

Rt Hon. Andrea Leadsom MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

8 May 2023

Dear Minister,

Special Schools Eye Care Service – 30% funding cuts threaten service delivery

I am writing to you in your capacity as Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Public Health, Start for Life and Primary Care to voice our deep concerns over the proposed tariff cuts for the Special Schools Eye Care Service. As Chief Executive of the Association of Optometrists, representing many of those delivering the current service, I want to highlight that the budget per child, due to be slashed by 30% from £116 down to £81, risks thousands of children missing out on a service vital to their health and wellbeing.

The Department for Health and Social Care's announcement in June last year, which confirmed the service would be rolled out nationally, was welcomed by the sector as well as our individual members. However, we urge the department to attach an appropriate level of funding to the scheme – no less than the previous figure – as a necessary step towards fulfilling its commitment. The planned level of funding will, we predict, render the service all but undeliverable and lead to its collapse before it has even been built.

You will of course be aware of the Conservative Party's 2019 commitment in the NHS Long Term Plan to provide sight testing in residential schools. While this has been approved in theory, the funding plan for this service threatens its long-term delivery.

The Special Schools Eye Care Service offers children with learning disabilities annual full vision and eye health assessments within their school, delivered by optometrists, orthoptists, and dispensing opticians. A survey carried out by the AOP in 2023 highlighted the importance of the scheme, with 65% of UK optometrists saying they believe that many SEN children are 'experiencing a lower quality of life' due to inadequate provision of NHS eye care services. A further 76% concluded that 'trauma and worry' is reduced for children and parents who have access to the specially designed service.

The work of the Special Schools Eye Care Service is essential to the health and wellbeing of the students who – in some cases – find it highly distressing to have a clinical examination in high street opticians, which are simply not set up to meet their needs.

As many as 40% of all children in special schools require glasses. However, our dedicated optometrist members will struggle to deliver the required comprehensive eye care package, which includes the full vision and eye health assessments alongside the fitting of spectacles, within the school environment for the proposed fee.



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Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are 28 times more likely to have a serious sight condition, and by the admission of your own department the Special Schools Eye Care Service is an important provision that can address the needs of the 165,000 children in special schools in an environment where they feel comfortable and safe. To lose this service would place these children at a distinct disadvantage compared with their nondisabled peers.

We hope that you will consider fully funding this essential service with the necessary fee and I would appreciate it if your office could send over your availability to meet and discuss how we take this conversation forward.

Yours sincerely,

Adam Sampson
Chief Executive