



The **ROYAL COLLEGE** of  
**OPHTHALMOLOGISTS**

# A four-point plan to strengthen eye care in Wales

March 2026

Around 112,000 people in Wales live with sight loss, and this number is predicted to double by 2050 as the population ages.<sup>1</sup> The economic impact across the UK runs into tens of billions of pounds each year,<sup>2</sup> while sight loss profoundly affects people at all stages of life by limiting everyday activities many of us take for granted.

Effective ophthalmology services are essential to preserving sight, slowing vision loss and supporting patients who rely on the NHS' busiest outpatient specialty. However, demand is high and rising. Workforce shortages, outdated facilities and limited digital capability are making it increasingly difficult for services to deliver efficient, timely care.

## The next Welsh Government should prioritise four commitments:

- 1. Deliver the National Clinical Strategy for Ophthalmology (NCSOphth)** by establishing an Ophthalmology and Eye Care Board to oversee implementation.
- 2. Invest in secondary ophthalmology services** by funding modern clinical space, equipment, and a national network of surgical hubs, diagnostic and treatment hubs and centres of excellence.
- 3. Expand the ophthalmology workforce** by prioritising an additional 36 ophthalmology training places by 2031, backed by appropriate resourcing.
- 4. Improve digital infrastructure for eye care** by ensuring OpenEyes electronic patient records are accessible across the whole system.



## The scale of the challenge

Demand for ophthalmology services has risen sharply in recent years. Waiting lists have increased by 169% over the past decade,<sup>3</sup> with around 157,000 patients at highest risk currently waiting for an outpatient appointment.<sup>4</sup> The prevalence of serious conditions such as glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy and age-related macular degeneration is predicted to increase by 13% in the coming years.<sup>3</sup>

With only 1.97 consultant ophthalmologists per 100,000 population – well below the recommended minimum of three – there are insufficient workforce numbers to meet patient demand in Wales. Chronic workforce gaps contribute to delays to treatment and increase the risk of irreversible but preventable sight loss.

Hospital buildings and equipment are also placing pressure on services.

**Evidence from ophthalmology clinical leads across Wales highlights the pressures facing eye care services:<sup>5</sup>**



**29%**

say their role has become less fulfilling in the past year



**75%**

cite lack of clinic space and poor digital infrastructure as key sources of dissatisfaction



**21%**

plan to retire by 2030

**“... both operating microscopes at end of life... theatre running on skeleton staff... [and] estates deemed not fit for purpose, with water coming through ceilings and plants growing through walls. It is not safe for the visually impaired.”**

*Ophthalmology clinical lead,  
North Wales*



## The commitments needed

To address these challenges, the next Welsh Government should commit to:

### 1. Delivering the NCSOphth

The Welsh Government should ensure full implementation of the NCSOphth.

Monitoring and implementation should be overseen by a new Ophthalmology and Eye Care Board, with representatives from across the eye care sector reporting directly to the Welsh Government.

The NCSOphth provides a blueprint for the sustainable future provision of ophthalmology services across Wales and has secured cross-party support. Its success in reforming overstretched services will depend on strong oversight and expert advice.

### 2. Investing in secondary ophthalmology services

The Welsh Government should fund a programme of investment in hospital eye care services, including improved clinical space, modern equipment and the development of a national network of surgical hubs, diagnostic and treatment hubs and centres of excellence in ophthalmology.

Investment in hospital eye care was identified as essential by the Health and Social Care Committee's inquiry into ophthalmology services in Wales and must mirror the progress already made in primary care optometry.

Currently, every ophthalmology unit in Wales lacks the physical space needed to treat patients efficiently in specialist clinics and theatres. Many services are operating with outdated or obsolete equipment in ageing hospital buildings, limiting their ability to deliver high-quality care.<sup>3</sup>

Urgent investment is needed to safely regionalise ophthalmology services, ensuring they can meet rising demand and deliver effective treatment now and in the future.

### 3. Expanding the ophthalmology workforce

The Welsh Government should increase ophthalmology training places by 36 by 2031, backed by appropriate resourcing to deliver high-quality training.

There is a strong interest from medical graduates in the specialty, yet the number of training places has barely increased over the past decade.<sup>6</sup> This shortage of consultants has contributed to significant growth in waiting lists.

The Welsh Government should support Health Education and Improvement Wales to strengthen recruitment and retention of ophthalmology resident doctors and consultants. Workforce expansion must also include investment in multidisciplinary teams, including nurses, orthoptists and hospital-based optometrists.

### 4. Improve digital infrastructure for eye care

The Welsh Government should modernise digital infrastructure to support integrated and efficient patient pathways across the eye care system.

Digital images are routinely captured during secondary care appointments, and many primary care practices also have high quality imaging capabilities. However, systems are often unable to share this information effectively.

The OpenEyes electronic health record system should be accessible across the whole eye care sector to ensure that clinicians can access consistent, accurate patient data across healthcare settings. Its introduction across Wales has suffered from repeated delays, with the pledge for full implementation by March 2026 not being met. The next government should act with urgency, supporting local health boards to deliver a full rollout of OpenEyes by July 2026.

Improving digital interoperability would reduce delays to treatment, prevent duplication of tests and unnecessary referrals, and improve communication between optometrists and ophthalmologists.

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**With the right workforce, modern facilities and effective digital infrastructure, Wales can build ophthalmology services that meet rising demand and protect patients from avoidable sight loss.**



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