



Rt Hon Dame Andrea Leadsom DBE MP
Minister for Public Health, Start for Life and Primary Care
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria St
London, SW1H 0EU
By email: PSLeadsom@dhsc.gov.uk

17 May 2024

Dear Minister Leadsom,

Special schools eye care service – ensuring its success

We write as a number of charities and representatives that work to improve outcomes for children with special educational needs and disabilities. We would like to seek your reassurance that the planned NHS special school eye care service will be commissioned and funded to its existing quality standard and to request a meeting with you before final decisions are made.

Concerns are increasing over the quality of what might be commissioned in the future and successful elements of the service being removed in a full national rollout, at which point proof of concept services will end. This fear was crystallised in reports last week ([Optometry Today, 9 May 2024](#)) that the fee could be 'slashed' by 30%, meaning no child would have the appropriate level of funding from the service.

Collectively we applauded [the government and NHS England's joint announcement](#) in June 2023 to rollout an eye care service to all special schools (day and residential) from 2024. This should be a major step forward in eye care reform for people with

learning disabilities. Bringing eye care to children 28 times more likely to have a sight problem than other children will provide them with a much better start in life, something we know that you are determined to address.

The evidence that led to this decision came from a decade of research and a NHS proof of concept which continues in 83 special schools to this day, supporting thousands of children. This demonstrated that 50% of special school students have never received eye care, yet up to half have a significant visual problem with over 40% needing glasses, often to stronger prescriptions. It also demonstrated the potential of seeing children in a more cost-effective way, including a substantial cohort of children otherwise having to be seen in hospital eye clinics.

This is currently delivered using a sustainable 'break even' fee of £116 per child providing a full annual eye examination and 'one stop shop' of eye care from the specially trained visiting teams from primary or secondary care, with glasses dispensing and support if needed and a written report on a child's vision needs for teachers and parents.

This model was [independently evaluated](#) and feedback from schools, parents and clinicians is extremely positive, as it was based on a [Framework for Special schools eye care](#), which was developed by experts and eye care professional bodies over many years, supported by materials co-produced with families and schools.

If fees are unsustainable, rendering the service undeliverable or one of a poorer quality, all of the benefits of the service with its continuity of support will be lost. During an engagement exercise in autumn 2023, NHS England laid out proposals that could reduce the specialism of the service and become dependent on families 'opting in' to be seen, with the subsequent risk that children will still miss out or receive fragmented care – being sent to opticians with glasses vouchers or into hospital as their needs are 'too complex'.

Parents and special schools are eager for timely roll out of a trusted clinical service that reaches as many children that need it. There have been many false starts over many years for the promise of better eye care for these children, and NHS communication has been piecemeal and contradictory.

If we could confidently state this service will adhere to what has worked, it should be something to celebrate in the world of SEND. Looking forward to World Sight Day on

10th October, with its focus on children's eye health, this service could be showcased as a 'first' internationally by Ministers.

Your predecessor, Neil O'Brien, was so kind as to convene a listening exercise with experts in the field prior to the June 2023 decision, and at this vitally important stage of implementation we appeal to you to meet and understand our concerns, and act to put the service on the best footing possible.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Vivien Cooper OBE, Chief Executive, The Challenging Behaviour Foundation

Anna Bird, Chief Executive Officer, Contact

Julian Hallett, Services Development Manager, Down's Syndrome Association

Eleanor Briggs, Head of Policy, Public Affairs & Campaigns, Guide Dogs for the Blind Association

Samantha Clark, Chief Executive, Learning Disability England

Jackie O'Sullivan, Chief Executive Officer (acting), Mencap

Annamarie Hassall MBE, Chief Executive, nasen

Claire Dorer OBE, Chief Executive, NASS

Alistair Crawford and Alison Ashley, Co-Chairs, National Network of Specialist Provision

Caireen Sutherland and Rory McDonnell, Co-Chairs, NatSIP steering group

Sophie Dodgeon, Interim Head of Policy and Public Affairs, RNIB

Lisa Donaldson, Head of Eye Care and Vision, SeeAbility

John Milligan, Chair, VIEW, the professional association for the vision impairment education workforce