

Improving Access to Eye Care: The South East London Easy Eye Care Pathway



This case study focuses on the Easy Eye Care Pathway in South East London, an innovative program to help individuals with learning disabilities and autism access essential community-based eye care services.

By reducing barriers and providing tailored care, this pathway ensures that vulnerable patients receive the necessary vision assessments and support they need to maintain eye health.

Introduction

People with learning disabilities and autism are at a significantly higher risk of undiagnosed and untreated eye conditions (1).

Many also experience barriers when accessing traditional hospital-based eye care, including the busy and clinical environment, sensory sensitivities, and communication difficulties (2), which can result in missed or delayed eye examinations.

Evidence indicates that adults with learning disabilities are 10 times more likely to experience eye conditions (3) compared with the general population.

The Easy Eye Care Pathway provides a comprehensive, inclusive and accessible community-based eye care service tailored specifically for individuals with learning disabilities and autism.

Commissioned by the South East London Integrated Care Board (ICB), through Primary Ophthalmic Solutions as a prime provider model, the service delivers personalised eye care through WOPEC accredited optometrists, utilising an upskilled workforce to ensure high-quality care. Launched on 20th September 2023, the pathway reduces barriers to routine eye care by offering extended appointment times, flexible delivery models and accessible communication formats to support the needs of people with learning disabilities and autism.

The service currently operates across six South East London boroughs: Bexley, Bromley, Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham, and Southwark, covering approximately 9,000 people with learning disabilities and 21,000 people with autism registered with a general practice in the region.

Benefits to Patients

The Easy Eye Care Pathway is designed to overcome the barriers faced by people with learning difficulties and autism when accessing traditional eyecare services.

The pathway enables self-referrals, as well as referrals from GPs undertaking Annual Health Checks, advocacy groups, the Hospital Eye Service and special schools delivering eye care. Referrals are accepted by the local Single Point of Access. Patients can find a participating practice online via an interactive practice locator map.

The pathway offers flexible, patient-centred care with several unique features:

- **Longer appointment times:** Patients receive extended appointment times or multiple visits based on their personal need to ensure thorough and comfortable assessments.
- **Easy-to-understand reports:** Patients receive easy-read eye health reports to help them better understand the outcomes of their assessment.
- **Bespoke training for clinicians:** Local optometrists and dispensing opticians participating in the pathway receive specialist training through WOPEC to work effectively with individuals with learning disabilities and autism. Training resources are also available to practice support staff.
- **Accessible local practices:** Patients can choose a local participating practice, from a [list of accredited opticians](#) or [use the practice locator map](#), that is convenient for them.
- **Community-based pre-visits:** Where helpful, patients can attend pre-visits to familiarise themselves with the practice environment helping to reduce anxiety and improve engagement.
- **NHS support:** Practice teams support patients to understand their NHS eligibility. Many patients are entitled to a free NHS sight test, improving access to essential eye care.
- **Personalised support:** Patients and/or their carers complete the [“About Me and My Eyes” form](#) (available online from [SeeAbility](#) or the optometrist), offering important background information to help clinicians understand the patient’s specific needs and tailor the care.
- **High-quality care through additional funding:** Participating practices receive additional NHS funding to deliver extended appointments, ensuring they can accommodate the unique needs of their patients and provide high quality care for this population.

Outcome for the Patient

The pathway aims to improve not only vision but overall health and wellbeing outcomes for this vulnerable population. Previously, many patients would avoid or struggle with routine eye tests in hospital settings due to environmental, sensory and communication challenges.

Through the Easy Eye Care Pathway, patients now have access to community-based eye care delivered in a familiar and supportive environment.

As highlighted by NHS England “By improving their vision children and young people can increase their independence, become more engaged with learning, achieve and enjoy their lives more”. (4)

Feedback from patients and carers indicates high levels of satisfaction, particularly due to the reduced stress associated with receiving care in community settings. Grace McGill, an Eye Care Champion for SeeAbility, has emphasised that the pathway provides much-needed care in a comfortable, familiar space, helping individuals feel supported throughout their appointment.

Patient Case Study: Abigail's Story

Abigail is a young woman with autism and significant learning disabilities. She was previously supported through the [Special School Eye Care Service](#) (5) and was first prescribed spectacles at the age of 14 in 2018 to correct significant myopia and astigmatism in both eyes.

Without her spectacles, Abigail is functionally visually impaired; however she achieves good vision when corrected and has otherwise healthy eyes.



After Abigail left her special school, her mother, Lorraine, struggled to access eye care in the community. Despite Abigail's clear need for regular eye examinations and spectacle updates, the lack of accessible provision meant that she struggled to obtain timely eye care and replacement glasses. In 2025, Abigail was able to access eye care through the Easy Eye Care Pathway.

She underwent an eye examination with optometrist Ray Small at Page and Small Opticians and received updated spectacles.

“The SeeAbility Easy Eye Care pathway has had a genuinely positive impact on how we deliver eye care to people with learning disabilities and/or autism. As an optometrist, it gives me the time, structure and support to adapt examinations to each individual, which leads to more accurate assessments and a far better experience for the patient.

“For our practice, the pathway allows us to provide inclusive, high-quality care in a sustainable way, with clearer communication and better coordination with carers and support services. Most importantly, patients benefit from a calmer, more personalised appointment where they feel understood and respected, resulting in improved engagement, trust and eye health outcomes.”

Ray Small, Optometrist, Page and Small Opticians

“Abigail was seen by Ray and team. It was such a delight for Abigail to be seen by someone who understands her condition and was still able to check her eyes.”

Lorraine, Abigail's Mother

A formal audit conducted in September 2024, alongside ongoing data collection, is demonstrating the pathway's effectiveness. The service is already recognised as more cost-effective than hospital-based care for standard sight tests. Expansion across London and beyond is one of the program's long-term goals.

Conclusion

The Easy Eye Care Pathway fills a crucial gap in eyecare provision for people with learning disabilities and autism by addressing their unique communication, sensory and time-related needs. The pathway offers flexible, accessible, and high-quality care delivered in a more familiar and community-based settings that are less overwhelming than traditional hospital environments.

Participating optometric practices receive additional funding to accommodate extended appointment times and personalised care to meet the specific needs of this population.

Hospitals are encouraged to refer eligible patients to this service, which can reduce strain on hospital services and prevent avoidable eye problems from escalating. This demonstrates the value of this community-based service for patients and providers.

General eye care pathways often fail to adequately account for the communication, time, and sensory needs of people with learning disabilities and autism. In contrast, the Easy Eye Care Pathway stands out for its flexibility, individualised approach and patient centred design. Its cost-effectiveness, combined with positive patient and carer experiences, positions it as a strong model for replication in other regions.



However, the pathway's continued success relies on raising awareness and educating GPs and primary care providers. Their role is crucial in identifying and referring eligible patients by discussing eye care during Annual Health Checks. Increased efforts to educate on appropriate referral processes could help boost referrals, making this pathway even more impactful.

Raising awareness of this service remains the key challenge in increasing referral rates. To address this, South East London ICB agreed that from April 2025, a text message promoting the Easy Eye Care pathway would be sent to every patient on GP learning disability registers to raise awareness and uptake of the service.

With a structured auditing process in place, the pathway is well-positioned to demonstrate its positive impact on patient outcomes.

As the service continues to expand across South East London, it highlights the importance of specialist community-based care and has the potential to influence eye care delivery for vulnerable populations across the UK.

References

- (1) [College of Optometrists Clinical Guidance](#)
- (2) [GOV.UK: Learning disability - applying All Our Health](#)
- (3) [Emerson E, Robertson J \(2011\) The estimated prevalence of visual impairment among people with learning difficulties in the UK. London: RNIB](#)
- (4) NHS England: [Eye Care](#)
- (5) [Special School Eye Care Service](#)

Further Reading

For further reading, please see [LOCSU Easy Eye Care Pathway for People with Learning Disabilities and/or autism](#).

Acknowledgements

Primary Ophthalmic Solutions
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