

Taking action to end the eye care crisis



Cutting waiting times and
preventing sight loss in England

(Over **611,000**
reasons to act now)

We call on the next government and all health policymakers to ensure patients receive the eye care they need at the right time and the right place, no matter where they live.

Over 611,000 people are on NHS waiting lists to begin treatment for ophthalmology in England, making ophthalmology one of the largest contributors to the NHS backlog - and this number is only set to grow with an ageing population.

Delays to treatment can have devastating consequences for individuals, families, communities, and the nation. Patients on long waiting lists are losing their sight unnecessarily.

Optometrists are eye health professionals with the necessary clinical skills to provide more NHS services than they are currently commissioned to do. They are ready to deliver safe and timely eye care to all patients closer to home. Those working in primary care (on the high street) can help reduce the reliance on local GPs, cut NHS waiting times and enable more people to live independently.

We can end the eye care crisis

We are calling on all political parties and health policymakers to support and strengthen eye care services by establishing optometrists as the first port of call for anyone with an eye care issue – saving millions of unnecessary GP appointments a year.

We must unleash the potential of optometry to cut NHS waiting times and improve patient outcomes by:

- (1)** Enabling optometrists to provide more care to patients closer to home.
- (2)** Prioritising a better-connected NHS and unlocking the potential of new technologies.
- (3)** Supporting the optometry workforce to develop specialised skills.

(No child or adult in England should experience avoidable sight loss due to delays in accessing specialist care)

(1) Enabling optometrists to provide more care to patients closer to home

Health services must recognise and utilise the full skills of optometrists. They must establish optometrists as first contact practitioners for eye care, in addition to their vital sight testing and eye examination services.

There are over 14,000 registered optometrists in England, and they all have the core skills to provide additional services within primary care. However, the commissioning of these services is patchy across England and often non-existent. Many optometrists have additional higher qualifications, including the ability to prescribe medications, and can also manage patients with more complex needs. However, our health system in England is not consistently utilising their skills to their full potential.

Optometrists should be established as the first point of contact for patients with an eye concern, instead of their GP. This, in addition to expanding the scope of eye care delivered in the community across England, will help tackle the current postcode lottery and reduce health inequalities. This will ensure patients can receive the right care they need quicker, and will free up NHS hospital eye care teams to treat patients in need of more complex or urgent care.

(2) Prioritising a better-connected NHS and unlocking the potential of new technologies

Digital connectivity must be improved to speed up diagnosis and treatments. More eye research funding is needed to develop new diagnostics and treatments in the future.

Many NHS-funded high street optometrists do not have access to the NHS.net portal, cannot access electronic patient records and cannot digitally refer to their local hospital eye service. Poor digital connectivity prevents optometrists and ophthalmologists from working better together and improving patient's outcomes. Many digital images (including eye scans) cannot be shared between optical practices and the hospital, meaning that patients must have the same images taken again at the hospital after referral. This lengthens delays in diagnosis and treatment, and increases unnecessary costs for the NHS. There is also a need to accelerate research to reduce preventable sight loss, and find the next generation of diagnostics and innovative treatments.

Upgrading IT infrastructure and improving digital connectivity will lead to more effective communication between healthcare professionals. The adoption of digital image sharing standards by all device manufacturers will support better image sharing. This will ensure more efficient patient referrals, and reduce delays in diagnosis and treatment. Supporting emerging digital technologies and innovation will help overcome the significant public health and social care challenges with an ageing population.

(3) Supporting the optometry workforce to develop specialised skills

Sustainable eye care workforce planning must be backed by investment in education and training to ensure we have the eye care capacity patients need, when and where they need it.

With continued pressures on NHS hospital eye services, it is more important than ever to use and develop the skills of the optometry workforce. Optometrists who have Independent Prescribing (IP) and Higher Qualifications can offer a wider range of specialist eye care services and treatments for managing more patients closer to home. In order to meet the growing demand for accessible and timely care to treat more complex sight-threatening conditions, we need more optometrists with IP and/or Higher Qualifications in specialist areas of practice (such as glaucoma and medical retina). The biggest barrier in delivering this objective is access to clinical learning placements.

A national improved approach to removing the bottlenecks in clinical placement opportunities is needed so that we can increase specialist skills in the optometrist workforce and help relieve pressure on NHS hospital eye services.

The eye care crisis in numbers



Today, **250 people start to lose their sight every day in the UK** – this is one person every six minutes. By 2050, it is estimated that **500 people per day will lose their sight.**



Over 1.8 million people are currently living with sight loss in England alone. This is projected to reach over **2.2 million by 2032.**



Sight loss costs the UK economy **£25 billion a year.**

These costs are expected to rise to **£33.5 billion a year in the next 25 years.**



Reducing the prevalence of eye conditions by **1% year** could save the UK economy **£3 billion** by the end of the decade. By 2050, these **savings are expected to be £9.5 billion.**

For more information and how to get involved, contact us at

policy@college-optometrists.org

or visit

www.college-optometrists.org/viewpoint

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