



The Eyes Have It Representation to the Autumn Budget 2024

September 2024

The Eyes Have It (TEHI) is a partnership of the Macular Society, Fight for Sight, Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), Association of Optometrists, Royal College of Ophthalmologists and Roche Products Ltd. Roche has funded the activities of the partnership.

The partnership works collaboratively across the eye care sector to advocate for and champion improvements to patient care and outcomes. Our ambition is for everyone to have access to the right care, where and when they need it, and to prevent avoidable sight loss.

To address the wide-ranging challenges facing the eye health and care sector across the UK, TEHI partners strongly believe that the Government should use this Autumn Budget **to commit to funding the development of a new National Eye Care Plan for England**. This budget submission puts forward policy proposals and recommendations for what we believe should be included within a National Eye Care Plan, including measures to cut delays to NHS care and treatment; taking steps to prioritise prevention and care closer to home; a plan for digital, technology and data and increased eye health research investment.

The significant socioeconomic impact of eye health conditions and sight loss

Eye health conditions, visual impairment and sight loss affect a significant proportion of the UK population and have a substantial and growing impact on both health and care services, and the wider economy. Around 2.2 million people are living with sight loss in the UK.¹ This figure is increasing sharply due to the effects of an ageing population and is estimated to double to over four million by 2050 – representing an urgent health, social care and productivity challenge.²

In 2017, eye health conditions, visual impairment and sight loss were estimated to cost the English economy £21.6 billion every year.³ While the impact of sight loss on the NHS is significant, 84% of associated costs lie outside the health and social care system, reflecting the significant financial impacts of informal care delivered by family and friends to those affected by sight loss, alongside wider productivity losses.² A breakdown of some of the key contributors to the total cost of visual impairment in England is set out below³:

- **Lost productivity:** 29.4% (£6.4 billion)
- **Informal care costs:** 33.5% (£7.2 billion)
- **Quality of life:** 18.3% (£4 billion)
- **Health and social care costs:** 15.6% (£3.4 billion)
- **Devices:** 2.3% (£500 million)
- **Welfare Admin:** 0.4% (£94 million)
- **Education:** 0.4% (£94 million)³

Key barriers to address: the case for action

Significant and long-standing barriers to NHS eye care services are impacting the ability of people to access the right care, in a timely manner, that is essential to preventing avoidable sight loss. In light of anticipated increases in patient numbers in the coming years, these pressures will only grow without urgent intervention and investment. According to the latest data from NHS England, over 610,000 people are waiting for their first appointment with an ophthalmologist, and ophthalmology remains the busiest outpatient speciality in the NHS.^{4,5}

Ophthalmology has also been found to have the highest average number of people waiting for a follow-up appointment per NHS Trust and has had consistently high follow-up lists since 2019.⁵ Delays in follow-up care in ophthalmology can have devastating consequences, with some **patients developing permanent and severe sight loss due to health service-initiated delays.**⁶ A 2023 Freedom of Information request by the Association of Optometrists revealed that NHS clinicians had filed 551 reports in relation to patients' sight loss due to delayed appointments since 2019 - with 219 resulting in "moderate or severe harm."⁷ Data also suggests that **permanent harm** from avoidable visual loss is **around 9 times more likely in follow-up patients** than in new patients.⁵

Furthermore, approximately 19% of blind and partially sighted people in the UK are of working age, however only 1 in 4 are in employment, a figure that has worsened in the last decade, with the sight loss employment gap at 48%.^{1,8}

The potential for change is significant. By addressing these barriers to access, we can make a substantial impact in helping more individuals remain in meaningful employment. In fact, reducing the prevalence of eye conditions by just 1% annually could save the UK £9.5 billion by 2050.³ This presents a crucial opportunity for the government to take decisive action.

What is TEHI calling for?

If the Government is committed to delivering on its ambitions of growing the economy and boosting productivity across every region of the country, it is vital its policy agenda seeks to ensure that everyone in the UK has access to the right eye care, where and when they need it.

To address the wide-ranging challenges facing the eye health and care sector across the UK, **TEHI partners strongly believe that the Government should commit to developing a new National Eye Care Plan for England.** This should be developed in consultation with sector experts and patients

and should set out a bold vision for delivering coordinated and strategic action across the whole of the eye care pathway.

At present, England is the only UK nation that has never had an overarching plan for eye care. By contrast, the Welsh Government has provided £150,000 in funding for the development of a National Clinical Strategy for Ophthalmology, while NHS Wales has also published its approach to optometry services for the coming decade. The Scottish Government has published its 'Vision Strategy' and sensory impairment strategy 'See Hear', while the Executive in Northern Ireland has set up an Eyecare Network to succeed its previous 'Developing an Eyecare Partnership' (DEP) strategy.

The development of a National Eye Care Plan is the single biggest opportunity for improving eye health in this country – it is an approach that the entire sector is unified behind and in the current environment, represents a low-cost, high-return policy commitment. The eye health and care sector possesses significant expertise and resources that the Government and supporting bodies - such as the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England - could draw on for the development of a national plan, including the potential for sector personnel to be co-opted into a national plan development team.

The Autumn Budget presents a timely opportunity for the Government to acknowledge the escalating economic impact of sight loss, and take decisive action to address it by committing to the development of a National Eye Care Plan.

Recommendations on what should be included within the National Eye Care Plan.

1. Measures to cut delays to NHS care and treatment

TEHI supports the Government's mission to alleviate pressure from GP surgeries and hospital waiting lists. Understanding and addressing the significant delays to NHS eye care and treatment need to be prioritised by this Government in order to address the increasing prevalence of eye health conditions and the risks of irreversible sight loss in a growing ageing population. This includes making more efficient use of available capacity across the sector, whilst also taking steps to tackle the workforce and capacity challenges in ophthalmology in order to meet rising demand. Increasing the use of community-based eye care, delivered by qualified optometrists for example, will bring benefits for patients and hospital eye services (HES).

The government should also endeavour to deliver on commitments within the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan by working to increase the number of ophthalmology specialty training places, in line with current and future patient need and fully resource trainers to deliver this expanded programme. This includes an additional 285 ophthalmology training places in England by 2031, in line with recommended patient to full-time equivalent consultant ratios.⁹

The independent sector provides a valuable resource to increase capacity and improve patient care, and it is vital that the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and NHS England work closely with commissioners, professional bodies, and providers to ensure that this capacity is

commissioned thoughtfully. This should be done in a way that aligns with patient needs and safeguards the sustainability of comprehensive NHS services.

2. Steps to prioritise prevention and care closer to home

Investment in primary eye care can offer value in driving better population health outcomes. This aligns to the Government's mission for a Neighbourhood Health Service, with more care delivered in local communities to spot problems earlier, over time shifting resources to primary care and community services. Each year around 20 million sight tests are performed by optometrists, detecting a range of eye health conditions; but there is much more that could be commissioned in community-based eye care.¹⁰

3. A plan for digital, technology and data

Data capture in secondary care must improve so that needs can accurately be assessed. Fully digitising primary care will improve outcomes and efficiency for patients, including improving communications between community-based clinicians and hospital specialists. Appropriate investment in data capture and data accessibility is needed to support NHS organisations to accurately identify care needs within their local populations and develop strategies to address them. This could include, for example, publication of detailed statistics on the number of people currently waiting for a follow-up appointment, alongside the routine Referral to Treatment (RTT) publication, to inform local assessments of clinical risk.

4. Commitment to increase eye health research investment

In 2018, over £1.4 billion was invested into medical research, via resource provided by UK Research and Innovation, government, charities and other public bodies.³ Only 1.5 percent (£24 million) of that was for eye research, which equates to just £9.60 per year being invested in eye research per person with sight loss. This is around one tenth of the per person spend on dementia research, despite the prevalence of sight loss being almost double.³

Research and innovation have the potential to transform eye care services through enabling a better understanding of sight loss and finding the next generation of diagnostics and innovative treatments. This is particularly critical given the scale and significance of society's ageing population, combined with the fact that prevalence of sight loss increases with age. There is a clear need to accelerate research into how to reduce preventable sight loss within wider healthy ageing and economic growth initiatives.

TEHI believe that the Government needs to urgently double funding for sight loss research, taking total public investment to at least £50 million per year by 2030 (for common and rare diseases), and continuing to expand research funding sustainably thereafter.

References

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Declaration of Interests: The Eyes Have It is a partnership of Macular Society, Fight for Sight, Royal National Institute of Blind People, Association of Optometrists, The Royal College of Ophthalmologists and Roche Products Ltd. Roche has funded the activities of the partnership.