Association of Optometrists

THE COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRISTS

Rt. Hon. Heidi Alexander MP,
House of Commons,
London,
SW1A 0AA

14 May 2025

Dear Ms Alexander,

Vision standards for drivers – urgent need for reform

We are writing on behalf of the Association of Optometrists (AOP) and The College of Optometrists in light of your recent comments to the Transport Committee. You indicated openness to considering changes to vision standards for drivers following four tragic cases highlighted by HM Senior Coroner for Lancashire, Dr James Adeley, after an inquest at which both our organisations gave expert evidence.

As you rightly acknowledged, the current system places too much reliance on self-declaration and lacks the safeguards necessary to prevent avoidable deaths. The incident you referred to – where advice from opticians about unsafe vision was not acted upon – sadly mirrors experiences reported by optometrists across the UK. Research by the AOP, which formed part of the inquest evidence, suggests that over half of AOP members have recently encountered the difficult situation of a patient who is below the legal vision standard but wants to continue driving. College research also shows almost half of motorists are unaware that it is illegal to drive without their prescribed distance glasses or contact lenses, and many assume they meet the vision standards whenever they are driving. Public polling indicates nearly 30% of drivers would continue to drive, even if they knew their vision was inadequate.

We strongly believe that vision-related accidents are preventable with simple, evidence-based legislative changes. The UK's current approach requires a driver to be able to read the 6/12 line of letters on a Snellen chart and a car number plate made after 1 September 2001 from 20 metres (with glasses or contact lenses, if necessary). However, the only mandatory check that takes place is a number plate test during the driving examination, which is carried out by the driving instructor, not an eye care professional. The system then relies on drivers being aware enough to check their own vision regularly and self-report if they do not meet the standard.

The UK's approach is out of step with best practice internationally and the current vision standards mean UK drivers do not undergo an objective measure of vision and assessment of eye health. Within Europe, we are one of only five countries that uses a licence plate test to test drivers' vision and only one of three countries to rely upon self-reporting. Other countries, including Germany, Spain, and Finland, mandate periodic eyesight assessments to maintain road safety throughout a driver's lifetime.

The AOP, The College of Optometrists and other optical organisations have consistently called for:

- Mandatory vision checks at first licence application and at every renewal (every 10 years for most drivers, every three years for those over 70)

With over 7,000 optometry practices nationwide, optometrists are well placed to support the delivery of these checks swiftly and effectively.

Given your openness to reviewing the evidence, we would very much welcome the opportunity to meet with you or your officials to share data, insight, and practical proposals for reform. Lives can and must be saved by ensuring no driver with unsafe vision remains on the road unchecked.

Thank you for your consideration on this pressing public safety issue. Further information is also available from the AOP website: www.aop.org.uk/dontswerve alongside the College's guidance and evidence base: Driving and vision - College of Optometrists.

We look forward to hearing from your office.

Yours sincerely,

Adam Sampson
Chief Executive
Association of Optometrists

Ian Humphreys
Chief Executive
The College of Optometrists