



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Chief Optometric Advisor Wales Eye Care Digest



Chief Optometric Advisor for
Wales, David O'Sullivan

Dear Colleagues,

The last two years have been like no other in recent history. COVID-19 has been responsible for the most challenging period the NHS – and perhaps the entire country – has faced in living memory.

Eye care professionals have faced huge challenges throughout the pandemic, but I have been heartened by the dedication, patience and professionalism of staff who have worked tirelessly to keep services running while protecting the health and safety of the public and their colleagues alike. Welsh Government, and I particularly, would like to say thank you.

This 2022 edition of the Eye Care Digest will recap some of the major achievements of the last two years and will take a forward look at how we continue to recover and rebuild from the changes and challenges of the pandemic.

I hope you enjoy this update. Please feel free to contact me with feedback about this newsletter and to suggest any item for inclusion in the 2023 edition.

David O'Sullivan, Chief Optometric
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COVID-19 – Achievements in challenging times

When COVID-19 took a foothold across the world in early 2020 causing disruption to all of our lives and particularly to the healthcare sector, no one could have envisaged how the situation would evolve or how long it would last. Almost exactly two years later, Welsh Government published the plan '[Together for a Safer Future](#)', which sets out the strategy for long-term transition from pandemic to endemic.

Lockdown and the Red phase

In March 2020, the first UK-wide lockdown saw all non-essential optometry appointments

suspended. From the very start of the pandemic, Welsh Government worked closely with the eye care profession, who reacted quickly to the guidance we issued to put in place safe working arrangements and enable continuity of care. Health boards met the challenge head-on, making significant changes to continue safely delivering emergency and essential eye care services. Optometric services were reorganised as a cluster model, ensuring at least one and up to three practices per cluster continued to provide urgent and essential eye care services.

Practices were given practical support with the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). They were also supported financially with a monthly NHS income based on the practice average NHS claims over the previous three-year period for General Ophthalmic Services (GOS), Eye Health Examination Wales (EHEW) and Low Vision Service Wales (LVSW).

In order to ensure patients could access acute eye health care services, health boards developed new pathways making use of the skills of optometrists, and in particular additional qualifications such as independent prescribing, glaucoma and medical retina. Domiciliary emergency eye care services developed during the Red phase in order to provide urgent care to this vulnerable group of patients. Other changes put quickly in place during the Red phase included optometrists working in collaboration with ophthalmology to provide eye casualty in optometry practices, shared care for glaucoma through electronic patient records, and a national pathway of optometrists monitoring pregnant women who had diabetes and were unable to be screened by Diabetic Eye Screening Wales during the disruption to normal services.

With the easing of the first lockdown in June 2020, optometry services gradually moved to the Amber phase of recovery. Optometry practices prioritised patients to ensure those with the greatest clinical need were seen first, but routine services resumed where capacity was available to do so.

In the meantime, Welsh Government policy officials worked with the professions to ensure development of recovery plans in readiness to

resume service at the right time. By summer 2021, face-to-face optometry services had returned largely to pre-pandemic levels.

Community spirit

Throughout the pandemic, I have been struck by the willingness of colleagues to go the extra mile to not only keep services running but to make a real difference in their communities. I would like to thank everyone in eye care who banded together and provided much-needed help to their communities. During the first lockdown in March 2020 many optometrists became community volunteers, working with pharmacy colleagues to deliver medicines to people who were shielding. This vital lifeline made a real difference to some of the most vulnerable people in Wales. Community spirit on the part of Wales' optometrists was also much in evidence; with many eye care professionals joining the mass vaccination programme to deliver jabs to the Welsh public, many of them returning to join the booster campaign in response to the Omicron variant in December 2021. I was proud to be one of the vaccination team and to play my own part in joining this vital public health measure.

The pandemic is not yet over, and challenges remain. We have all worked in collaboration and at pace with all stakeholders through the recovery phase, the difficulties with PPE, infection control procedures and the local and national lockdowns. Out of adversity, we have seen the development of new pathways such as urgent care in domiciliary settings and Independent Prescribing in hub optometry practices.



A winning team

On a positive note, 2021 saw well-deserved recognition for eye care professionals in Wales. The Opticians Awards saw independent Welsh optometrists Probert and Williams win the Enhanced Optical Service Award, with strong Welsh representation in the rest of the shortlist. Congratulations also go to Cardiff and Vale University Health Board's Primary Care Optometry and Secondary Care Glaucoma Teams and Gareth Bulpin, National Architect for Eye Care Digitisation, who were awarded the prestigious Glaucoma UK Excellence in Glaucoma Care Awards 2022.

Towards recovery and essential change

By autumn 2021, Optometry face-to-face appointments were nearly back to pre-Covid levels when accounting for new measures in place such as time devoted to donning and doffing PPE. This continued through the surge of the Omicron variant over winter 2021-22. Increasing the number of people accessing care close to home during the challenging times of the pandemic is testament to the success of our optometry policy and the dedication of NHS Wales' eye care staff.

COVID-19 is still with us more than two years after the first lockdown, though hopes continue that the disease is moving from a global pandemic to an endemic infection. Across Wales, inevitable service changes in hospital eye departments have occurred in order to regain adequate performance against the eye healthcare measures. Some health boards are outsourcing activity to other providers, including the independent sector, and are delivering additional sessions locally at weekends and evenings to reduce waiting times.

For eye care services to be sustainable and to address the current backlog, the workforce across both primary and secondary care setting needs to be utilised fully, with everyone working to the full extent of their clinical qualifications. I have no doubt that optometrists and other professionals are more than up to this challenge. There are exciting challenges ahead and I encourage everyone in the eye care profession to consider how they could get involved with the development and delivery of services. Which brings me neatly on to:

Future Approach and Contract reform

We no longer live in the world for which the NHS was designed. People are living longer, medicine can do much more, technology is transforming the way we live, and lifestyles and expectations have changed. Our ambition from 2020 onwards is to bring health and social care services together, designed and delivered around the needs and preferences of individuals, with a much greater emphasis on keeping people healthy and well.

Optometry has a key role in delivering the aims of '[A Healthier Wales](#)' and the transformation of eye care services through the provision of eye care closer to home. The role has developed considerably since the introduction of the Wales Eye Care Service, enabling optometry to be the first port of call in primary care for patients with eye problems; helping to detect, treat and manage eye diseases early to stop unnecessary referrals and reduce waiting lists.

Featured in the new [Programme for Government 2021-2026](#) is a Well-being statement with 10 policy objectives that Welsh Government will use to maximise its contribution to Wales' seven long-term

well-being goals and the steps we will take to deliver them. The first of these is the objective to provide effective, high quality and sustainable healthcare. Our ongoing work on contract reform and bringing services into the community will align to this new document by continuing to support health workers, protecting the NHS, deepening the integration of services, improving accessibility and supporting people to live healthy lives.

As part of this transformational change, contract reform will fully realise the vision for NHS Wales eye health care services, moving to a clinically appropriate service model that is based on prudent principles, and aligns to '[A Healthier Wales](#)' and the seven well-being goals of the [Future Generations \(Wales\) Act](#). Legislative changes to General Ophthalmic Services, Eye Health Examination Wales and Low Vision Service Wales will enable diagnosis, treatment and management of a wider range of eye conditions in primary care and underpin the necessary coverage of optometry services within each cluster to enable all aspects of contract reform.

While there are challenges to ensure patients' timely access to all eye care services, each member of the clinical team providing services along the patient pathway is collaborating to work at the top of their respective clinical license. Broader and deeper professional relationships are being built and strengthened by clinical teams utilising their full skillset and working in new and innovative ways.

There are exciting times ahead as work continues in collaboration to agree the detail of future clinical pathways bringing together primary and secondary care to deliver services for patients fit for the 21st century. Through their local Eye Care Collaborative Groups, health boards will continue to work with stakeholders to ensure the continuation of progress against the *'Together for Health: Eye Care Delivery Plan'* recommendations beyond 2020 and will report annual progress to the Welsh Government from April 2020.

Contract Reform

A key priority for the future of eye care in Wales is moving delivery of services from hospitals to primary care. This will address backlog in hospital appointments and delay in follow-up, and release specialist consultant and GP resource. Central to Welsh Government's policy commitment is extending the provision of optometry to holistic eye care; including the provision of sight tests, diagnosis, treatment, ongoing management, shared care,

prevention and health and well-being advice. We will enable an increase in the scope of what services are considered 'General Ophthalmic Services' (GOS) in Wales; nationally strengthening optometrists' engagement, support and clinical care of individuals' eye health and influence treatment and ongoing care.

Optometric contract reform will enable the drive forward to higher quality optometry services and the delivery of positive benefits for health professionals and citizens, fully realising the ambition set out in *'NHS Wales Eye Healthcare: Future Approach for Optometry Services.'*

Although GOS Reform is a huge change in service model, it is widely accepted by Optometry Wales, the overarching body representing optometrists and dispensing opticians. The change will put the profession's business on a stable footing and will provide NHS Wales with assurance that delivery of services will be equitable and consistent. It will enable the introduction of a system-wide approach for the delivery of ophthalmic services by NHS Wales, improving engagement in the design and delivery of quality, integrated eye health services for all citizens across Wales, and setting in motion a system change progressing improvements for citizens, health professionals, NHS Wales and Local Authorities alike.

Key Eye Care Statistics

The latest edition of the Sensory Stats bulletin was published in September 2021. This biennial report gives a summary of statistics related to eye care and hearing care services, including General Ophthalmic Services, Welsh eye care services (Eye Health Examination Wales and Low Vision Service Wales) and Diabetic Eye Screening Wales. These statistics help monitor the delivery of current services and provide evidence from which current eye health policies can be evaluated.

As may be expected, the datasets showed a marked impact from the pandemic, with activity levels falling in 2020-21.

In 2019-20, 813,922 GOS sight tests were paid for by NHS Wales, but this fell by more than half to 348,740 in 2020-21. There was a similar picture for examinations carried out under Eye Health Examination Wales, with 201,208 carried out in 2019-20 and 81,785 in 2020-21.

Given the disruption to routine eye care services caused by the pandemic, it is more important than ever that we encourage the Welsh public to have their eyes checked regularly to help identify any eye health issues at an early stage, and ultimately to reduce preventable sight loss.

Read the full report on gov.wales

New Technology: Electronic Patient Record and Attend Anywhere

Health boards are utilising new technologies including Open Eyes (electronic patient records and referral), Consultant Connect and Attend Anywhere (remote consultation software). This uptake and rapid spread of new technology in eye care has opened up a new model of delivering healthcare in a convenient and prudent way, and it will stay in place well into the future.

Remote appointments have already proved popular with patients; [public perception research](#) by the General Optical Council across the UK found that 70% of people would consider attending phone or video appointment during the pandemic, with over 60% of people saying they would consider using such services after Covid restrictions eased. Digital systems will support health boards to deliver their eye care plans and enable patients to receive timely, prudent care aligning to key strategic documents including *'A Healthier Wales'*.

'Attend Anywhere' healthcare appointments via videoconferencing have reduced the need for face-to-face contact between patients and care providers during the pandemic. Using a combination of optometrists, tele-triage and rapid access clinics, health care professionals have been able to review and treat the majority of patients in the community, which in turn has freed up hospital capacity for the patients with the greatest need.

In addition, Wales is the first nation in the UK to introduce a national Electronic Patient Record (EPR) and digital Electronic Referral system for eye care; a cloud-based system to modernise the eye care referral and record process. It will benefit both patients and health professionals; speeding up treatment and referral times and improving patient outcomes. Welsh Government is investing £4.801m into the project between the 2020/21 and 2024/25 financial years.

A Greener Wales

Members of the optical profession have an important part to play in making Wales a greener place to live.

Declaring a Climate Emergency in Wales in 2019, Welsh Government has made climate change a core policy focus. Following the 2021 election, First Minister Mark Drakeford created the new portfolio of Minister for Climate Change, and announced that the environment would be at the heart of decision-making in the new government.

Welsh Government will actively promote actions and policies in optometry that support decarbonisation as part of the commitment to making NHS Wales Net Zero by 2030. We will also ensure we factor decarbonisation and sustainability into ongoing contract reform for optometry.

Public Health Wales began a pilot of a Greener Primary Care Framework and Award Scheme in the first quarter of 2022, which includes a framework of actions primary care practices can

undertake to make their practice more sustainable and to earn recognition of this. This includes optometry-specific actions. Welsh Government encourages all optometry contractors to Engage with the Framework on its full release in June and to review their practices' ways of working.

Optometrists can encourage and facilitate greener behaviours among the public, including through a number of recycling initiatives for glasses and contact lenses and their packaging.

Please note that as of August 2020, Vision Aid Overseas ended its recycling scheme in the UK and no longer accepts used spectacles. The charity will now focus on other areas of fundraising. Practices are encouraged to consider alternative spectacle recycling schemes. Local charitable organisations may also accept unwanted or end-of-life spectacles.

Contact details and resources

Welsh Government

Feedback and items for inclusion in the next edition of the Eye digest:

HSS-PrimaryCareMailbox@gov.wales

Please contact your local health board to speak to your local optometric advisers and other primary care contacts.

Useful links

A Healthier Wales: long-term plan for health and social care

College of Optometrists COVID-19 resources

College of Optometrists patient leaflets and resources

Future Approach for Optometry Services

General Optical Council COVID-19 latest information

Programme for Government 2021 to 2026

Sensory health (eye care and hearing statistics) April 2019 to March 2021

The Well-being of Future Generations | GOV.WALES

Together for a Safer Future: Wales' long-term COVID-19 transition from pandemic to endemic