

The Eyes Have It is a partnership of Macular Society, Fight for Sight / Vision Foundation, RNIB, Association of Optometrists, The Royal College of Ophthalmologists and Roche Products Ltd. Roche has funded the activities of the partnership.



## Sight loss in England

Submission to Lord Darzi Open Consultation for the Independent investigation of NHS performance

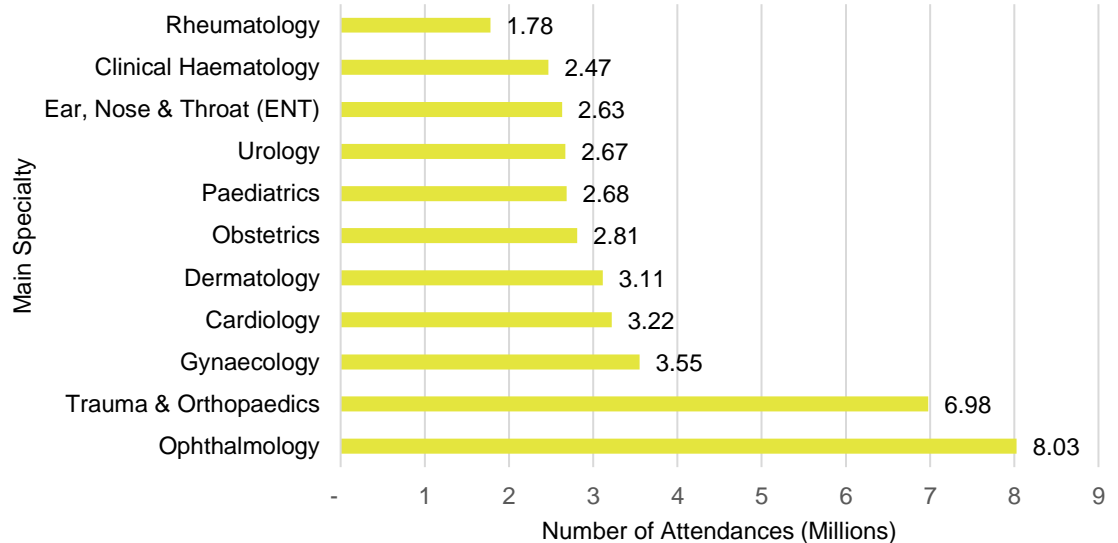
August 2024

# Prevalence of sight loss



- An estimated 2.2 million people in the UK are affected by sight loss or visual impairment, with **ophthalmology representing the busiest outpatient speciality in the NHS.** <sup>1,3</sup>
- Due to the UK's ageing population, it is estimated that the number of people living with sight loss will grow to 3.5 million by 2050.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2022/23 in England alone, there were 8,028,671 outpatient appointments for ophthalmology, more than any other specialty and equivalent to around 8% of the total number of appointments across the NHS. <sup>3</sup>
- As of 2017, sight loss was estimated to cost the UK approximately £25.2 billion every year — a figure expected to rise with the ageing population and the increasing prevalence of eye conditions<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1: Outpatient Activity: Attendance by main speciality (2022/23)



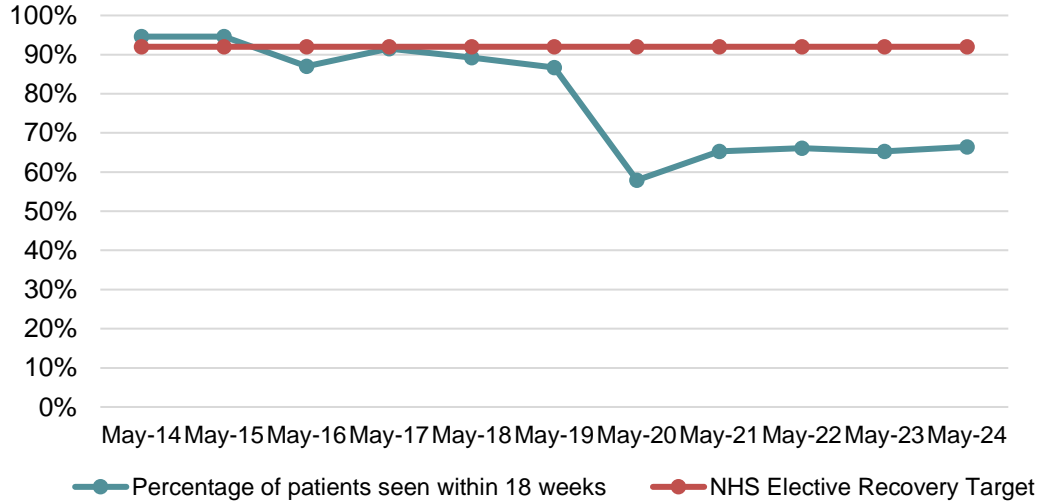
Source: NHS England. Hospital Outpatient Activity 2022-23

1. RNIB. Sight Loss Data Tool Version 5.2. 2023. Available from: <https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/health-social-care-education-professionals/knowledge-and-research-hub/sight-loss-data-tool/> [Accessed August 2024]
2. Fight for Sight. Time to Focus. 2020. Available from: <https://www.fightforsight.org.uk/media/3302/time-to-focus-report.pdf> [Accessed August 2024]
3. NHS England. Hospital Outpatient Activity 2022-23. Available from: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/hospital-outpatient-activity/2022-23> [Accessed August 2024]

# Waiting times in ophthalmology



Figure 2: Percentage of ophthalmology patients who received elective treatment within 18 weeks of referral since May 2014<sup>1</sup>



Source: NHS England. Consultant-led Referral to Treatment Waiting Times Data

- Due to the increasing burden of sight loss, there are now significant waiting lists in ophthalmology, with backlogs made worse by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- As of May 2024, **613,435** people were waiting to be seen for ophthalmology treatment, and only **66.4% of ophthalmology patients had been seen within 18-weeks**, far below NHS England's **elective recovery target of 92%**.
- For many people with suspected sight loss or visual impairment, timely referral and treatment is vital to help prevent further deterioration. For example, it is recommended that those with suspected age-related macular degeneration - the leading cause of blindness in the UK- receive treatment within 2 weeks of referral. Despite this, **89%** of ophthalmology patients had been waiting more than 2 weeks.<sup>1</sup>
- Last year, Freedom of Information (FOI) requests revealed that 551 reports were filed by NHS clinicians in relation to patients' losing their sight due to delayed appointments since 2019. 219 of these resulted in "moderate or severe harm".<sup>2</sup>

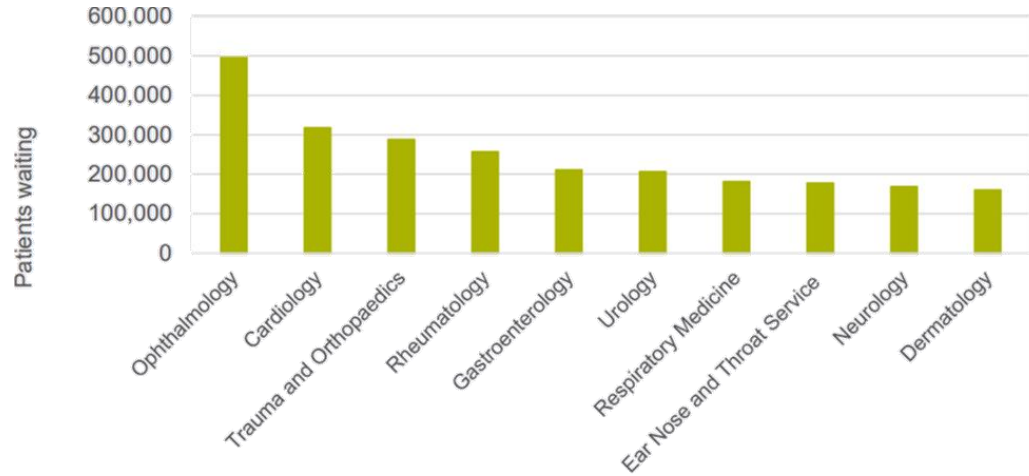
1. NHS England. Consultant-led Referral to Treatment Waiting Times Data. Available from : <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/rtt-waiting-times/> [Accessed August 2024]  
2. Association of Optometrists. NHS patient backlogs are leading to life-changing sight loss, FOI request reveals. Available from: <https://www.aop.org.uk/our-voice/media-centre/press-releases/2023/03/21/nhs-patient-backlogs-are-leading-to-life-changing-sight-loss-foi-request-reveals> [Accessed August 2024]

# The 'hidden' waiting list



- Analysis published by *Reform* provides an overview of the top ten treatment functions with the largest number of people waiting for follow up appointments in 2023, based on data received from Freedom of Information requests from acute trusts in England.
- **Ophthalmology was found to have the highest average number of people waiting for a follow-up appointment per trust.** The analysis also indicated that the sector has had consecutively high follow-up waitlists since 2019.<sup>1</sup>
- Delays in follow-up care in ophthalmology can have devastating consequences. In 2017, the Royal College of Ophthalmologists found that **patients were developing permanent and severe visual sight loss due to health service-initiated delays.**<sup>2</sup>
- Data also suggests that **permanent harm** from avoidable visual loss is **around 9 times more likely in follow-up patients** than in new patients.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 3: Top ten treatment functions with the largest follow-up backlog in 2023



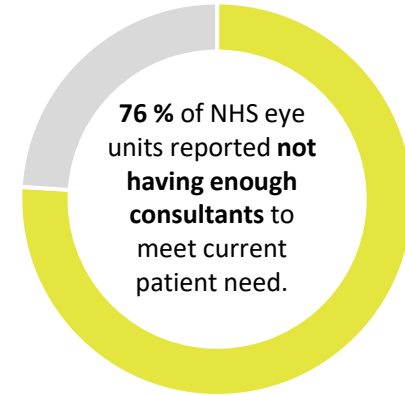
Source: Reform. The hidden waiting list: the growing follow-up backlog

1. Reform. The hidden waiting list: the growing follow-up backlog. Available here: <https://reform.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Reform-The-Hidden-Waitlist-Embargoed.pdf> (Accessed August 2024)  
2. Royal College of Ophthalmologists. BOSU report shows patients losing sight to follow-up appointment delays. Available from: <https://www.rcophth.ac.uk/news-views/bosu-report-losing-sight-delays/> [Accessed August 2024]

# Eye care workforce



- Increasing demand in ophthalmology is currently outstripping capacity; **over three quarters (76 %)** of NHS eye units have reported they **do not have enough consultants** to meet current patient need.<sup>1</sup>
- The Royal College of Ophthalmologists' latest workforce census found that **NHS ophthalmology units are facing significant recruitment and retention challenges:**<sup>1</sup>
  - over half of NHS ophthalmology units (52%) have found it more difficult to fill consultant and specialty and associate specialist doctor vacancies over the last 12 months;
  - a quarter of consultants (25%) plan to leave the ophthalmology workforce over the next five years.
- As of April 2024, there were approximately 1476 consultant ophthalmologists registered in England, equivalent to around 2.6 per 100,000 people.<sup>2</sup> This is far lower than comparator European countries such as France (9.2 per 100,000), Germany (9.1 per 100,000).<sup>3</sup>
- By comparison, there are over 17,500 optometrists registered in the UK, carrying out over millions of sight tests each year.<sup>4</sup> Making better use of the optometry workforce provides an opportunity to tackle the capacity crisis in eye care, improve eye health and prevent avoidable sight loss. Over 3000 high street opticians have access to OCT retinal scanning technology.<sup>5</sup>



1. Royal College of Ophthalmologists. Facing workforce shortages and backlogs in the aftermath of COVID-19: the 2022 census of the ophthalmology consultant trainee and SAS workforce. 2023. Available from: <https://www.rcophth.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2022-Ophthalmology-census-Facing-workforce-shortages-and-backlogs-in-the-aftermath-of-COVID-19.pdf> [Accessed August 2024]

2. NHS England. NHS Workforce Statistics- April 2024. Available from: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-workforce-statistics/april-2024>. [Accessed August 2024]

3. Resnikoff et al. Estimated number of ophthalmologists worldwide (International Council of Ophthalmology update): will we meet the needs? Supplementary material *British Journal of Ophthalmology* 2020;104:588-592. Available from <https://bj.o.bmj.com/content/104/4/588> [Accessed August 2024]

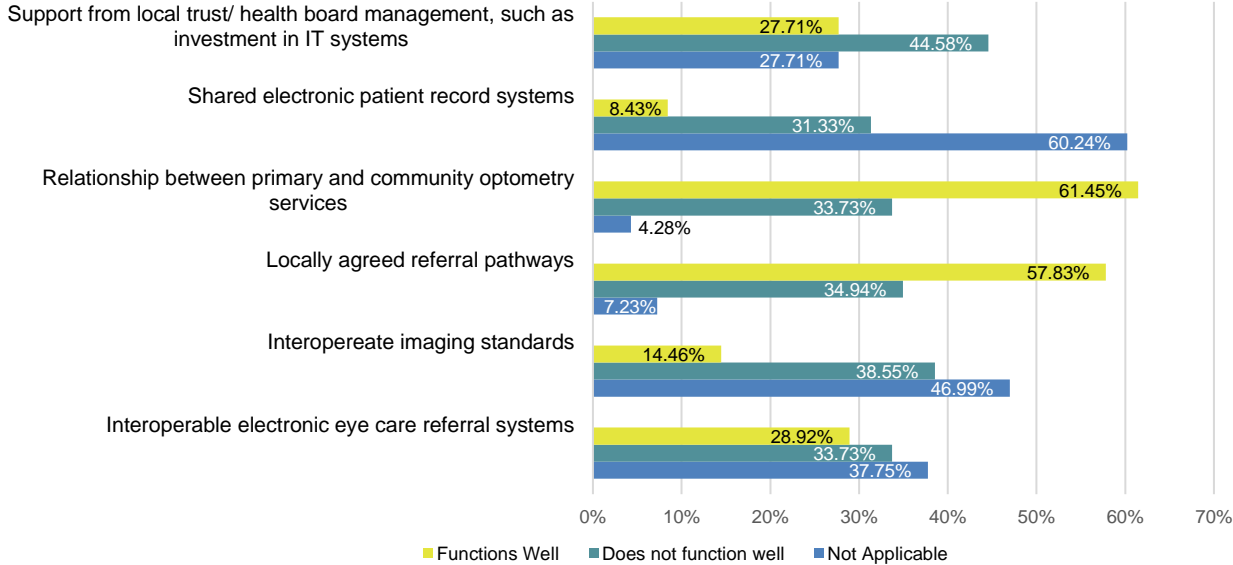
4. Association of Optometrists. Primary care optometry. Available from: <https://www.aop.org.uk/our-voice/policy/visionary-change-in-eye-health/primary-care-optometry>. [Accessed August 2024]

5. Association of Optometrists. Community diagnostic hubs and connectivity. Available from: <https://www.aop.org.uk/our-voice/policy/position-statements/2023/10/05/community-diagnostic-hubs-and-connectivity>. Accessed August 2024.

# Pathway challenges



Figure 4: How do the following enablers of integrated care function in your ophthalmology department?



Source: The Royal College of Ophthalmologists. Summary of 2024 clinical leads survey.

- A lack of connectivity between primary and secondary care in ophthalmology is having a significant impact on sector performance.
- **Poor IT connectivity** and digital clinical image interoperability is causing significant inefficiencies in the patient pathway, creating barriers to sharing data such as images and patient information, resulting in unnecessary referrals and patients not receiving the right care at the right time.
- A recent survey of ophthalmology clinical leads in NHS departments in the UK found that **less than 10% felt** that shared electronic patient record systems functioned well, while almost **two fifths (39%)** said that **interoperate imaging standards did not function well**.<sup>1</sup>
- Another key challenge for people living with sight loss is the backlog of “missing” Certificates of Vision impairment (CVIs), which are essential for blind and visually impaired people to get the support they need. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant decline in the number of CVIs being issued and there has since been no sign of volumes being compensated for post-pandemic, despite hospital eye care services returning to pre-covid levels.<sup>2</sup>

1. The Royal College of Ophthalmologists. Summary of 2024 clinical leads survey. Available from: <https://www.rcophth.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Summary-of-RCOphth-2024-clinical-leads-survey.pdf>. Accessed August 2024.

2. Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. Public Health Outcomes Framework. Available from: [https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/public-health-outcomes-framework/data#page/4/gid/1000044/pat/15/par/E92000001/ati/502/are/E09000002/iid/41204/age/1/sex/4/cat/-1/ctp/-1/yr/1/cid/4/tbm/1/page-options/car-do-0\\_tre-ao-0](https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/public-health-outcomes-framework/data#page/4/gid/1000044/pat/15/par/E92000001/ati/502/are/E09000002/iid/41204/age/1/sex/4/cat/-1/ctp/-1/yr/1/cid/4/tbm/1/page-options/car-do-0_tre-ao-0) [Accessed August 2024]