



Eye Care Services for People with Learning Disabilities

At a glance

This case study considers the benefits of widespread commissioning of the People with Learning Disabilities service, following the roll out of the service across the North West of England.

Objective

Support reduction in health inequalities, experienced by people with learning disabilities by widespread commissioning of this service.

Introduction

People with Learning Disabilities are statistically 10 times more likely to have serious sight problems but are less likely to have access to high quality eyecare.¹ Figures from before the pandemic show less than 50 per cent of adults with learning disabilities have had a sight test in the last two years with these figures now likely to be even higher.²

Access to eyecare can be hindered as family members and carers believe a person wouldn't be able to complete a 'standard' sight test due to communication problems or if for example, they can't read. LOCSU working alongside SeeAbility have updated this service to increase awareness that no one is too disabled to have a sight test. The more complex and profound a person's learning disability is, the more likely a person will experience serious visual problem.³ Conditions associated with learning disability such as Down's syndrome, cerebral palsy and prematurity have well documented links with eye problems such as keratoconus, reduced accommodation, cataracts and higher and more prevalent spectacle prescriptions.⁴

A person with a learning disability may not be able to communicate a sight problem effectively to others. Unrecognised sight problems may lead to reduced quality of life, may cause behaviour to alter, as an inability to articulate their visual changes may make the individual confused, upset or frustrated.

¹ Sight and learning disabilities | Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities

² Delivering an equal right to sight DESIGN_0.pdf (seeability.org)

³ Eye care and people with learning disabilities: making reasonable adjustments – gov.uk

⁴ college-optometrists.org/professional-development/college-journals/optometry-in-practice/all-oip-articles/volume-21,-issue-3/2020-09-optometriccareofchildrenwithsignificantlea



What Was Done?

The service has been established in Greater Manchester since 2016, followed by Cheshire and Mersey in 2017. The launch of the service in Lancashire and South Cumbria makes the North West the first NHS region with full coverage in England. The service is to relaunch across the entire area as the pandemic has seen activity reduce in recent years, with CPD events planned.

LOCSU, SeeAbility and WOPEC have together updated the online learning module which needs to be completed if delivering this service. The module which consists of six lectures, has been expanded to include a section covering autism, with an initial lecture suitable for the clinical team and all practice staff. The remaining 5 lectures are designed for the clinical team but can be made available to interested practice staff.

Pennine Lancashire LOC and Lancashire Morecombe Bay LOC have worked with SeeAbility to launch the service in Lancashire and South Cumbria. A virtual event, offering CPD, in March 2022 was run with the support of SeeAbility, both LOCs and LOCSU was well attended.

Promotion of the service has been targeted, with local engagement of GPs via Primary Care Networks and service users via community groups and hubs identified by SeeAbility. The service aims to make sight tests accessible by finding out more information about the patient before they attend using the 'About me and my eyes' form. The patient can if preferred, visit the practice before the appointment to help allay any concerns they may have, The WOPEC module supports optometrists with suggestions for different clinical approaches to better meet individual's needs.

SeeAbility have many accounts of people attending the hospital for their routine eyecare due only to their learning disability, all of whom could be seen locally in primary care. This service will support discharge from secondary care back to primary care. It allows sharing of information so the patient doesn't get bounced back for a longstanding condition that may not be well reported by the carers or patient. It allows care to be delivered flexibly, closer to home in a more familiar environment and also releases capacity in the hospital. The service accepts and promotes referrals from GPs following an annual health check. The Long-term plan aims to support 75 per cent of people to have access to a regular health check at their GP.⁵ Referrals may also come from secondary care services as well as self-referral or from the Special Schools service for school leavers.

Penny Owens, who is now aged 41, has a chromosomal abnormality resulting in severe learning disabilities. Penny is highly myopic and was seen for many years at the eye hospital for refraction following corneal graft surgery aged 14 and 24. Penny's mum Ann, said when discussing Penny's experience that "she has trusting relationships with her consultant and his team" but continued "when it came to sight tests, panic and stress" resulted in exceptionally poor vision being recorded. Penny has for several years been seen locally for her sight test and her mum reports that this change in location has been "hugely beneficial and key to getting any results" with vastly improved acuities measured. Penny is made to feel valued: the pace of the appointment is unhurried and allows her to feel confident. If you were to ask her, she would say she feels as if she's visiting friends.

⁵ NHS England » Three in four people with a learning disability receive NHS annual health check



Benefits

The NHS Long term plan makes a commitment to improve access for those with learning disabilities and autism.

- This service supports this aim by delivering care flexibly closer to home. It improves access by using local practices and reduces the need to travel further for eyecare and provides continuity of care. Utilising the skills and resources already within optical practices eases capacity on secondary care
- It allows collaborative working between optical practices, GPs and voluntary sector organisations ensuring information can be shared to avoid duplication and unnecessary referrals
- People with learning disabilities are more likely to require spectacle correction which can be difficult to adapt to. Local practices make follow up and fitting adjustments easier as well as ongoing advice and guidance on how to correctly use the spectacles, therefore improving compliance and vision
- Understanding that poorer vision will impact on communication, engagement, mobility, education, work and mental health sees that we have a duty to ensure everyone has access to eyecare

Primary Eyecare Services (PES), are the service provider and to date have around 50 practices signed up, with many more undertaking the necessary training. Data provided by PES show 68 patients were seen within the service in Greater Manchester, Cheshire and Mersey between December 2021 and April 2022. A promotion event with various stakeholders from the learning disability sector to encourage engagement and referrals into the service is planned for 20th June. Haroon Ahmed has recently completed his WOPEC training to deliver the service at his practice Tyrells and Embery in Blackburn, Lancashire. Haroon is involved with the Special School project and believes that delivery of this service 'broadens your optometric skills by taking you out of your comfort zone,' he continues that he finds it 'incredibly rewarding and you will definitely be changing the lives of some individuals.'

Conclusion

This service offers practitioners a chance to make a real difference to a person's quality of life. The service is valued by those who use it, their families and carers and has proven success. David Gleave, a Dispensing Optician at his family practice, Hepworth and Hall, in Pemberton, Wigan, has offered the service for many years. He said 'providing people with learning disabilities this pathway enables my practice to make a difference to someone's life and helps them to achieve their goals.'

Optometrists recognise the benefits of continuity of care and this service allows us to meet the eyecare needs of people with learning disabilities locally, in a familiar environment within a NHS commissioned service. Reducing health inequalities and allowing equal access to high quality eyecare closer to home is a key area of focus at present and this service supports delivery of this.