



LOOK UK webinar: Primary to Secondary: Supporting Families Through Transition Webinar 3rd June 2020

Challenge:

We know that a time of transition can be daunting for VI children and their families in normal circumstances, and now the Covid-19 pandemic adds an additional layer of worry and questions.

Objective:

During this FREE event, we will feedback our key learning points gathered from families who are worried/have questions about their child's transition from primary to secondary this year and will discuss the best strategies and solutions for addressing family concerns.

Introduction:

John - Welcome everyone. This is the inaugural VIEW/LOOK webinar during this unusual time. My name is John Milligan, I am representing VIEW today. LOOK held an event for parents last week that really highlighted a list of concerns that parents felt they wished to share with the sector and so we are here together today to address some of those. The focus today is about transition from Primary to Secondary school.

Elin - Main concerns that came up from the parents' event were; emotional well-being and mental health for their children; social development and worrying about making new friends and the possibility of bullying; and how best to communicate their child's needs effectively to their teachers. The recording of that event, and the recording of this event, will be on the LOOK website in the future; it usually takes us about a week to get these up.

Views expressed during this webinar are those of the individual responsible and are not necessarily shared by members of the Look and/or VIEW team.

Panellists:

Emma McGibbon – I'm a psychologist at Great Ormond Street Hospital, I've spent time working in the developmental vision clinic that you might know. I work with young people with Bardet-Biedl syndrome at the hospital.

Vanessa Browell – I'm a counsellor with the charity Herts Vision loss. Part of my role is to visit schools across Hertfordshire and work with young people aged 6-18, their friends and family.



Katharina Walls – I work as a QTVI in Lancashire. I'm currently working on a document compiling strategies and advice to help schools think through the practical implications for children and young people with a VI returning to school and transitioning to their next school.

Jane Ring – I'm here as a parent-carer. I have a very incredible child who is severely sight impaired and profoundly deaf. She is in mainstream and she is in year 7, so we were kind of negotiating transition, and then we had to stop and she's at home.

Angela Wood – I'm a qualified habilitation specialist, I work in Dorset. I'm also chair of HabilitationVIUK.

Chapter One – Questions and concerns raised in Parent/Carer event.

John - To begin, we have extracted four questions from the parent/carers event last week. First of all, I would like Jane and Vanessa to get the ball rolling and consider this question:

1. What are the concerns of parents/carers going through the transition process of primary to secondary school?

Vanessa – Starting year 7 can be an exciting but also anxious time for both parents and students. It's really common but doesn't make it any less stressful. Preparation is a key in dealing with situations where there are a lot of unknowns. We would like the school to understand your child's needs, we would like them to access the support that is needed. A safe environment helps them to understand that they're not alone and helps adjustment and confusion that they're going through.

Jane – Primary schools can be a place where the child feels safe and accepted. As parents, we only have to deal with one teacher, minimal support staff, and one SENCO. The change feels very daunting for us. Home is often the place where our children melt-down, and we have the added pressure of teaching them life skills and independence in a way that parents of sighted children don't need to. Our fears are huge for our children, letting them go and trusting that other people can support them and help them thrive can be very difficult. We long for them to be independent, but it is a very big thing to negotiate. We need to prepare for the change, understand the new routines, be confident that the handover is being well managed, and that our children won't be overwhelmed by the new school. Silence, and not being included in the conversation is the most difficult thing to manage. We want to be confident for our child, and support them to make the change, but we need to know what the plans are. The social side of school life, and fears of bullying and isolation are often our biggest concerns, with no easy answers. We want our children to be happy and feel accepted, more than getting good grades. Though, them achieving their full potential is also important. I know that you must see lots of anxious parents, but the best way to ease the parents is to make sure you include us and that we are beside you in all the work you do. That installs confidence in us and our children. My daughter's transition started really well; it was later on down the line that things started unravelling.

2. How do we address the emotional needs and well-being of students going through this transition?



Vanessa – It's important to include the student when you go to look around the school. Sit down with new teachers and allow the child to ask them questions. Also, let the school listen to the child's concerns. Write down the questions that you want the school to know before you go so you don't forget any. Give the child extra time to look around, go to the new school as much as possible. Ask the child questions.

Emma – You should know the young person well, try to put yourself in their shoes in the secondary school setting. Discuss with them any worries they have and try to get this all out in the open. Help focus the parents on the things they can control, rather than focussing on the things that they can do. Think about how the child might show how they are feeling; changes in eating, sleeping, behaviour etc. Provide reassurance and encourage parents to show their confidence in their child and that you will all be working hard to make sure everything is being done to make the transition as smooth as possible. Children feel better when they feel their parents and other people are in control of the situation so encourage the use of calm, reassuring tones. Make sure the young person feels included from the beginning, put support in place from the start. Whether that is having an adult mentor at the school from the start who can prompt them and ask about how different areas are going. They might benefit from discussing different scenarios that occur within social groups and this can help them open up. The buddy system is used with varying success, this can be really helpful to make sure that somebody feels included. Make sure unstructured times, such as break and lunch and after school, are accessible and it is best to create plans for these times and have accessible activities. Being in contact with the school and getting any necessary changes needed in place early is a good idea.

3. What sort of mobility support can parents expect during social distancing?

Angela – Habilitation VIUK has published a guidance paper and this is there to be part of your own risk assessments that you will be putting together for each of the young people that you are working with. It really homes in on some very specific issues and is based on the chief medical officer's advice about covid. Not only have we got students moving from primary to secondary with all the usual anxieties that they would have in any given year, we also have covid to consider as well. There are lots of strategies in the paper for habilitation and mobility officers. The risk assessments are part of the wider transition document that is used for communication between the schools, sensory services and all the other professionals involved in these areas. This should also be shared with the parents as well to keep clear levels of communication. With covid, it is going to be about a real partnership between all these people and everybody talking to each other and all having access to being able to talk to each other. This is very important when looking at organising environmental audits, we have to think about getting the student used to the new setting and doing route familiarisation, and think about how that's going to look, what the responsibilities of everybody are, including the habilitation specialist and the young person. There is a lot around hand hygiene and how we are going to work. We have to make sure that each and every student understands the new guidance and we should check if the student understands all aspects, e.g. do they know how far 2 m is? Are they able to gauge that distance? There are going to be situations where we will have to sighted guide, so we need to make sure everybody feels safe. Lots of communication needs to take place, the transition document is very important.



Katarina – We need to encourage the young person to have opportunities to be independent. When we do the environmental audit, we can already start to do that. We have to talk to schools about whether they are going to use one classroom per class rather than changing classrooms in this situation. If they are just using one classroom, which one is it? Can we have an influence on which one they are going to use? One that is close to other places where the student needs to go can allow them to be introduced to a small area of the school and become confident in that space before other areas are added. It's also really important to think about the classroom in relation to where things are going to be stored. Will there be storage space in the one classroom they are going to use? We need to think about one-way systems in the corridors. A lot of schools, if they don't already use one, are going to introduce one-way systems. If the child is right-handed, could we have a right-handed system so they can use their right hand to guide them? After a visit, I would ask for a floor plan of the school so you can go through the plan over and over again with parents and professionals so they can build a better mental map.

4. What can we do to ensure we are implementing the guidance and EHCP in new settings?

Angela – It's important that whatever we do, we take our time and we plan. We want a positive transition and it might take a little bit longer to achieve what we want to achieve, but as we work through the transition plan, it needs to be positive steps every way through it. So, if it takes longer, then that's what has to happen. I think it's important to take it one step at a time and to be very clear throughout. Some of the areas in the education healthcare plan may not be covered as quickly as others. When schools are having to consider putting Braille on walls or suitable marking on floors, this may take some time to achieve. It is essential for children with SEN to be able to go back to school and that they are all welcomed back. However, they may all go back at staggered times as it is going to take a little bit longer for schools and sensory services to put in the necessary steps for the student to go back. Teacher training days are needing to be changed this year and many will either be run in small groups where it is possible to social distance, or in a virtual setting. For habilitation officers, many are planning to visit schools and to carry out the environmental audits. While we are in schools, we are doing some advisory work on how to support the young person with sighted guide, and we can demonstrate that at a distance. Within our guidance, we are not saying that we won't be sighted guiding, because there will be times when that is required. But, we have put in place strategies to maintain hand hygiene. If we aren't able to verbally direct a student, we will be encouraging staff to sighted guide. Alongside that, we would look at how they sighted guide. Part of the government guidance is that if you are going to sneeze but don't have a tissue, then you use your elbow. However, that is the key spot used for sighted guiding so we have looked into that and put strategies in place to help. There are alternatives that we can look at and slight alterations that can be made. It is important that these changes are made clear and transparent and that they are consistent among all the staff to reduce confusion.

Katharina – I think habilitation is one of the main areas where you have to think creatively and where we worry about how we can implement that. The other area is the one-to-one support, some of our children have lots of support and we have to look at how we can help schools to still offer this support with the social distancing rules. Some services have got their own teaching assistant so they can continue to offer support which is ideal. Other services don't have that. Either way, planning is key to the success of the transition.



Identifying one or two assistants who are going to be working with the young person during the transition, and then working with them and the young person to get them all used to the technology and any modifications. Also to identify who to liaise with for these modifications. All of this needs to be planned quite well in advance so people feel enabled and empowered when they go back. Staff training is crucial and we have to work out how to do that in small groups or online, but I think that additionally to the normal training that we do, we have to make sure that teachers know that somethings might take longer due to the student not being able to have as much support around them at this time. The teacher may need to give a bit of extra time which they don't often do in secondary schools. The teacher needs to understand that if the student takes their equipment themselves or switches between equipment, that that takes time. So, staff training is really important. We also need to think about practical things. We won't be able to social distance all of the time so we need to think about where our wipes and hand gel can be stored so they are accessible all the time. If the child's computer crashes or something isn't working, we need the TA to be there but they will have to be able to wipe down the equipment before and after they touch it. We need to identify who is responsible for making sure these things are available at all times. Lastly, while we need to encourage independence, I think it is also really important to reassure the student that support is available and that with the right precautions, such as wiping equipment and wearing a mask, they can have help. This is important for them to know so that they don't feel overwhelmed or that they suddenly have to do everything on their own.

Chapter Two – Issues raised during webinar and Solutions:

- 1. Discuss the importance of the QTVI and habilitation team being advocates for the young person so that the family feel like they have a team alongside them and that there is a constant in this very fluid environment that we are in at the moment.**

Emma – It is important for the young person to have someone who they have a good relationship with at the school. This means that if things do crop up, they can be identified early on and that they have somebody that they feel they can speak to. As children become young adults, they will want to gain that independence from their parents and the skill of self-advocacy, and those independence skills are key parts of that. So, as parents moving from the primary to the secondary setting can feel a bit more distant and a bit more worried about that. Encouraging those positive relationships at school with staff so their worries can be addressed, and any worries are identified to them is helpful. Bullying is a concern, again the young person having a trusted adult at the school will hopefully be useful as they should already know how the young person is interacting with their peers and should be able to talk through with them any disagreements that occur within a friendship group. Secondary schools are very familiar with those types of scenarios.

Vanessa – To keep communication up with school is important. Encourage the child with the friendship group, help support the child walk to school if possible, with a friend they have made. Support friendships outside of school as well where you can.

Jane – Having just gone through this with my daughter, I have clear, good relationships with our QTVI and habilitation. I tried really hard to have a good relationship with the school. It



was no one's fault, but the SENCO changed over the summer. I think everything got a lot easier once we realised that there were going to be teething problems. After the first term, the staff said, okay, we will meet again in six weeks and I think we needed that. It was a big team and there were lots of things to sort out. My daughter went in wanting her independence and not really wanting any support anymore, but that caused problems because actually, because of her deafness as well, social relationships are even trickier. In some ways provision was dropped without my in-put. The parents do know their child best but she was really angry and she wanted to be the same as everyone else but was up against loads of things. I wish we had had a clear mentor for her from the start from the school because she didn't want to talk to her one-to-ones, which is fair enough. She also didn't want to talk to me which is fair enough as she is trying to be who she is. But, if that support had been identified earlier, it would've made such a difference. The tutor had other disruptive children and there were other reasons why it was difficult for them to support my daughter fully. In the end, I set up a squishy system at home, so when she came home, if she had had a bad day, she would put the lemon squishy in the jar. This tells me that she can't talk about it, but I know things are tough. If she had a good day, that we could celebrate, she would put a cake squishy in. I think things like that, knowing that it's a big chance so the children you support might not know how to express it, but there is a chance to catch it and to negotiate it. Meetings are still possible, so organising meetings with families and people involved will be really key.

2. Someone in the chat has mentioned ramble tags. These have been suggested as a method to reduce the contact between staff and children in their settings. What are the pros and cons?

Angela - It's certainly a product that people may have used. The thing around using anything on your body is that you've got to put it on; that means you've got to touch it. So, there's not really much difference between that and putting on your coat, your jacket, your cardigan, your jumper. It's a touch contact point. So, I think it's a bit like the face masks, they're not going to protect you against covid, and the ramble tag won't either because you've got to touch it; you've got to put it on, you've got to take it off, you've also got to make sure you wash it regularly because it's a contact point. You might find that you can just save your money and wash your clothes each day, take a spare cardigan or a spare jumper. Also think about how many students you're going to be working with. We know that government advice is saying for class teachers to remain teaching one class of students to reduce the number of teachers teaching any group at any time. It would be the same with sighted guiding and teaching our students, we have to think about how many we are going to be teaching and how many we're going to be sighted guiding at any given day. The plans that you need to put in place, and the government advice, is hand hygiene which works much better than anything else. We know that covid stays on clothing. We know we can reduce that by washing hands and using hand hygiene. Think about how you're going to sighted guide, think about other alternatives such as trailing techniques, verbal instructions, keeping to the side of the student and avoiding being face-to-face. Reduce the amount of time you're going to be guiding and working with a student at any given time. Think about, if you can, getting outside to get some fresh air and ventilation. I think those strategies are probably going to work better than trying to introduce something else that doesn't actually make the problem any more difficult or easier. With face masks, you've got to touch your face to put the face mask on, so that means that you've got to wash your face at the contact point when you take



the mask off. So, if you hadn't put the mask on in the first place, you wouldn't have to wash your face. Sometimes it's kind of trying to solve a problem that it isn't going to, because you're creating a problem by introducing something else that is unnecessary. That's not in the habilitation UK guidance because you're creating another problem by trying to solve a problem.

3. Is there a way to manage parent anxieties during this time?

Emma – Firstly, anxiety isn't a bad thing that we need to get rid of; anxiety is very useful, it's adaptive, it's how we have survived for so many years. Anxiety helps us to focus on the problems that we need to fix when we are stressed. Our brains want us to be able to predict and look at worst case scenarios so that we can prepare ourselves and protect ourselves as well. As long as there are situations that we can problem solve, it's a really useful emotion to have. It's not so useful when there isn't a solution, but it is okay to be anxious. Everyone is feeling more anxious now with the covid situation and the uncertainty that goes along with it. As much as possible, we want to protect our young people from that anxiety. Advise the parents to look after their own mental health. If they know that they are feeling very anxious, encourage them to take themselves away from the child for a bit. We can have a lot of worrying thoughts at the moment and those thoughts can end up being catastrophic. Ask the parent to question their own thoughts that they're having; are they being realistic about their worries. If their friend was in the same situation, what would they say to them? You can also use these techniques with the young person if they are feeling anxious. A young person may ask repetitive questions about an event, such as the transition to secondary school, often it is not about gaining the information, but about conveying that they are feeling anxious about the event itself. Answering again and again can be unhelpful, instead it might be best to distract onto a different activity. It might be useful to set up a schedule where they think about the transition once a day at a set time and try to limit the amount of time that you are focusing on that anxiety and that worry. This is also an exciting time, and there are things to be positive about, so address those worries, let the young person know that you are aware of those and helping to sort them out, but also balance that out with all the fun things they are going to be doing and learning at secondary school.

Jane – I am in regular contact with my QTVI, I have a good team of people around me that I can contact and say 'this has happened, can we talk about it' and by the time we have finished that phone call, I have a list of solutions that I know I'm part of and I can go to my daughter and say 'this is what we're dealing with today'. With LOOK we have had some chats with her mentor, and she has been able to chat some more about her fears of going back to school in year 8 and we are finding solutions. It is such a bonus to have you guys in the background. I know a lot of parents who are feeling really anxious, it is understandable, so them knowing that it is understandable and that they're not alone is so important.

John – It's being pointed out that LOOK UK, along with York College, have set up a service of 6 free sessions for counselling. All available on the LOOK website. Also, Jane offers a parent/carers support group every other Friday night. It is free and is just parents offering support and solutions in this time.

Katharina – It is helpful for the young person and the families to create a transition booklet together. Usually a child during this term would have transition visits and group visits with other children and they would meet other children and meet their teachers, all of this won't



be happening so it might be helpful to have a booklet where we can have pictures of their tutor or some key staff that they will be meeting. Pictures of the classrooms, floor plans, uniforms, all the things that can be exciting and can be addressed in that. In that you can also voice your own questions and worries. This allows you to address the worries, how big is the worry, who might be able to help? If I have a problem, what would I do? This is all stuff that can be shared with key staff, and it is something helpful and productive that you can be doing now. Then, after the first term, you can look at it again. What has happened? What has not happened? Which concerns have been solved? Which concerns have been added? This can then be carried over all the way through with constant updates. The transition is an ongoing process, not just relevant to the first term. We are working on one at the moment which we are happy to share as an example.

Emma – Parents who have children with VI have a lot of experiences that they can draw on from these situations. I just want to emphasise that the parents must remember that they have all these experiences and skills as a result. A lot of people have had to face a lot of challenges and overcome a lot of frustrations, managing worry and uncertainty about children's vision, adapting their routines and activities to overcome all the barriers that they will have faced, and recovering from situations and learning from experiences. It's important not to forget these skills.

4. Discuss travelling and having different styles of working. Are you getting back into settings? Or is it all remote?

Angela – At the moment, we have a mixed picture. Some schools are happy to do virtual meetings, others are allowing us in to do environmental audits. We are planning those for after school or when it is very quiet, to go in. There is government guidance that visitors coming into a school may have some need for PPE. Some schools may ask you to wear a mask, but I haven't had that yet. We are all using quiet times to carry out audits or take students in for route familiarisations. Some habilitation staff are deferring the route familiarisations until the Summer break when the school is very quiet. That is when we can really focus on small areas and building up their route map of the school areas. A concern that came up in the parents' event last week was PE. That is a joint response between the QTVI and the habilitation specialist, where we're looking at teaching practices as well for PE. The increasing level of skills that are required for some areas of the curriculum are challenging for VI students. Here in Dorset we are doing work on inclusive PE and we would be more than happy to share this information with other services. This is a joint piece of work looking at building on the blocks developed when the child was in Primary school and then looking at how we implement the teaching information to teachers, so they can feel confident in teaching inclusive PE.

5. What advice do you have for using hand-under-hand approaches and tactile learning during covid restrictions?

Katharina – There will be situations where you can't do whilst social distancing. We can do only so much support verbally, at a distance. Where we can't work at a distance, we have to take precautions; avoid face-to-face interactions, have regular hand washing. We also have to decide if it is better for that child to be in school, or would it be better for them to stay



home and come back at a later time? This has to be assessed on an individual basis with all staff and the family involved in that decision.

Chapter Three – Closing Top Tips:

Katharina – 1) filling in the transition booklet with the QTVI and parents can be very helpful, and to keep this booklet as a working document throughout the first year.

2) Start gathering information about resources you need now, so that there is enough time for the school to prepare them in the required format before term starts.

3) Get as much information from school as possible, e.g. school plan, classrooms, and go through it with the young person so they become familiar with it and can talk about any worries or questions they have.

Angela – 1) Communication is absolutely key, please ensure the student is at the heart of everything you do and that their voice is heard.

2) It is important that we follow the covid guidelines, but you can do it in a fun way. Make sure the student knows how to wash their hands properly and that they are taking responsibility. They have a part to play in this, and it is really important that they take their responsibility seriously, but we can demonstrate it in a fun way as well to ease some of their anxiety.

3) Please read the risk assessment guidance and make sure that every child has a risk assessment. That will inform what their transition will look like, when they will go back to school, and hopefully help them have a smooth transition.

Emma – 1) Remember that starting secondary school is going to be exciting, but also quite tiring. Make sure the young person is getting regular meals, exercise, and most importantly sleep. Make sure they have ways to relax that they like to.

2) Remember to give praise to the young person for the efforts they are showing and the skills they are developing. Recognise their characteristics and encourage their parents to do the same.

Jane – 1) The child's voice and the parent/carers voice should be included in all the decision making. The best thing my daughter did last year to help her prepare, was a video because she had things that she really wanted the school to understand before she started there. This definitely helped her and gave her confidence when she started. Remote meetings are still possible where practical arrangements like timetable, tutor group, arrangements for PE, start and end of the day, residentials and trips are agreed.

2) Arrange new technology in advance, my daughter started using a new Braille note just before term started and this was not ideal.

3) Establish key contact with the new school and agree how the parent carer can communicate any concerns within agreed boundaries. Also, acknowledge the fear and anxiety parent carers have and suggest practical things they can do with their children to help prepare (planning and practicing routes to school, new routine in morning etc).



Vanessa – Try to keep anxiety levels under control. It can be a stressful time for parents/carers, but their anxiety may affect the young person, so encourage them to manage this and to talk through issues with the young person.

Chapter Four – Closing Comments:

Angela – Family fund is a scheme to be aware of. This provides money for equipment the child needs working from home during covid. The family can apply directly to the scheme.

Katharina – I think us as QTVIs have to make sure schools are aware that VI children are not able to social distance, so it is more the responsibility of the other children to maintain the social distancing.

Jane – Make sure the child shares what they want to with the school, I think this makes a real difference to their confidence.

Vanessa – I have had students who have found the LOOK mentoring project really useful and I have referred a few students to this.

Chapter Five - Resources:

Name of Resource	Web Link	Source
Recording of Parents' event: Supporting your VI child through transition from primary to secondary	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_ssSX1nPdQ	LOOK
LOOK events and services	https://www.look-uk.org/meet-up/	
Audio recording of event for professionals 3.6.20	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CN9bbORhL1Y	
Transition Booklet	https://viewweb.org.uk/transitionbook/	VIEW
Coronavirus Information for Education Professionals	https://viewweb.org.uk/coronavirus/	
Coronavirus (Covid-19): Habilitation and Mobility Risk Assessment Guidance	https://habilitationviuk.org.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-habilitation-mobility-risk-assessment-guidance/	Habilitation VI UK



Transition Reflections from a parent	https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oYDM5ZripCdhwyhJaiNZXCw6Qwv3jG0X/view?usp=sharing	Jane Ring (parent/carer)
Chloe's Video	https://vimeo.com/357208118	Family Fund
Disability Grants - Your guide to grants for the disabled	https://www.disability-grants.org/	

Chapter Six – Panellists' Contact Details:

Name	Role	Email
Angela Wood	Chair of HAB VI UK	chair@habilitationviuk.org
Jane Ring	Parent/Carer	janering32@gmail.com
John Rous-Milligan	Team Leader, Virtual School Sensory Support	john.milligan@norfolk.gov.uk
Katharina Walls	QTVI and Executive VIEW member	Katharina.Walls@lancashire.gov.uk
Vanessa Browell	Ears for Eyes Counsellor, Herts Vision Loss	earsforeyes@hertsvisionloss.org.uk