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## Support for infants and young people with sight loss: sight impairment certification and referral to education and social care services

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Complete List of Authors:	Boyce, Tammy; Research Consultant, Dahlmann-Noor, Annegret; Moorfields Eye Hospital, NIHRBiomedical Research Centre; UCL, Institute of Ophthalmology Bowman, Richard; London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, International Centre for Eye Health; UCL, Institute of Child Health Keil, Sue; RNIB,
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**TITLE:**

Support for infants and young people with sight loss: sight impairment certification  
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**KEYWORDS:**

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**AUTHORS:**

Dr Tammy Boyce  
30 Victoria Pk Rd East  
Cardiff, CF5 1EH  
tboyce39@gmail.com

Dr Annegret Dahlmann-Noor  
NIHR Biomedical Research Centre at Moorfields Eye Hospital NHS Foundation Trust  
and UCL Institute of Ophthalmology, London, UK  
annegret.dahlmann-noor@moorfields.nhs.uk

Dr Richard Bowman  
International Centre for Eye Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical  
Medicine, London, United Kingdom; Institute of Child Health, London, United  
Kingdom  
Richard.Bowman@gosh.nhs.uk

Ms Sue Keil\*  
58-72 John Bright St,  
Birmingham B1 1BN  
Sue.Keil@rnib.org.uk  
\*Corresponding author

## ABSTRACT

### Objectives

To examine the experience of infants, children and their parents, the role of ophthalmologists and other health, social care and education professionals in the certification and registration processes and examine the relationship between certification and referrals and pathways to support.

### Design

Qualitative study.

### Setting

Telephone interviews with health, social care, Qualified Teachers of Visual Impairment (QTVIS) and parents of infants/children in England.

### Participants

52 health, social care and education professionals who are part of the certification or registration process. 26 parents of infants and children with vision impairment.

### Results

Referrals to education do not require a Certificate of Vision Impairment (CVI) however the majority of parents received support from education and social services only after an offer of the CVI, which was often dependent upon having a formal diagnosis. Parents stated they wanted support sooner, particularly parents of children with additional complex needs who experienced longer delays. Areas with multi-disciplinary teams and support roles such as Eye Clinic Liaison Officers appeared to have more reliable referral pathways.

### Conclusion

1  
2  
3 For infants and children with vision impairment, there should be a consistent  
4  
5 mechanism for triggering education and social care support even with uncertainty  
6  
7 about diagnosis and/or prognosis. All professionals involved in the certification and  
8  
9 registration processes (ophthalmologists, optometrists, ECLOs, orthoptists, social  
10  
11 workers, QTVIs) can better communicate the value and benefits of certification and  
12  
13 registration.  
14  
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## 16 17 18 **ARTICLE SUMMARY**

### 19 20 **Strengths and limitations of this study**

- 21 • The research is the first study to analyse the processes of certification and  
22 registration in infants and children and the various health, social care and ed-  
23 ucation professions involved.  
24  
25
- 26 • The experience of parents from across England shows wide variation in the  
27 certification and registration processes, with examples of good and poor prac-  
28 tice.  
29  
30
- 31 • The article offers examples of good practice to improve consistency of the cer-  
32 tification and registration processes.  
33  
34
- 35 • The number of participants was small, so findings should be considered indic-  
36 ative, however, saturation/repetition levels were reached in all three interview  
37 groups, suggesting confidence in the findings.  
38  
39
- 40 • Parents of infants and children certified came from all areas in England and  
41 did not reflect the areas where professionals worked. Further research is  
42 needed to explore both the provision and experience of care in specific areas  
43 however, this research was still able to identify key themes arising from each  
44 interview cohort.  
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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Certificate of Vision Impairment (CVI) for both children and adults is to provide a reliable route for someone with sight loss to be brought to the attention of social care. Certification and registration is transformative for adults as the referral to social services and the support triggered substantially improves their lives.<sup>(1)</sup> While for infants and children social services often have an important role to play, and registration also brings financial and practical benefits to families, the main provider of support is the local authority specialist vision impairment education service. Early assessment and interventions (e.g. low-vision aids) can decrease risks of delayed development in motor, cognitive, language and social domains.<sup>(2,3,4,5,6,7)</sup>

In the UK, qualified teachers of children with vision impairment (QTVIs) most commonly provide training and support to enable parents to assist their child's early development.

Information is parents' greatest need at the period of establishing a diagnosis of their child's ophthalmic disorder.<sup>(8)</sup> During this critical period when an infant/child's vision impairment is being diagnosed, parents state they want support to both accept their infant/child's sight loss and to learn how to maximise the remaining vision and develop adaptive skills.<sup>(9,10,11)</sup> However, research consistently finds parents do not receive this information from health professionals at an early stage, leaving parents frustrated<sup>(12)</sup> and children with delayed development.<sup>(13,14)</sup>

Through interviews with health and social care and education professionals and parents, this research explores what triggers referral for support and whether clinicians depend on a firm diagnosis or a CVI to act as a trigger, or needs

1  
2  
3 of/requests from patients and parents. In addition, it examines the impact of waiting  
4  
5 for referrals to education and provides examples of good practice and identifies ways  
6  
7 of ensuring prompt referrals.  
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11  
12 Certification and registration are two separate processes and involve a  
13  
14 number of stages. Firstly, the CVI is completed by a consultant  
15  
16 ophthalmologist who establishes a child's eligibility for certification as  
17  
18 either sight impaired (SI) or severely sight impaired (SSI). The  
19  
20 completed CVI is then sent to the local Social Services Department  
21  
22 who 'offer' registration, as it is a voluntary choice. Registration offers  
23  
24 practical and financial benefits and concessions.<sup>(15)</sup> The CVI should act  
25  
26 as a referral for a social care assessment, and where eligible, the offer  
27  
28 of support.  
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34 **Support offered by education follows a separate referral pathway**  
35  
36 **and is not dependant on certification or registration** but based on a  
37  
38 child's need.  
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42  
43 The UK Department of Health recommends that infants and young  
44  
45 children who have congenital ocular abnormalities leading to visual  
46  
47 defects should be certified as sight impaired unless they are obviously  
48  
49 severely sight impaired.<sup>(16)</sup> Children aged 4 and over should be certified  
50  
51 as SSI or SI according to their binocular corrected vision. No other UK  
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53 specific guidelines exist for children.  
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Between 1982 and 2011 there has been more than twofold increase in new blind and partial-sight registration in children in England.<sup>(17)</sup> However, the rise in registration rates is inconsistent across England. The cause of this irregularity is estimated to be due to both the 'combination of a genuinely higher prevalence of visual impairment locally and underreporting of visual impairment nationally'.<sup>(18)</sup>

Box 1: The certification and registration processes

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Sample

The purposive sample seeks to provide an overview of the certification and registration processes in five NHS areas. The study of health, social care and education professionals was conducted in five areas in England identified as having fluctuating rates of sight loss registration rates and whether or not they employed specialist paediatric ophthalmologists.<sup>(19)</sup> We purposely selected areas that would provide us with 'excellent examples' as well as more ordinary or common practices.<sup>(20)</sup> Purposive sampling is based on knowledge of a population.<sup>(21)</sup> In this research, those professionals involved in certifying and supporting infants and children with vision impairment and parents of children who are certified as severely sight impaired or sight impaired were deliberately selected for interview.

Hospital consultants were identified by RNIB or the advisory group, subsequent health care staff were identified by the consultants first contacted. Education (QTVIs) and social care interviewees were identified by health care professionals or one of the authors. Parents were recruited via invitation calls sent from RNIB and



Action for Blind People (posted on their websites) and letters sent by interviewed QTVIs. The request for interviews was also placed on social media websites of parent support groups – this was beyond our control but was very welcome as it led to a number of parents being interviewed. Parents were recruited from across the whole of England.

After examination of the National Research Ethics Framework<sup>(22)</sup> the research was deemed a service evaluation and ethics approval was not necessary. None of the parental participants were identified or approached via NHS services; instead, we used membership of charities and patient support organisations. Informed consent was obtained by all participants at the beginning of each interview. Personal identifying information was not recorded.

78 participants were interviewed. Hospital interviews were with a range of staff involved in the certification process (See Table 1). Of the 12 consultants interviewed 10 were qualified for over ten years, the remaining two consultants were qualified for over five years.

Hospital Staff	Education	Social Services	Parents
12 Consultant Ophthalmologists	7 QTVI	6 Managers	26 parents with 28 children
3 ECLOs	1 Manager	5 Rehabilitation Workers	22 Severely Sight Impaired, 6 Sight Impaired

1 Optometrist		3 Administrators	7 infants and children with complex needs
5 Administrators		1 social worker	18 diagnosed under age 1 10 certified under age 1
6 Orthoptists			Ethnicity: 26 white, 2 Asian
2 Nurses			12 girls, 16 boys
<b>Total: 29</b>	<b>Total: 8</b>	<b>Total: 15</b>	<b>Total 26</b>

**Table 1: List of Interviewees**

Twenty-seven per cent (n = 7) of parents stated they had an income below £15,000/annum. Two parents (eight per cent) classified themselves as Asian, slightly below England's population of mixed, Asian, Black and Chinese ethnicities which make up twelve per cent of England's population.<sup>(23)</sup>

Specialist education services in seven local authorities associated with the hospitals and representatives from seven social care departments were also interviewed. In one area representatives from different social services and education departments were interviewed resulting in professionals from eight local authority areas being interviewed.

### Interviews and data analysis

The interviews consisted of semi-structured questions covering the following themes;

- Description and/or experience of certification and registration processes
- Attitudes to and meaning of certification and registration
- Role and relationships with relevant stakeholders (health, education, social services)
- Improving experiences and systems

The nature of the interviews encouraged participants to feel comfortable to raise issues they felt relevant to their own experiences.<sup>(24)</sup> The advisory group provided guidance on the interview questions' consistency, validity and ambiguity.

Each transcript was read and analysed multiple times. Interview data was analysed thematically, similar to previous research with adults.<sup>(1)</sup> A list of deductive codes was initially created; inductive codes emerged during the second level of the thematic analysis.<sup>(25,26)</sup>

All interviews were digitally recorded with the participant's consent, lasted between 10 and 50 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were completed between March and July 2014.

Extracts are referenced with the type of interviewee and interview number—parent (Par); ophthalmologist (Ophth); secretary/administrator (Adm); nurse (Nur); optometrist (Optom); eye clinic liaison officer (ECLO); orthoptist (orth); social services staff including managers, rehabilitation officers, administrators (SS) and QTVIs and a manager (QTVIs). The terms 'certification' and 'registration' were used

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2  
3 inconsistently by most interviewees; hence these terms are amended in the text for  
4  
5 clarity.  
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7

## 8 9 **RESULTS**

### 10 11 **Referral processes**

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14 Across England, the typical patient pathway when an infant or child has a VI is a  
15  
16 direct referral from health to education, usually via letter. Once a referral from the  
17  
18 hospital is received by education a QTVI makes initial contact, usually by telephone.  
19

20 All but one of the areas under analysis referred directly from hospital to education.  
21

22  
23 In one area under-going a lengthy reorganisation, QTVIs were not alerted when  
24  
25 children were certified and stated 'it's a little bit hit and miss when we find out'.  
26

27 (QTVI3)  
28  
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30  
31  
32 Under Special Educational Needs and Disability legislation, an infant or child's  
33  
34 entitlement to specialist educational support is entirely independent of whether or not  
35  
36 they have a CVI. All QTVIs interviewed confirmed children do not need to be certified  
37  
38 or registered in order to receive educational support.  
39  
40

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43 '(Certification and registration) doesn't open doors [to QTVIs]...we can offer  
44  
45 all the resources and things whether they are registered or not.' (QTVI2)  
46  
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48  
49 All parents interviewed stated the lead professional supporting their infants and  
50  
51 children came from education rather than social care (where adults receive their  
52  
53 support).  
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58 *Parents and ophthalmologists report different experiences*  
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4 The interviews found differences in opinions between the experiences of parents  
5 seeking support for their VI infants and children and ophthalmologists' stated  
6 practice. Parents stated they wanted referrals to education prior to diagnosis but  
7  
8 doctors appeared to wait until they had a firm diagnosis before referring. The offer of  
9  
10 a CVI appeared to trigger ophthalmologists to refer to education services.  
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17 *Parents wait for diagnosis and offer of CVI before being referred*  
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21 Despite processes outlining that a CVI is not needed for an education referral, two-  
22 thirds of parents (n=18) stated they were not referred to support *until after the CVI*  
23 *was issued* to their infants/children. These parents stated ophthalmologists delayed  
24 or did not mention either certification or referral to education until they had reached a  
25 firm diagnosis.  
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34 '(Ophthalmologists) really didn't do a lot before (certification), that's what I'm  
35 angry about, those years before school, more wasn't done. Now when I look  
36 online and stuff you see all of these nursery schools for VI children and  
37 afternoon sessions and play sessions. There was none of that, I didn't know  
38 about any of that.' (Par14)  
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48 One parent of a child diagnosed with idiopathic nystagmus at age nine months  
49 waited until he was three to be certified, by this stage she had referred her child to a  
50 QTVI through her own networks and received no referrals to support or information  
51 about her child's VI from the hospital. In this case, certification was prompted only  
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3 when the child participated in a research project and the research staff  
4  
5 recommended it to provide additional support (Par6).  
6  
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10 For some parents, the lack of referral or access to information had a lasting and  
11  
12 significant impact on their lives. One parent was told by a paediatric ophthalmologist  
13  
14 to treat their child eventually certified as sight impaired simply as 'a normal baby'.  
15  
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18  
19 'The doctor at \*\*\* just said to me 'just treat him like a normal baby. Just carry  
20  
21 on exactly like you are'...if they'd certified him and I had had proper advice  
22  
23 they might've said to do as much as you can to stimulate him. She said just  
24  
25 treat him like a normal baby...If he had been certified and I had spoken to a  
26  
27 QTVI earlier and been given more advice.' (Par14)  
28  
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32 Education and social care professionals confirmed what parents had said - they  
33  
34 often encountered children who were not referred to support until the CVI was issued  
35  
36 or a firm diagnosis reached. One QTVI confirmed that some children go without  
37  
38 support because they are not referred as ophthalmologists wait to see if vision  
39  
40 improves. QTVIs stated infants and children with complex needs often presented  
41  
42 late to their services.  
43  
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48 'it's often the more complex needs children that ...we haven't had a referral to  
49  
50 the service for, the education service and that is often because they are very  
51  
52 young.' (QTVI8)  
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57 *Ophthalmologists state referral is offered before certification*  
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3 Whilst the majority of parents wanted support before certification, all 12  
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5 ophthalmologists, three ECLOs and six orthoptists stated they referred infants and  
6  
7 children to QTVIs and education before they reached a stage where they offered  
8  
9 certification.  
10

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14 'You don't have to be certified to get access to the VI teaching service. So  
15  
16 we're not depriving them of something by them not being certified...I don't  
17  
18 leap in and certify until I absolutely know where they are going to end up. And  
19  
20 I'm still going to do all the other things that I would do for them, referral for low  
21  
22 vision aids, for to teaching service, specialist optometry and so on. It's on my  
23  
24 list but I wouldn't say I, I personally don't leap in and certify early on.' (Oph3)  
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29  
30 Paediatric ophthalmologists with close relationships with QTVIs and education,  
31  
32 stated they frequently discussed cases with QTVIs.  
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36  
37 'The first thing we tend to do is refer to VI team, even before certification, so  
38  
39 they have a little bit of input from this team before they actually get information  
40  
41 about registration, education team, enhanced service...We rely on them  
42  
43 heavily as well.' (Oph2)  
44  
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47  
48 Other areas had internal systems, working closely with orthoptists to ensure children  
49  
50 were offered support when they needed it.  
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53  
54 'We have a system where the orthoptist would see all those children as well  
55  
56 and would normally make a referral to learning support services but as I say,  
57  
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3 we wouldn't certify them until their eye-sight deteriorates to appropriate  
4 standards...We're also going to be referring people who aren't certified, from  
5 that point of view they are equally going to have access to learning support.'

6  
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9  
10 (Oph12)

### 11 12 13 *Reasons for differences between parents' and clinicians' experiences*

14 Numerous issues arose suggesting reasons for the dissonance between parents and  
15 ophthalmologists' experiences of referrals and certification. Firstly, vision typically  
16 improves with age and it is standard practice for ophthalmologists to wait months, in  
17 some cases years, to identify a diagnosis.

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26 'It's not clear cut. Certain conditions where it is, there are certain where it isn't.

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28 Some children with delayed visual maturation, where you don't really know  
29 how much their vision will improve or to what level, so some of those it's quite  
30 a waiting game or you're not able to assess the child's vision very accurately.

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34  
35 And so you're waiting for more accurate clinical information.' (Orth4)

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39 The difficulty in measuring visual acuity and VI in infants was mentioned by most  
40 ophthalmologists and many stated they waited to offer certification until they (or  
41 orthoptists) could measure VA or until test results were received.

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49 'It can be extremely difficult to measure visual acuity in very young children,  
50 small babies. So what may appear, for example, to be a non-seeing baby at  
51 12 weeks with something like delayed visual maturation may actually turn out  
52 to be a baby with perfectly normal sight in six weeks, or it may be much



1  
2  
3 longer. I think it's a delayed visual maturation if I think it's a baby with much  
4  
5 more severe visual diagnosis then it's based on that.' (Oph11).  
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10 What appears to be happening is that some ophthalmologists associate both the  
11 offer of certification **and** referral to support with determining a firm diagnosis.  
12  
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14  
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16 This issue may be a particular problem in hospitals without paediatric ophthalmology  
17 specialist consultants. Whilst this is a small sample, consultants working in different  
18 Tertiary Centres stated parents often arrived at their hospitals looking for support,  
19 having not been referred during their visit to the first hospital.  
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27  
28 'If you have (ophthalmologists) who do not have specialist training in  
29 paediatric ophthalmology they don't understand the pathways and the needs  
30 of the children and they don't think to refer them to the VI services and they  
31 don't think that a child can use a Low Vision Assessment and they don't think  
32 that actually the parents do actually need help filling in the Disability Living  
33 Allowance form.' (Oph8)  
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43 Ophthalmologists who certified numerous children in a year had more flexible  
44 attitudes to certification and the DH guidance.  
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48  
49 'I tend to be rather flexible with interpreting the guidelines. I don't think visual  
50 acuity is the best way of doing it in children. For instance, children with  
51 nystagmus might have better vision than 6/18 but they obviously have visual  
52 problems in terms of tracking and visual perception. Same with some of the  
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3 milder forms of cerebral VI where their visual acuity can be good but they are  
4 confronted with a real world where they are overloaded with visual information  
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6  
7 and they really struggle. I tend to adopt a more functional approach to it.

8  
9  
10 Based on fact that acuity are guidelines rather than strict legal definitions.'  
11  
12 (Oph7)

13  
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15  
16 Whilst interpreting the DH guidance flexibly can benefit those on the borderlines or  
17  
18 waiting for a diagnosis, it can also mean certification is offered inconsistently.  
19

20  
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22  
23 Another issue that arose was related to the offer of certification for children with  
24  
25 complex needs. Some health professionals stated they delayed the offer of  
26  
27 certification for these children because they felt their parents already had so much to  
28  
29 deal with and the benefits of certification would not be worthwhile. Some  
30  
31 ophthalmologists stated they believed parents of infants/children with complex needs  
32  
33 might not want to discuss certification but made this assumption without actually  
34  
35 discussing the offer with parents.  
36  
37  
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39

40  
41 'They've got multiple agency involvement it probably isn't very important to  
42  
43 register that child if they are going blind... many of our children who need that  
44  
45 are multiply handicapped are already getting a lot of support and I think they  
46  
47 feel they just don't want another label'. (Oph6)  
48  
49

## 50 51 52 **How to ensure early and consistent support**

### 53 54 55 *Multi-disciplinary teams* 56 57 58 59 60

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3 Ophthalmologists stated working in multi-disciplinary teams reduced possible delays  
4  
5 in certification or referrals for support.  
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10 'Many of our children come from multi-disciplinary teams where we supply  
11  
12 staff to check vision for these children.' (Oph6)  
13

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15  
16 Across the eight local authority areas studied, four areas held joint meetings  
17  
18 between health, education and SS, meetings were usually held once a term or a few  
19  
20 times a year. These joint meetings facilitated relationships, making it easier for  
21  
22 professionals to pick up the phone or send an email when there is a problem - or  
23  
24 before an issue becomes a problem.  
25  
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27  
28  
29 'I don't think we could offer a good service if we didn't work together as a  
30  
31 team.' (Orth3)  
32  
33

### 34 35 *Direct referral pathways* 36

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39 To encourage prompt and consistent referrals, two areas created referral forms to  
40  
41 directly refer from health to education as children were getting lost in systems and  
42  
43 referrals weren't happening fast enough.  
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47  
48 'We get parents to sign a consent form to say they are happy to share  
49  
50 information so we can liaise quite easily.' (Orth3)  
51  
52

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54  
55 The DH already promotes a process for direct referral from health professionals to  
56  
57 others who can offer support, based on a Referral of Visual Impairment (RVI) form.  
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3 This referral does not require the patient (adult or child) to be certified and  
4  
5 registered.  
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### 8 *ECLOS* 9

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12 Intermediaries such as specialist nurses, Eye Clinic Liaison Officers (ECLOs) and  
13  
14 Family Support Unit provided a reliable referral route for parents to education and  
15  
16 other services for specialist support. Parents who attended children's hospitals,  
17  
18 where most have roles such as ECLOs or Family Support Units, very much valued  
19  
20 the information and support they offered.  
21  
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25

26 'When we had hospital appointments, we were up there quite a bit in the first  
27  
28 few months... (ECLOs) would sit in on the appointments that we had... the  
29  
30 information they first gave us, it was really helpful and it was nice to know  
31  
32 someone was... We would've felt really isolated and not had a clue basically. I  
33  
34 don't really know what we would've done.' (Par22)  
35  
36  
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38

39  
40 Ophthalmologists stated these intermediary roles could potentially solve many of the  
41  
42 problems faced by parents of CYP with VI in providing timely information and  
43  
44 support.  
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47

48 'I think ECLOs are one of the things that would really help transform care for  
49  
50 children with VI over the years.' (Oph5)  
51  
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55 However, even when these personnel were in hospitals, referring to these  
56  
57 intermediary roles was not consistent, instead it was a subjective decision made by  
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ophthalmologists. Parents were very disappointed when children's hospitals/ Centres of Excellence failed to provide support or information through these intermediary roles (as they were not referred). One parent, despite seeing orthoptists, consultants and optometrists at a children's hospital, did not receive the support she expected.

'I was supposed to get a journal<sup>(27)</sup> - from birth up to about five, about certain things you can do with blind children to help them. I never received it and they promised me it.'(Par18)

## DISCUSSION

### Delayed referrals are unnecessary

The referral to specialist support was often unnecessarily delayed in the process of establishing a diagnosis. Even though most childhood visual disorders are present from infancy, our research confirmed there is often a 'prolonged period of uncertainty before the final diagnosis is achieved'.<sup>(13)</sup> Previous research found 21% of parents waited less than a month to have their child's vision impairment diagnosed while 25% waited over a year. They also found 40% of children with multiple disabilities had to wait more than a year to have their vision impairment diagnosed.<sup>(14)</sup>

The purpose of certification is to formally refer a person to social services, however it should not be the only prompt to a referral. While the ophthalmologists who took part in this study were aware of the importance of speedy referral of infants and children to the specialist education service, evidence from parents indicates that this is not consistent across the country. Delays in referring to education may be due to

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3 doctors waiting to obtain a firm diagnosis; health staff not understanding the role of  
4  
5 the QTVI; and a lack of clear referral processes in some areas.  
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10 For parents of infants and children with complex needs, the delays could be longer  
11  
12 as children are not always referred to ophthalmology departments or offered eye  
13  
14 examinations and vision assessment by other health professionals. Vision  
15  
16 impairment in children with complex needs is often under-identified<sup>(28)</sup> and can take  
17  
18 some time to diagnose.<sup>(13)</sup> The number of children with neurodevelopmental  
19  
20 disorders is contributing to the increase in the prevalence of visual impairments,<sup>(29)</sup>  
21  
22 yet diagnosing vision impairment in infants and children with complex needs is more  
23  
24 difficult to and therefore this cohort is more likely to be overlooked.<sup>(29,30)</sup> This  
25  
26 suggests not all eligible infants and children are being certified and that they and  
27  
28 their families may be missing out on important financial and practical support. Early  
29  
30 support is crucial for infants and children with vision impairment and their families, to  
31  
32 support children's cognitive development, communication, social and independence  
33  
34 skills. Referrals to the specialist teacher (QTVI) from the local authority education  
35  
36 advisory service is not dependent upon certification.  
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### 42 **Refer when support is needed, not when certification is offered**

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46 The compassion shown by ophthalmologists, orthoptists, optometrists and ECLOs  
47  
48 was clearly apparent but this is not enough – these sentiments need to translate into  
49  
50 actions so that infants and children with VI are promptly and consistently referred to  
51  
52 the support they need to secure the best start to their lives. There should be a  
53  
54 formal mechanism for triggering QTVI and social care support even if there is  
55  
56 uncertainty about diagnosis and prognosis, such as formal referral pathways.<sup>(31)</sup>  
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5 Previous studies found value in infants and children managed by multi-disciplinary  
6 teams 'to ensure comprehensive and integrated intervention'.<sup>(9)</sup> This research  
7 demonstrates the value of multidisciplinary teams as well as intermediaries to ensure  
8 referrals and support are offered to infants and children with VI.  
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15 A consistent mechanism for triggering educational and social support for children  
16 with visual impairment and their families, even when diagnosis and eventual level of  
17 visual function are uncertain, would improve child development and families'  
18 experience.  
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## 24 25 26 27 **LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH**

### 28 29 **Bias**

30 Overall, the number of participants interviewed in each category was small; as such,  
31 the findings should be considered indicative, however saturation/repetition levels  
32 were reached in all interview groups, suggesting confidence in the findings.<sup>(32)</sup> We  
33 sought to reduce the potential for selection bias by selecting from a broad group of  
34 parents, however all children needed to be certified. We aimed to minimise reporting  
35 bias by defining the research questions at the beginning of the project and the  
36 researcher (TB) was experienced in the topic and with the interview population.<sup>(1)</sup> In  
37 addition, the advisory group provided objective guidance in forming the research  
38 questions and in reviewing the findings.  
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### 51 52 *Sample*

53 The original aim of the research was to interview parents from the same areas as the  
54 professionals (similar to the sample researched for the adult research<sup>(1)</sup>). As there  
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3 are fewer infants and children certified compared to adults, it was decided to widen  
4  
5 the sample to include all parents of infants and children certified in all parts of  
6  
7 England. As such, it is difficult to provide a snapshot of each area. Despite this  
8  
9 limitation, the research is able to identify key themes arising from each interview  
10  
11 cohort.  
12  
13

### 14 15 16 17 18 **CONTRIBUTOR STATEMENT**

19  
20 TB wrote the initial draft. All authors revised the initial draft and subsequent drafts.

21  
22 TB is the guarantor. All authors have full control of the content of the article.  
23  
24

### 25 26 **COMPETING INTERESTS**

27  
28 None.  
29  
30

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33 The Royal National Institute of Blind People funded this research. The funders  
34 contributed to the design of the research.  
35

### 36 37 **DATA SHARING STATEMENT**

38 No additional data are available.  
39

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42 The authors thank the parents, health and social care professionals and QTVIs who  
43  
44 were involved in this research, as well as members of the Advisory Group.  
45

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7 **Research Checklist**  
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9  
10 The Equator Network suggested the following article as relevant to our research:  
11

12 Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research:

13 A Synthesis of Recommendations

14 Bridget C. O'Brien, PhD, Ilene B. Harris, PhD, Thomas J. Beckman, MD,

15 Darcy A. Reed, MD, MPH, and David A. Cook, MD, MH  
16

17  
18 I have read the article and believe our research more than adequately follows the  
19 recommended methodology.  
20

21 I apologise if this information is incorrect but to be honest – it is unclear what is  
22 expected in a research checklist for qualitative research. It may be more obvious for  
23 clinical trials.  
24  
25

26  
27 Best,  
28

29 Tammy Boyce  
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# BMJ Open

## Support for infants and young people with sight loss: A qualitative study of sight impairment certification and referral to education and social care services

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Secondary Subject Heading:	Paediatrics, Patient-centred medicine, Qualitative research, Communication
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Manuscripts

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**TITLE:**

Support for infants and young people with sight loss: A qualitative study of sight impairment certification and referral to education and social care services

**KEYWORDS:**

Blindness; Sight loss; certification of vision impairment; children; infants; QTVI; Children with special health care needs

**AUTHORS:**

Dr Tammy Boyce  
30 Victoria Pk Rd East  
Cardiff, CF5 1EH  
tboyce39@gmail.com

Dr Annegret Dahlmann-Noor  
NIHR Biomedical Research Centre at Moorfields Eye Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and UCL Institute of Ophthalmology, London, UK  
annegret.dahlmann-noor@moorfields.nhs.uk

Dr Richard Bowman  
International Centre for Eye Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, United Kingdom; Institute of Child Health, London, United Kingdom  
Richard.Bowman@gosh.nhs.uk

Ms Sue Keil\*  
58-72 John Bright St,  
Birmingham B1 1BN  
Sue.Keil@rnib.org.uk  
\*Corresponding author

## ABSTRACT

### Objectives

To examine the experience of infants, children and their parents, the role of ophthalmologists and other health, social care and education professionals in the certification and registration processes and examine the relationship between certification and referrals and pathways to support.

### Design

Qualitative study.

### Setting

Telephone interviews with health and, social care professionals, Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (QTVIs) and parents of infants/children in England.

### Participants

52 health, social care and education professionals who are part of the certification or registration process. 26 parents of infants and children with vision impairment.

### Results

Referrals to education do not require a Certificate of Vision Impairment (CVI) however the majority of parents received support from education and social services only after an offer of the CVI, which was often dependent upon having a formal diagnosis. Parents stated they wanted support sooner, particularly parents of children with additional complex needs who experienced longer delays. Areas with multi-disciplinary teams and support roles such as Eye Clinic Liaison Officers appeared to have more reliable referral pathways.

## Conclusion

For infants and children with vision impairment, there should be a consistent mechanism for triggering education and social care support even with uncertainty about diagnosis and/or prognosis. All professionals involved in the certification and registration processes (ophthalmologists, optometrists, ECLOs, orthoptists, social workers, QTVIs) can better communicate the value and benefits of certification and registration.

## ARTICLE SUMMARY

### Strengths and limitations of this study

- The research is the first study to analyse the processes of certification and registration in infants and children and the various health, social care and education professions involved.
- The experience of parents from across England shows wide variation in the certification and registration processes, with examples of good and poor practice.
- The article offers examples of good practice to improve consistency of the certification and registration processes.
- The number of participants was small, so findings should be considered indicative, however, saturation/repetition levels were reached in all three interview groups, suggesting confidence in the findings.
- Parents of infants and children certified came from all areas in England and did not reflect the areas where professionals worked. Further research is needed to explore both the provision and experience of care in specific areas

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2  
3 however, this research was still able to identify key themes arising from each  
4  
5 interview cohort.  
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## 9 10 **FUNDING STATEMENT**

11  
12 The Royal National Institute of Blind People funded this research. The funders  
13  
14 contributed to the design of the research.  
15  
16

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18  
19 **Word Count 3819 words**  
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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Certificate of Vision Impairment (CVI) for both children and adults is to provide a reliable route for someone with sight loss to be brought to the attention of social care. Certification and registration is transformative for adults as the referral to social services and the support triggered substantially improves their lives.<sup>(1)</sup> While for infants and children social services often have an important role to play, and registration also brings financial and practical benefits to families, the main provider of support is the local authority specialist vision impairment education service. Early assessment and interventions (e.g. low-vision aids) can decrease risks of delayed development in motor, cognitive, language and social domains.<sup>(2,3,4,5,6,7)</sup>

In the UK, qualified teachers of children and young people with vision impairment (QTVIs) most commonly provide training and support to enable parents to assist their child's early development.

Information is parents' greatest need at the period of establishing a diagnosis of their child's ophthalmic disorder.<sup>(8)</sup> During this critical period when an infant/child's vision impairment is being diagnosed, parents state they want support to both accept their infant/child's sight loss and to learn how to maximise the remaining vision and develop adaptive skills.<sup>(9,10,11)</sup> However, research consistently finds parents do not receive this information from health professionals at an early stage, leaving parents frustrated<sup>(12)</sup> and children with delayed development.<sup>(13,14)</sup>

Through interviews with health and social care and education professionals and parents, this research explores what triggers referral for support and whether clinicians depend on a firm diagnosis or a CVI to act as a trigger, or needs

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3 of/requests from patients and parents. In addition, it examines the impact of waiting  
4 for referrals to education and provides examples of good practice and identifies ways  
5 of ensuring prompt referrals. The research follows on from previous research on  
6 adults and the CVI and registration process.<sup>(1)</sup> The aim of the research was to  
7 examine issues related to the certification and registration processes in infants and  
8 young people.  
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19 Certification and registration are two separate processes and involve a  
20 number of stages. Firstly, the CVI is completed by a consultant  
21 ophthalmologist who establishes a child's eligibility for certification as  
22 either sight impaired (SI) or severely sight impaired (SSI). The  
23 completed CVI is then sent to the local Social Services Department  
24 who 'offer' registration, as it is a voluntary choice. Registration offers  
25 practical and financial benefits and concessions.<sup>(15)</sup> The CVI should act  
26 as a referral for a social care assessment, and where eligible, the offer  
27 of support.  
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40 **Support offered by education follows a separate referral pathway**  
41 **and is not dependant on certification or registration but based on a**  
42 **child's need.**  
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49 The UK Department of Health recommends that infants and young  
50 children who have congenital ocular abnormalities leading to visual  
51 defects should be certified as sight impaired unless they are obviously  
52 severely sight impaired.<sup>(16)</sup> Children aged 4 and over should be certified  
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3 as SSI or SI according to their binocular corrected vision. No other UK  
4 specific guidelines exist for children.  
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10 Between 1982 and 2011 there has been more than twofold increase in  
11 new blind and partial-sight registration in children in England.<sup>(17)</sup>  
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13 However, the rise in registration rates is inconsistent across England.

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16 <sup>(18)</sup> The cause of this irregularity is estimated to be due to both the  
17 'combination of a genuinely higher prevalence of visual impairment  
18 locally and underreporting of visual impairment nationally'.<sup>(19)</sup>  
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25 The criteria for certification as blind or partially sighted is defined by the  
26 Department of Health. Generally, to be certified (and subsequently  
27 registered) as severely sight impaired (blind) a person's sight needs to  
28 fall into one of the following categories, while wearing glasses or  
29 contact lenses that they need:  
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- 36 - Visual acuity of less than 3/60 with a full visual field
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- 38 - Visual acuity of between 3/60 and 6/60 with a moderate reduction of  
39 field of vision, such as tunnel vision
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- 41
- 42 - Visual acuity of 6/60 or above, but with a very reduced field of vision  
43 especially if a lot of sight is missing especially in the lower part of  
44 the field  
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49 To be certified (and subsequently registered) as sight impaired  
50 (partially sighted) a person's sight has to fall into one of the following  
51 categories, while wearing glasses or contact lenses that they need:  
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- 55 - Visual acuity of 3/60 to 6/60 with a full field of vision  
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- Visual acuity of up to 6/24 with a moderate reduction of field of vision or with a central part of vision that is clouded or blurry
- Visual acuity of up to 6/18 or better if a large part of their field of vision, e.g. a whole half of their vision, is missing or a lot of their peripheral vision is missing.

The only additional advice with regards to infants and young people are:

- Infants and young children who have congenital ocular abnormalities leading to visual defects should be certified as sight impaired unless they are obviously severely sight impaired.
- Children aged 4 and over should be certified as severely sight impaired or sight impaired according to the binocular corrected vision.<sup>(20)</sup>

Box 1: The certification and registration processes

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Sample

The purposive sample seeks to provide an overview of the certification and registration processes in five NHS areas. The study of health, social care and education professionals was conducted in five areas in England identified as having differences in sight loss registration rates (lower, average or higher registration rates than might be expected for the size of the child population in that area)<sup>(21)</sup> and whether or not they employed specialist paediatric ophthalmologists. We purposely selected areas that would provide us with, as Morse states, 'excellent examples' as well as more ordinary or common practices.<sup>(22)</sup> Purposive sampling is based on

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3 knowledge of a population.<sup>(23)</sup> In this research, those professionals involved in  
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5 certifying and supporting infants and children with vision impairment and parents of  
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7 children who are certified as severely sight impaired or sight impaired were  
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9 deliberately selected for interview.  
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14 Hospital consultants were identified by RNIB or the advisory group, subsequent  
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16 health care staff were identified by the consultants first contacted. The research  
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18 advisory group included health, education and social care professionals. Education  
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20 (QTVIs) and social care interviewees were identified by health care professionals or  
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22 one of the authors. Parents were recruited via invitation calls sent from RNIB and  
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24 Action for Blind People (posted on their websites) and letters sent by interviewed  
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26 QTVIs. The request for interviews was also placed on social media websites of  
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28 parent support groups – this was beyond our control but was very welcome as it led  
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30 to a number of parents being interviewed. Parents were recruited from across the  
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32 whole of England.  
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38 After examination of the National Research Ethics Framework<sup>(24)</sup> the research was  
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40 deemed a service evaluation and ethics approval was not necessary. None of the  
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42 parental participants were identified or approached via NHS services; instead, we  
43  
44 used membership of charities and patient support organisations. Informed consent  
45  
46 was obtained by all participants at the beginning of each interview. Personal  
47  
48 identifying information was not recorded.  
49  
50

### 51 52 53 54 **Interviews and data analysis** 55 56 57 58 59 60

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3 The interviews consisted of semi-structured questions covering the following themes;  
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- 7
- 8 • Description and/or experience of certification and registration processes
  - 9 • Attitudes to and meaning of certification and registration
  - 10 • Role and relationships with relevant stakeholders (health, education, social  
11 services)
  - 12 • Improving experiences and systems
- 13  
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21 The nature of the interviews encouraged participants to feel comfortable to raise  
22 issues they felt relevant to their own experiences.<sup>(25)</sup> The advisory group provided  
23 guidance on the interview questions' consistency, validity and ambiguity.  
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30 Each transcript was read and analysed multiple times. Interview data was analysed  
31 thematically, similar to previous research with adults.<sup>(1)</sup> A list of deductive codes was  
32 initially created; inductive codes emerged during the second level of the thematic  
33 analysis.<sup>(26,27)</sup>  
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41 All interviews were digitally recorded with the participant's consent, lasted between  
42 10 and 50 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were completed  
43 between March and July 2014.  
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50 Extracts are referenced with the type of interviewee and interview number—parent  
51 (Par); ophthalmologist (Ophth); secretary/administrator (Adm); nurse (Nur);  
52 optometrist (Optom); eye clinic liaison officer (ECLO); orthoptist (orth); social  
53 services staff including managers, rehabilitation officers, administrators (SS) and  
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QTVIs and a manager (QTVIs). The terms 'certification' and 'registration' were used inconsistently by most interviewees; hence these terms are amended in the text for clarity.

## RESULTS

**Interviewees** this section moved from methods section

78 participants were interviewed. Hospital interviews were with a range of staff involved in the certification process (See Table 1). Of the 12 consultants interviewed 10 were qualified for over ten years, the remaining two consultants were qualified for over five years.

Hospital Staff	Education	Social Services	Parents
(3 Teaching Hospitals 2 District General)			
12 Consultant Ophthalmologists (8 subspecialty paediatric ophthalmologists)	7 QTVI	6 Managers	26 parents with 28 children
3 ECLOs	1 Manager	5 Rehabilitation	22 Severely Sight

		Workers	Impaired, 6 Sight Impaired
1 Optometrist		3 Administrators	7 infants and children with complex needs
5 Administrators		1 social worker	18 diagnosed under age 1 10 certified under age 1
6 Orthoptists			Ethnicity: 26 white, 2 Asian
2 Nurses			12 girls, 16 boys
<b>Total: 29</b>	<b>Total: 8</b>	<b>Total: 15</b>	<b>Total 26</b>

**Table 1: List of Interviewees**

Twenty-seven per cent (n = 7) of parents stated they had an income below £15,000/annum. Two parents (eight per cent) classified themselves as Asian, slightly below England's population of mixed, Asian, Black and Chinese ethnicities which make up twelve per cent of England's population.<sup>(28)</sup>

Specialist education services in seven local authorities associated with the hospitals and representatives from seven social care departments were also interviewed. In one area representatives from different social services and education departments were interviewed resulting in professionals from eight local authority areas being interviewed.

### **Referral processes**



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2  
3 Across England, the typical patient pathway when an infant or child has a VI is a  
4 direct referral from health to education, usually via letter. Once a referral from the  
5 hospital is received by education a QTVI makes initial contact, usually by telephone.  
6  
7 All but one of the areas under analysis referred directly from hospital to education.  
8  
9 In one area under-going a lengthy reorganisation, QTVIs were not alerted when  
10 children were certified and stated 'it's a little bit hit and miss when we find out'.  
11  
12  
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16 (QTVI3)  
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21 Under Special Educational Needs and Disability legislation, an infant or child's  
22 entitlement to specialist educational support is entirely independent of whether or not  
23 they have a CVI. All QTVIs interviewed confirmed children do not need to be certified  
24 or registered in order to receive educational support.  
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32 '(Certification and registration) doesn't open doors [to QTVIs]...we can offer  
33 all the resources and things whether they are registered or not.' (QTVI2)  
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46 All parents interviewed stated the lead professional supporting their infants and  
47 children came from education rather than social care (where adults receive their  
48 support).  
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#### *Parents and ophthalmologists report different experiences*

The interviews found differences in opinions between the experiences of parents seeking support for their VI infants and children and ophthalmologists' stated practice. Parents stated they wanted referrals to education prior to diagnosis but

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3 doctors appeared to wait until they had a firm diagnosis before referring. The offer of  
4  
5 a CVI appeared to trigger ophthalmologists to refer to education services.  
6  
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9 *Parents wait for diagnosis and offer of CVI before being referred*

10  
11  
12 Despite processes outlining that a CVI is not needed for an education referral, two-  
13  
14 thirds of parents (n=18) stated they were not referred to support *until after the CVI*  
15  
16 *was issued* to their infants/children. These parents stated ophthalmologists delayed  
17  
18 or did not mention either certification or referral to education until they had reached a  
19  
20 firm diagnosis.  
21  
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25  
26 '(Ophthalmologists) really didn't do a lot before (certification), that's what I'm  
27  
28 angry about, those years before school, more wasn't done. Now when I look  
29  
30 online and stuff you see all of these nursery schools for VI children and  
31  
32 afternoon sessions and play sessions. There was none of that, I didn't know  
33  
34 about any of that.' (Par14)  
35  
36  
37

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39  
40 One parent of a child diagnosed with idiopathic nystagmus at age nine months  
41  
42 waited until he was three to be certified, by this stage she had referred her child to a  
43  
44 QTVI through her own networks and received no referrals to support or information  
45  
46 about her child's VI from the hospital. In this case, certification was prompted only  
47  
48 when the child participated in a research project and the research staff  
49  
50 recommended it to provide additional support (Par6).  
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3 For some parents, the lack of referral or access to information had a lasting and  
4 significant impact on their lives. One parent was told by a paediatric ophthalmologist  
5 to treat their child eventually certified as sight impaired simply as 'a normal baby'.  
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11  
12 'The doctor at \*\*\* just said to me 'just treat him like a normal baby. Just carry  
13 on exactly like you are'...if they'd certified him and I had had proper advice  
14 they might've said to do as much as you can to stimulate him. She said just  
15 treat him like a normal baby...If he had been certified and I had spoken to a  
16 QTVI earlier and been given more advice.' (Par14)  
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25 Education and social care professionals confirmed what parents had said - they  
26 often encountered children who were not referred to support until the CVI was issued  
27 or a firm diagnosis reached. One QTVI confirmed that some children go without  
28 support because they are not referred as ophthalmologists wait to see if vision  
29 improves. QTVIs stated infants and children with complex needs often presented  
30 late to their services.  
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41 'it's often the more complex needs children that ...we haven't had a referral to  
42 the service for, the education service and that is often because they are very  
43 young.' (QTVI8)  
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#### 50 *Ophthalmologists state referral is offered before certification*

51 Whilst the majority of parents wanted support before certification, all 12  
52 ophthalmologists, three ECLOs and six orthoptists stated they referred infants and  
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3 children to QTVIs and education before they reached a stage where they offered  
4  
5 certification.  
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10 'You don't have to be certified to get access to the VI teaching service. So  
11 we're not depriving them of something by them not being certified...I don't  
12 leap in and certify until I absolutely know where they are going to end up. And  
13 I'm still going to do all the other things that I would do for them, referral for low  
14 vision aids, for to teaching service, specialist optometry and so on. It's on my  
15 list but I wouldn't say I, I personally don't leap in and certify early on.' (Oph3)  
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24 Paediatric ophthalmologists with close relationships with QTVIs and education,  
25 stated they frequently discussed cases with QTVIs.  
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32 'The first thing we tend to do is refer to VI team, even before certification, so  
33 they have a little bit of input from this team before they actually get information  
34 about registration, education team, enhanced service...We rely on them  
35 heavily as well.' (Oph2)  
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43 Other areas had internal systems, working closely with orthoptists to ensure children  
44 were offered support when they needed it.  
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49  
50 'We have a system where the orthoptist would see all those children as well  
51 and would normally make a referral to learning support services but as I say,  
52 we wouldn't certify them until their eye-sight deteriorates to appropriate  
53 standards...We're also going to be referring people who aren't certified, from  
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3 that point of view they are equally going to have access to learning support.'

4  
5 (Oph12)  
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8  
9 *Reasons for differences between parents' and clinicians' experiences*

10 Numerous issues arose suggesting reasons for the dissonance between parents and  
11 ophthalmologists' experiences of referrals and certification. Firstly, vision typically  
12 improves with age and it is standard practice for ophthalmologists to wait months, in  
13 some cases years, to identify a diagnosis.  
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21 'It's not clear cut. Certain conditions where it is, there are certain where it isn't.

22  
23 Some children with delayed visual maturation, where you don't really know  
24 how much their vision will improve or to what level, so some of those it's quite  
25 a waiting game or you're not able to assess the child's vision very accurately.  
26  
27  
28

29  
30 And so you're waiting for more accurate clinical information.' (Orth4)  
31  
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35 The difficulty in measuring visual acuity and VI in infants was mentioned by most  
36 ophthalmologists and many stated they waited to offer certification until they (or  
37 orthoptists) could measure VA or until test results were received.  
38  
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40  
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43  
44 'It can be extremely difficult to measure visual acuity in very young children,  
45 small babies. So what may appear, for example, to be a non-seeing baby at  
46 12 weeks with something like delayed visual maturation may actually turn out  
47 to be a baby with perfectly normal sight in six weeks, or it may be much  
48 longer. I think it's a delayed visual maturation if I think it's a baby with much  
49 more severe visual diagnosis then it's based on that.' (Oph11).  
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3 What appears to be happening is that some ophthalmologists associate both the  
4 offer of certification **and** referral to support with determining a firm diagnosis.  
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10 This issue may be a particular problem in hospitals without paediatric ophthalmology  
11 specialist consultants. Whilst this is a small sample, consultants working in different  
12 Tertiary Centres stated parents often arrived at their hospitals looking for support,  
13  
14 having not been referred during their visit to the first hospital.  
15  
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20  
21 'If you have (ophthalmologists) who do not have specialist training in  
22 paediatric ophthalmology they don't understand the pathways and the needs  
23 of the children and they don't think to refer them to the VI services and they  
24 don't think that a child can use a Low Vision Assessment and they don't think  
25 that actually the parents do actually need help filling in the Disability Living  
26 Allowance form.' (Oph8)  
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36 Ophthalmologists who certified numerous children in a year had more flexible  
37 attitudes to certification and the DH guidance.  
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43 'I tend to be rather flexible with interpreting the guidelines. I don't think visual  
44 acuity is the best way of doing it in children. For instance, children with  
45 nystagmus might have better vision than 6/18 but they obviously have visual  
46 problems in terms of tracking and visual perception. Same with some of the  
47 milder forms of cerebral VI where their visual acuity can be good but they are  
48 confronted with a real world where they are overloaded with visual information  
49 and they really struggle. I tend to adopt a more functional approach to it.  
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3 Based on fact that acuity are guidelines rather than strict legal definitions.'

4  
5 (Oph7)  
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10 Whilst interpreting the DH guidance flexibly can benefit those on the borderlines or  
11 waiting for a diagnosis, it can also mean certification is offered inconsistently.  
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16 Another issue that arose was related to the offer of certification for children with  
17 complex needs. Some health professionals stated they delayed the offer of  
18 certification for these children because their felt their parents already had so much to  
19 deal with and the benefits of certification would not be worthwhile. Some  
20 ophthalmologists stated they believed parents of infants/children with complex needs  
21 might not want to discuss certification but made this assumption without actually  
22 discussing the offer with parents.  
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34 'They've got multiple agency involvement it probably isn't very important to  
35 register that child if they are going blind... many of our children who need that  
36 are multiply handicapped are already getting a lot of support and I think they  
37 feel they just don't want another label'. (Oph6)  
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## 45 **How to ensure early and consistent support**

### 46 *Multi-disciplinary teams*

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48 Ophthalmologists stated working in multi-disciplinary teams reduced possible delays  
49 in certification or referrals for support.  
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3 'Many of our children come from multi-disciplinary teams where we supply  
4  
5 staff to check vision for these children.' (Oph6)  
6  
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8

9  
10 Across the eight local authority areas studied, four areas held joint meetings  
11  
12 between health, education and SS, meetings were usually held once a term or a few  
13  
14 times a year. These joint meetings facilitated relationships, making it easier for  
15  
16 professionals to pick up the phone or send an email when there is a problem - or  
17  
18 before an issue becomes a problem.  
19

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22  
23 'I don't think we could offer a good service if we didn't work together as a  
24  
25 team.' (Orth3)  
26  
27

### 28 *Direct referral pathways*

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30  
31  
32 To encourage prompt and consistent referrals, two areas created referral forms to  
33  
34 directly refer from health to education as children were getting lost in systems and  
35  
36 referrals weren't happening fast enough.  
37  
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40  
41 'We get parents to sign a consent form to say they are happy to share  
42  
43 information so we can liaise quite easily.' (Orth3)  
44  
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47

48 The DH has a recommended pathway for referral prior to certification, using the  
49  
50 Referral of Visual Impairment (RVI). Although designed primarily for use with adults it  
51  
52 can be used with children as well. This referral does not require the patient (adult or  
53  
54 child) to be certified and registered. In interviews the RVI was not mentioned once by  
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ophthalmologists (although they were not directly asked if they used the RVI).

Ophthalmologists referred to QTVIs and social care without the need for a RVI.

### *ECLOS*

Intermediaries such as specialist nurses, Eye Clinic Liaison Officers (ECLOs) and Family Support Unit provided a reliable referral route for parents to education and other services for specialist support. Parents who attended children's hospitals, where most have roles such as ECLOs or Family Support Units, very much valued the information and support they offered.

'When we had hospital appointments, we were up there quite a bit in the first few months... (ECLOs) would sit in on the appointments that we had... the information they first gave us, it was really helpful and it was nice to know someone was... We would've felt really isolated and not had a clue basically. I don't really know what we would've done.' (Par22)

Ophthalmologists stated these intermediary roles could potentially solve many of the problems faced by parents of CYP with VI in providing timely information and support.

'I think ECLOs are one of the things that would really help transform care for children with VI over the years.' (Oph5)

However, even when these personnel were in hospitals, referring to these intermediary roles was not consistent, instead it was a subjective decision made by

ophthalmologists. Parents were very disappointed when children's hospitals/ Centres of Excellence failed to provide support or information through these intermediary roles (as they were not referred). One parent, despite seeing orthoptists, consultants and optometrists at a children's hospital, did not receive the support she expected.

'I was supposed to get a journal<sup>(29)</sup> - from birth up to about five, about certain things you can do with blind children to help them. I never received it and they promised me it.'(Par18)

## DISCUSSION

### Delayed referrals are unnecessary

The referral to specialist support was often unnecessarily delayed in the process of establishing a diagnosis. Even though most childhood visual disorders are present from infancy, our research confirmed there is often a 'prolonged period of uncertainty before the final diagnosis is achieved'.<sup>(13)</sup> Previous research found 21% of parents waited less than a month to have their child's vision impairment diagnosed while 25% waited over a year. They also found 40% of children with multiple disabilities had to wait more than a year to have their vision impairment diagnosed.<sup>(14)</sup>

The purpose of certification is to formally refer a person to social services, however it should not be the only prompt to a referral. While the ophthalmologists who took part in this study were aware of the importance of speedy referral of infants and children to the specialist education service, evidence from parents indicates that this is not consistent across the country. Delays in referring to education may be due to doctors waiting to obtain a firm diagnosis; health staff not understanding the role of

1  
2  
3 the QTVI (particularly ophthalmologists without a paediatric specialism and,  
4 therefore, an understanding that 'education' is not just about the school years); and a  
5 lack of clear referral processes in some areas.  
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10  
11 For parents of infants and children with complex needs, the delays could be longer  
12 as children are not always referred to ophthalmology departments or offered eye  
13 examinations and vision assessment by other health professionals. Vision  
14 impairment in children with complex needs is often under-identified<sup>(30)</sup> and can take  
15 some time to diagnose.<sup>(13)</sup> The number of children with neurodevelopmental  
16 disorders is contributing to the increase in the prevalence of visual impairments,<sup>(31)</sup>  
17 yet diagnosing vision impairment in infants and children with complex needs is more  
18 difficult to and therefore this cohort is more likely to be overlooked.<sup>(31,32)</sup> This  
19 suggests not all eligible infants and children are being certified and that they and  
20 their families may be missing out on important financial and practical support. Early  
21 support is crucial for infants and children with vision impairment and their families, to  
22 support children's cognitive development, communication, social and independence  
23 skills. Referrals to the specialist teacher (QTVI) from the local authority education  
24 advisory service is not dependent upon certification.  
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#### 45 **Refer when support is needed, not when certification is offered**

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48 The compassion shown by ophthalmologists, orthoptists, optometrists and ECLOs  
49 was clearly apparent but this is not enough – these sentiments need to translate into  
50 actions so that infants and children with VI are promptly and consistently referred to  
51 the support they need to secure the best start to their lives. There should be a  
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3 formal mechanism for triggering QTVI and social care support even if there is  
4  
5 uncertainty about diagnosis and prognosis, such as formal referral pathways.<sup>(33)</sup>  
6  
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9  
10 Previous studies found value in infants and children managed by multi-disciplinary  
11  
12 teams 'to ensure comprehensive and integrated intervention'.<sup>(9)</sup> This research  
13  
14 demonstrates the value of multidisciplinary teams as well as intermediaries to ensure  
15  
16 referrals and support are offered to infants and children with VI.  
17  
18

19  
20 A consistent mechanism for triggering educational and social support for children  
21  
22 with visual impairment and their families, even when diagnosis and eventual level of  
23  
24 visual function are uncertain, would improve child development and families'  
25  
26 experience.  
27  
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## 29 30 31 **LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH**

### 32 33 34 **Bias**

35  
36 Overall, the number of participants interviewed in each category was small; as such,  
37  
38 the findings should be considered indicative, however saturation/repetition levels  
39  
40 were reached in all interview groups, suggesting confidence in the findings.<sup>(34)</sup> We  
41  
42 sought to reduce the potential for selection bias by selecting from a broad group of  
43  
44 parents, however all children needed to be certified. We aimed to minimise reporting  
45  
46 bias by defining the research questions at the beginning of the project and the  
47  
48 researcher (TB) was experienced in the topic and with the interview population.<sup>(1)</sup> In  
49  
50 addition, the advisory group provided objective guidance in forming the research  
51  
52 questions and in reviewing the findings.  
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54

### 55 56 57 *Sample*

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3 The original aim of the research was to interview parents from the same areas as the  
4 professionals (similar to the sample researched for the adult research.<sup>(1)</sup> As there are  
5 fewer infants and children certified compared to adults, it was decided to widen the  
6 sample to include all parents of infants and children certified in all parts of England.  
7  
8 As such, it is difficult to provide a snapshot of each area. Despite this limitation, the  
9 research is able to identify key themes arising from each interview cohort.  
10  
11 In addition, other professionals involved in the certification and registration process  
12 were occasionally mentioned by interviewees (e.g. community paediatricians,  
13 support workers delivering portage (home-visiting educational service for pre-school  
14 children with additional support needs and their families)) however they were not  
15 interviewed as the research focused on the key workers providing support and  
16 information to parents and carers of infants/ young people with sight loss.  
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### 31 **CONTRIBUTOR STATEMENT**

32 TB wrote the initial draft. All authors revised the initial draft and subsequent drafts.  
33

34 TB is the guarantor. All authors have full control of the content of the article.  
35  
36  
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### 39 **COMPETING INTERESTS**

40 None.  
41  
42  
43  
44

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47 contributed to the design of the research.  
48  
49  
50

### 51 **DATA SHARING STATEMENT**

52 No additional data are available.  
53  
54

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**COREQ: 32-item checklist**

- 1 Which author/s conducted the interview or focus group? T Boyce
- 2 What were the researcher's credentials? E.g. PhD, MD PhD
- 3 What was their occupation at the time of the study? Research Consultant
- 4 Was the researcher male or female? Female
- 5 What experience or training did the researcher have? PhD, professional experience
- 6 Was a relationship established prior to study commencement? No
- 7 What did the participants know about the researcher? Reasons for doing the research, explained at beginning of interview
- 8 What characteristics were reported about the interviewer/facilitator? Reasons and interests in the research
- 9 What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study? Discourse and content analysis
- 10 How were participants selected? Purposive and snowball
- 11 How were participants approached? Telephone and email
- 12 How many participants were in the study? 78
- 13 How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons? Less than 5 – main reason, could not be reached by telephone in time period
- 14 Where was the data collected? Home
- 15 Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers? No
- 16 What are the important characteristics of the sample? Parents of children with visual impairment, health, social care and education professionals working with children who are visually impaired
- 17 Were questions, prompts, guides provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested? No questions / prompts provided. Pilot tested with 4 participants.
- 18 Were repeat interviews carried out? If yes, how many? No
- 19 Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data? Audio recording
- 20 Were field notes made during and/or after the interview or focus group? No
- 21 What was the duration of the interviews or focus group? Approximately 15 minutes each
- 22 Was data saturation discussed? Yes
- 23 Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or correction? They were asked, none said yes.
- 24 How many data coders coded the data? 1, Boyce
- 25 Did authors provide a description of the coding tree? No
- 26 Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data? Both
- 27 What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data? None
- 28 Did participants provide feedback on the findings? The findings were published as a RNIB publication and they were sent the report
- 29 Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes / findings? Was each quotation identified? e.g. participant number Yes, by participant number
- 30 Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings? Yes, this was the aim of the research
- 31 Were major themes clearly presented in the findings? Yes
- 32 Is there a description of diverse cases or discussion of minor themes? Yes