; improved outcomes for Braille users and low-vision candidates

### Total Estimated Annual Cost (per jurisdiction - full implementation)

- **Northern Ireland:**  
**£115,000 per year**  
*(Braille specialist already in place)*
- **Republic of Ireland:**  
**€190,000 per year**

### **Expected System-Wide Impact**

- Stronger Workforce Capacity: Whole-school VI training creates confident, consistent practice across classrooms and reduces reliance on overstretched specialist teams.
- Earlier, Better-Informed Support: Designated Braille and AT Specialists, alongside standardised assessments, ensure timely literacy-medium decisions and effective use of assistive technology.
- Improved Equity in Exams: Aligned accommodations across NI and ROI give pupils fair, accessible assessment pathways that match their learning needs.
- Greater Consistency Across Jurisdictions: Shared standards and approaches reduce regional variation and ensure more equitable provision.
- Enhanced Parent and School Confidence: Clearer processes and improved communication strengthen trust and collaboration.
- Better Outcomes for Learners: Pupils with vision impairment receive the right support at the right time, leading to increased independence, participation, and attainment.

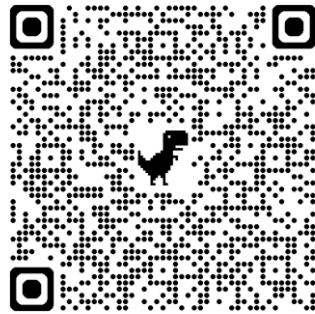
### **Conclusion — A Shared Opportunity**

The evidence is clear: when educators are equipped with the right skills, technology and confidence, children and young people with vision impairment can learn, participate and thrive alongside their peers. This cross-border collaboration has shown what is possible when lived experience, specialist knowledge and practical classroom training come together.

With modest investment and joint commitment, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland can lead the way in creating an inclusive education system that delivers on rights, raises attainment, and transforms life chances.

**The next step is simple: make what works standard practice - everywhere.**

## QR Codes full reports



2005, Report:



2004, Report:

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