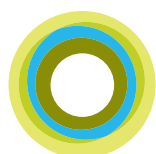
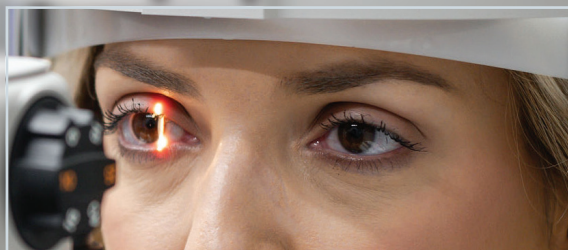


PAST LESSONS  
**FUTURE VISION**  
COMMUNITY OPTOMETRY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

# PRIMARY CARE OPTOMETRY IN FOCUS



**OPTOMETRY**  
NORTHERN  
IRELAND

In Partnership With



## THE CHALLENGE

# AN EYECARE CRISIS ON OUR DOORSTEP



Northern Ireland has an ageing population with **one in six people** currently over the age of 65 rising to one in four by 2039.

### Northern Ireland is not meeting government targets for secondary care waiting times.

Data from 2023 show that almost **41,000 patients are on ophthalmology waiting lists** in Northern Ireland.

Optometrists have conversations with patients on a daily basis about waiting more than 3 years for an initial assessment for cataract surgery. The average waiting times to see a consultant after triage is over a year, with the upper limit being almost 5 years.

The serious consequences of long waits for ophthalmology appointments include anxiety, a reduced quality of life, and, in some cases, **irreversible sight loss**.

Northern Ireland has higher rates of socio-economic deprivation as compared to the rest of the UK and these people are less likely to access eyecare.

Alongside this, 36% of the Northern Ireland population live in rural areas which can make access to eyecare services even more challenging due to distances to travel to hospitals and lack of transport.

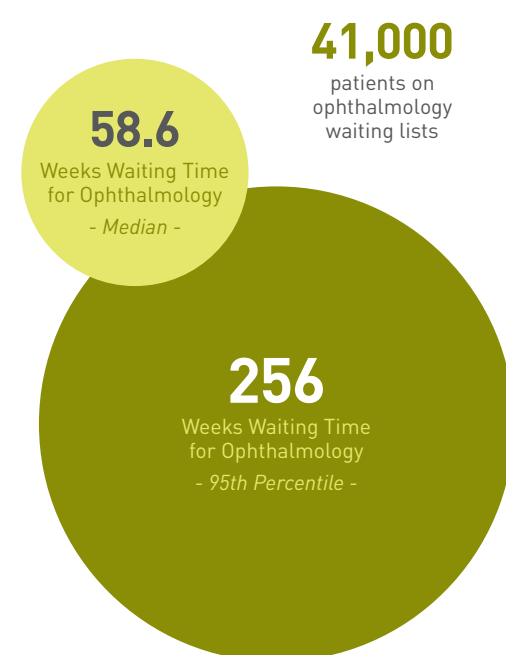
It is estimated that **50% of visual impairment is preventable**, underlying the importance of regular access to eyecare allowing early detection and monitoring of eye conditions.

Number of People on Ophthalmology Waiting List in Northern Ireland



Median and 95th Percentile Waiting Times for Ophthalmology in Northern Ireland

31 March 2023



Data from Figure 4.2 Median and 95th Percentile Waiting Times by Specialty for 31 March 2023 (graph from <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-waiting-time-statistics-outpatient-waiting-times-march-2023>)

**263** Optometry Practices in Northern Ireland

**700** Highly Skilled Optometrists

**50+** Independent Prescribing Optometrists

**>70%** of Optometry Practices with hospital grade OCT scanners.

## THE SOLUTION

# SKILLED, LOCAL & READY TO HELP



The Public Health Agency have recently published their corporate plan for 2024-2030 with two of their key priorities “**living well**” and “**ageing well**”.

Primary care optometrists have the skills, and capacity to be active contributors to these objectives.

By better utilising the primary care optometry workforce, we can also help deliver the Programme for Government priority to “Cut Our Health Waiting Times”, supporting the Executive’s vision for a rebalanced Health and Social Care system that invests in prevention, reduces inequalities, and meets patient

needs without unnecessary hospital intervention.

**The solution is all around us, embedded in our towns and villages**, Northern Ireland has a network of 263 optometry practices staffed by around 700 highly skilled optometrists including more than 50 Independent Prescribing Optometrists.

Our workforce is well equipped with over 70% having hospital grade OCT scanners which

can be utilised to detect and monitor sight threatening conditions.

We provide accessible care seven days a week with a very low “Did Not Attend” rate, taking pressure off secondary care services.

We are already a trusted part of the primary care system, delivering nearly **half a million** GOS sight tests last year.

## PROVEN SUCCESS

# WE ARE ALREADY MAKING A DIFFERENCE



## Northern Ireland Enhanced Services

50,000

appointments  
facilitated  
annually

75%

of appointments  
successfully  
managed in  
community

### Northern Ireland Primary Eyecare Assessment and Referral Service (NI PEARS)

During 2023-2024 Northern Ireland optometrists facilitated almost **50,000 appointments** for patients with acute eye problems.

This has reduced patient attendance at GP practices and hospitals. The existence of such a service means patients are seen closer to home and are seen quickly. Furthermore, this provides a significant financial saving to the health care system.

Crucially, 37,275 (**75%**) appointments were managed entirely within the patient's **local community** in optometric practice.

### Glaucoma Referral Refinement

Since 2013, Primary Care optometrists have carried out glaucoma referral refinement which has reduced onward case referral by over **70%**.

This scheme has been extended further to allow optometrists in community to **monitor patients** who have been discharged from hospital but are still at higher risk of glaucoma. This has further positive impact on the situation in secondary care.

To date there are more than 2500 patients who have been discharged and are now being monitored in optometric practice.

70%

reduction in  
glaucoma  
referrals

### NI PEARS Plus

Independent Prescribing (IP) optometrists recently participated in a pilot project to manage four specific acute eye conditions.

The evaluation reported that **89%** of patients were managed solely within primary care subsequently increasing the capacity in Eye Casualty by **10%**.

Thus, Eye Casualty could manage more relevant and complex cases

### Detection of General Health Conditions

Primary care optometrists routinely detect common, and sometimes life-threatening, health conditions, making their role incredibly important in early detection.

A report from Ulster University\* highlights several cases of this, including an optometrist who detected the first signs of a brain tumor in a 10-year-old, a man with dangerously high blood pressure, and another with stroke symptoms.

### Post Op Cataract Review

This service frees up 4000 spaces in outpatient clinics across the country, harnessing the skills of optometrists and providing a service closer to home for the patient.



## THE ECONOMIC CASE

# A SMART INVESTMENT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



### Managing Patients in Community

Bringing care closer to home is a **cost-effective strategy** and aligns with the Department of Health and Public Health Awareness policies and action plans.

### Exceptional Return of Investment

All the enhanced services that Optometry practices currently deliver show a **strong return on investment**. A recent study in England estimated that based on the NHS Disability-Adjusted Life Year (DALY) economic modelling technique, General Ophthalmic Service delivers **£4 of value** from correcting refractive error and early detection of eye conditions **for every £1 spent**.

### The Funding Gap is Unsustainable

Practices are **providing NHS services at a loss** which is highlighted in the study. The short fall is covered by cross subsidising with private sales; this is an unsustainable model.

### We Can Save the NHS Money

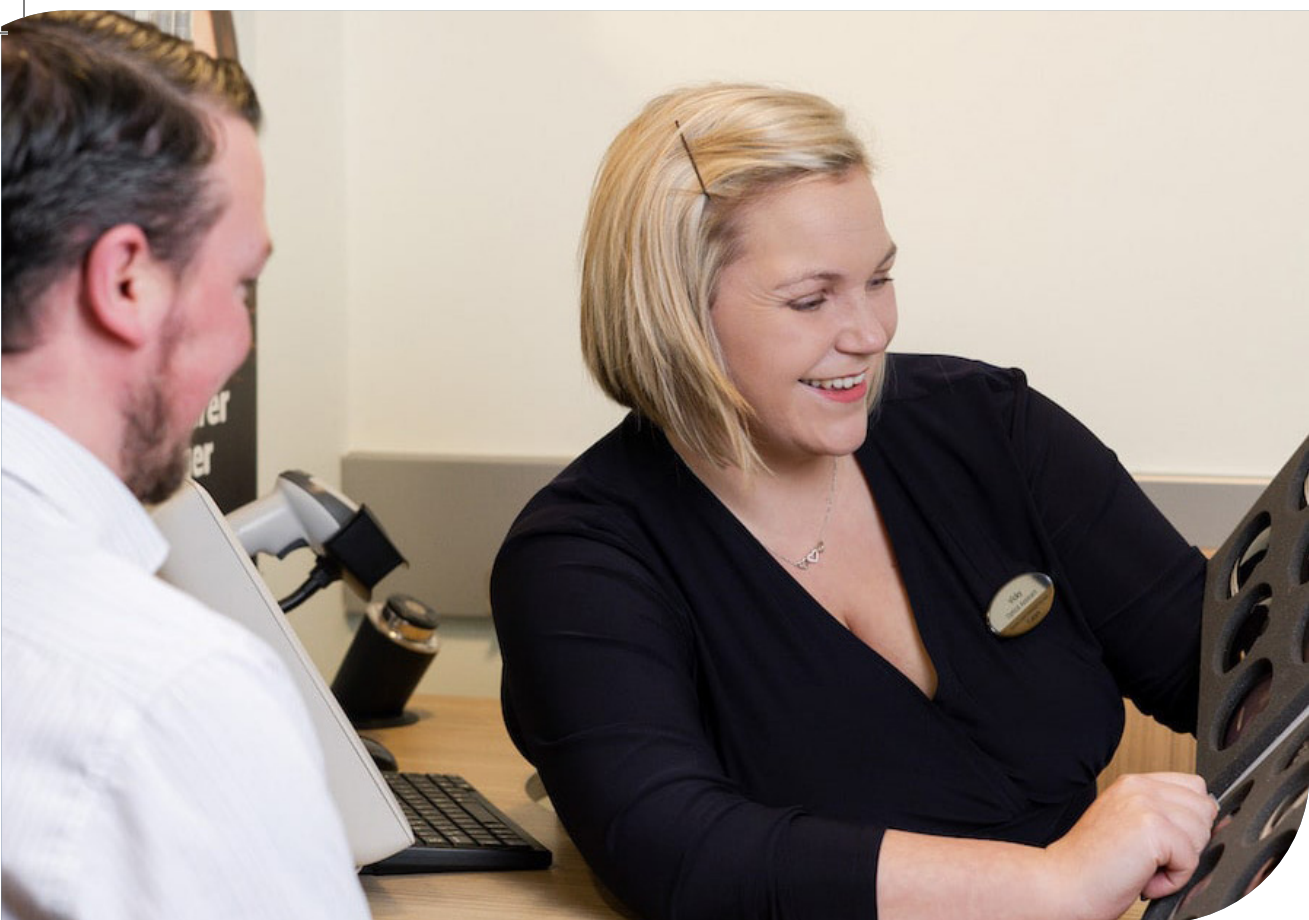
Primary care optometrists are appropriately skilled and are well equipped to manage many eye conditions in practice and in doing so are well placed to help relieve the current unsustainable burden on secondary care. Current pathways have been proven not only to **save the NHS money** but also have a **high rate of patient satisfaction and compliance**.



Change has already happened in **Scotland and Wales**, where both nations have modernised the delivery of primary Eyecare Services allowing for the potential improvement of health outcomes across their populations.

\*Ulster University, July 25. The role and activity of community optometrists in Northern Ireland for primary and enhanced eyecare services.





THE PATIENT VOICE

YOUR  
CONSTITUENTS  
TRUST US

Patient satisfaction with community optometrists is exceptionally high, with a recent Ulster University report showing 95% satisfaction. This positive trend is further supported by a recent survey of the PEARS Plus pilot, which found **100% patient satisfaction** and unanimous willingness to reuse the service.

Most respondents reported no barriers to attending Primary Care optometric practice and almost **70% agreed** that optometry could play an extended role in supporting general health interventions.

With respect to secondary care, the main barriers to attending the hospital eye service are waiting times, distance to the hospital, costs and a requirement to take time off work.

*“This was a great way to **conveniently access the diagnosis** and help I needed.*

*The service was very **professional and thorough** with a **great follow up review** after the medication came to an end.”*

**95%**  
of the population  
are within 5 miles  
of an optometry  
practice

OUR ASK



A PARTNERSHIP  
FOR BETTER HEALTH

At a time when secondary care is facing so much pressure and needs to release capacity, the Primary Care Optometry workforce **possesses the potential to address a portion of the eyecare crisis.**



1. Fair Funding

An NHS contract that delivers the **true cost of delivering high quality eyecare** to the people of Northern Ireland while reducing the burden on secondary care.

2. Expanded Services

Further commissioning and continued support of community based pathways for **PEARS Plus, glaucoma management, urgent care** and other areas to **cut waiting lists**. Reduce preventable sight loss and bring care closer to home.

3. Investment in Training

To support the ongoing professional development of our optometrists, enabling them to **deliver world leading levels of eyecare** for the people of Northern Ireland.



By partnering with us, you can contribute to transitioning care into the community and ultimately **mitigate preventable sight loss.**



# PAST LESSONS **FUTURE VISION**

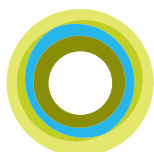
COMMUNITY OPTOMETRY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

## LET'S WORK TOGETHER TO BUILD A SUSTAINABLE, EFFICIENT AND WORLD CLASS EYECARE SERVICE

For the people of Northern Ireland

"Optometry in Northern Ireland is uniquely positioned to help achieve one of our primary goals: Reducing avoidable sight loss. By collaborating to address waiting list issues and manage patients within their own communities, we can make a real difference. We believe that with a bit of innovative thinking, a positive outcome is achievable, and we are ready to contribute to the solution."

**Brian McKeown, Chair Optometry NI**



**OPTOMETRY**  
NORTHERN  
IRELAND

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