

Impact of Paediatric Eyecare Services in South Tyneside



Description of Intervention

Since 2016, South Tyneside had an effective Children's Post Vision Screening service, with primary care optometrists receiving referrals for diagnostic care following screening. The local service supported the NHS Long Term Plan to reduce health inequalities.¹ During the pandemic, this service was stepped down. In 2021 the Clinical Council for Eye Health Commissioning (CCEHC) recommended that Post Vision Screening services for Children were reinstated.²

The LOCSU model for children's eye care, ensures early intervention and management of poor vision using an integrated service model delivered in primary care optical practices. The South Tyneside service, following the LOCSU pathway, demonstrates the principles of Optometry First, with an integrated approach allowing the backlog caused by the pandemic to be tackled.

In part of South Tyneside, in-school vision screening for reception children, aged 4-5 years old, is delivered by school nurses rather than orthoptists/HES teams. Following the pandemic and associated workforce shortages the area had a lack of available nurses and resources were diverted elsewhere. The LOC were concerned; in 2019 South Tyneside was ranked as the 12th most income deprived local authorities in the country³ putting these children at increased risk of poorer health and educational outcomes.⁴ These inequalities were exacerbated by the closure of schools and suspension of screening during the pandemic. The LOC recognised the risk to this cohort of children and sought to reinstate the vision screening service. The first challenge was to identify who was responsible for reinstating the service. Having identified the responsible nursing manager, this led to submission of proposals by the LOC to reinstate the service and recruitment of more school nurses.

Once agreed, operating at pace, the LOC worked collaboratively with the local Trust and Primary Eyecare so that the service could relaunch in September 2022, ready for new reception children starting school. The Orthoptist team delivered training to the new workforce through August 2022.

Evidence of Impact

Results from Primary Eyecare show that 89 children entered the optometry service between October 2022 to March 2023. This is almost three times the number of children seen in the year 2018-19. The outcomes of service delivery were largely the same pre- and post-covid with 93% of children retained within primary care. Outcomes following the first visit showed almost half of children were discharged from the service, 47% of children had a follow up appointment booked and only 6 children (7%) required onward management within the hospital eye service.

Outcome of First Appointment Within The South Tyneside Paediatric Service



Key

- Discharged 46%
- Follow-up appointment booked 47%
- Referred to HES for management 4%

Intended Objectives

- Early intervention for patients who have a suspected eye defect which has been identified at school screening, with a maximum waiting time of two weeks
- Increased access and choice for patients
- Improved capacity, reduced waiting lists in secondary care to treat most sight threatening cases
- Integration of primary and secondary care services with improved communication
- Optimised use of skilled workforce in primary care.
- Good value for the NHS pound

Successes

- Effective collaboration between LA, primary and secondary care to reinstate the service
- Timely intervention with improved visual outcomes for local children
- Significant increase in children screened and referred into the optometry service
- Reduction in health inequalities with improved access and decreased risk of permanently reduced vision

Learnings and Next Steps

- The number of practices, post pandemic, delivering the service has reduced significantly (29%) due to local practice closures
- LOCs to promote risk of amblyopia and the increased risk of inequality with regard to education and career prospects
- Ongoing work into amblyopia treatment may benefit children missed during COVID⁵
- LOC to continue to engage with local schools to promote eyecare services
- Build on the relationships made with secondary care and H&SC to continue to deliver joined up care

Contact

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¹ NHS Long Term Plan » Online version of the NHS Long Term Plan
² Recommendations for the Immediate Management of the Child Vision Screening Backlog – College of Optometrists (college-optometrists.org)
³ Exploring local income deprivation (ons.gov.uk)
⁴ COVID-19 Suggestions for mitigating the impact on health inequalities at a local level (2)
⁵ ESCRS – A New “Ground-Breaking” Treatment for Amblyopia