

Eyecare Services for Children with Special Needs Pilot

Notes for Clinicians/Providers

The 'What':

NHS England is developing an in school eyecare service for all children with learning disabilities and autism in special schools across England. This is an exciting new area of community-based clinical practice that will enable providers to work closely with health and education professionals. It will bring together clinicians from across the eyecare sector to undertake a range of services that will enable every child to get the most from their vision, including a visual assessment, refraction, and dispensing of glasses – all completed on the school premises.

Our goal is to improve the quality of vision and eye care for every child attending a special school, leading to improved quality of life, and life opportunities. This is an NHS England funded service that will be commissioned via an Additional Services contract incorporating new regulations. A new contract fee for this service has been agreed.

The 'Why':

Children with special needs often have difficulty 'seeing the world' in the same way as other children – this programme will help to identify these issues, and support teachers, parents and children to use their vision in the best way to help them with communication skills, mobility and independence.

There are already small pockets of eyecare services being delivered in special schools across the country, but this will be the first national service of its kind. Some of the research we have from these existing services is detailed below;

- Children with special needs are 28 times more likely to have visual problems than other children yet only 10% will have ever received a sight test in a community setting. 50% of these children have to attend a hospital eye clinic for a sight test, and 44% will have never received a sight test
- Poor vision is often overlooked as a contributory factor towards challenging behaviours, and can mask a child's true potential. New research conducted by Ulster University has shown there are measurable benefits in the classroom from improved vision.
- Helping children and young people make the most of their vision, often just by making sure they have the glasses they need can be lifechanging, and gives them the opportunity to realise their full social and educational potential



- Parents consistently favour in school assessment over hospital eye clinics because they are more convenient, and they reduce the levels of anxiety children experience when they are in unfamiliar surroundings with people they don't know.
- Every child will receive a report written in plain English, helping teachers and parents to understand what the child can see, and enabling appropriate adjustments to be made at home, and in the classroom

The 'How':

The service requires a report to be prepared for every child, written in non clinical language. This will include details about the child's sight, spectacle prescription, and any other useful information relating to their vision. It will be shared with parents and teachers to advise them on the best treatment options for each child, which may include glasses, patching, visual strategies, advice and guidance.

NHS England is working with Health Education England to develop a Non Clinical training package to support all clinicians who are interested in delivering this service. They are also working with the College of Optometrists to develop a practical skills 'Refresher' course, intended to sharpen or enhance existing skills. This support will enable you to develop new skills and apply them to improve both the vision and quality of life for patients with the highest need. You will also be able to apply those skills to the patients you see in community practices.

It is hoped that a variety of providers will apply to deliver these services including mobile GOS providers, fixed practices already engaged with or located near special schools, special-interest charities and hospital-led services.