

ADVOCACY FACT SHEET

The Global State of Vision

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes uncorrected refractive error (URE) as **the primary cause of vision impairment (VI), the second cause of blindness, and the largest unaddressed disability worldwide.**¹

Globally, **2.7 billion** or **1 in 3** people live with poor vision caused by URE² (URE includes myopia, hyperopia, astigmatism and presbyopia. It results in reduced visual acuity, leading to blurred vision and, when severe, visual impairment).³



Vision impairment costs the global economy **US\$411 billion** in yearly **productivity losses.**⁴

Without action, **half the global population**, roughly **4.8 billion**, is set to have a VI, primarily myopia, by **2050.**⁷



Over 90% of VI cases are **preventable**, and/or **treatable** with existing, cost-effective interventions.⁴ Globally, only 36% of people with distance VI due to refractive error have access to the appropriate care they need.⁵



With this baseline (36%), the 74th World Health Assembly (WHA) endorsed a global target for a **40% increase in effective coverage of refractive errors (eREC)** by 2030.⁶

The **WHO SPECS 2030 Initiative**⁷, building on WHA⁸/UNGA⁹ resolutions and particularly the eREC target, assists countries and stakeholders in addressing the unmet need for spectacles while ensuring the delivery of quality eye care.



Ireland Overview



- 1. High Prevalence of Vision Impairment:** With an estimated 270,000 people experiencing vision impairment in Ireland and a significant increase in vision impairment among children, there is a pressing need for accessible eye care services. This includes eye examinations and provision of spectacles, especially considering the economic and social impact of untreated vision impairment, and the potential for prevention through early detection and intervention.
- 2. Existing Disparities and Accessibility Challenges:** While publicly funded eye care services are available, disparities exist in access, particularly in rural areas and among certain demographics. Migrants, who may face additional unique barriers to healthcare, including language barriers, cultural differences, and lack of awareness about available services, could benefit significantly from dedicated vision clinics providing comprehensive services. By addressing geographic, financial, and informational barriers, these clinics can ensure equitable access to essential eye care for all.
- 3. Alignment with Global Commitments and Initiatives:** Ireland's commitment to global initiatives like Vision 2020 and the UN's goal of universal access to eye care by 2030 provides a compelling rationale for providing and expanding on accessible eye care. By aligning with these commitments and leveraging existing advocacy efforts and partnerships, Ireland can take proactive steps to address vision care needs, both for its citizens and for its migrant population, thereby improving overall public health and well-being.

Vision Needs in Ireland

- In 2020 in Ireland, there were an estimated **270,000** people with vision loss. Of these, **96.7% are visually impaired**, and 3.3% are blind.¹⁰
- The prevalence of **myopia**, **hyperopia** and **astigmatism** among participants aged 6–7 years old was 3.3%, 25% and 19.2%, respectively, and among participants aged 12–13 years old was 19.9%, 8.9% and 15.9%, respectively.¹¹
- Census 2016 figures show that since 2011, there has been a **20% increase** in the number of **children with vision impairment.**¹²
- A further five people/week became blind in Ireland since 2010, despite 75 to 80% of blindness being preventable.¹⁵
- There is a disparity between children needing and wearing spectacles in Ireland, indicating suboptimal uptake of eye care services.¹¹ Almost **one in four children fails to bring their spectacles** to school.¹⁴
- In the 2017 Fighting Blindness National Survey, respondents shared that **vision loss had impacts in all areas of their lives** - 44% career, 43% leisure and hobbies, 38% mobility, 33% day-to-day routine, 14% social withdrawal, 22% falls/accidents, 21% relationships, 19% isolation, 19% education, 13% how they communicate.¹⁵
- The **total economic cost of VI and blindness** was about €2.14 billion in 2010 among the 224,832 people with mild VI, moderate VI or blindness, projected to rise to nearly **€2.67 billion by 2020.**¹⁶

(1) World Health Organization. (2019, October 8). World report on vision. www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241516570

(2) Essilor. (2019, November 5). Eliminating Poor Vision in a Generation. What Will It Take To Eliminate Uncorrected Refractive Errors by 2050? The OneSight EssilorLuxottica Foundation. <https://onesight.essilorluxottica.com/research/eliminate-poor-vision-by-2050/>

(3) WHO TEAM Noncommunicable Diseases. (2013, October 6). Blindness and vision impairment: Refractive errors. www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/blindness-and-vision-impairment-refractive-errors

(4) Burton, M.J., Ramke, J., Marques, A.P., Bourne, R.R.A., Congdon, N., Jones, I., et al. The Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health: Vision beyond 2020. *Lancet Glob Health* (2021), 9(4), e489–e551. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(20\)30488-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(20)30488-5)

(5) World Health Organization. (2022). Report of the 2030 targets on effective coverage of eye care. World Health Organization. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/363158>

(6) World Health Organization. (2021). Integrated people-centred eye care, including preventable vision impairment and blindness Global targets for 2030 Draft decision. In: World Health Organization. https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA74/A74_9Ade3-en.pdf

(7) World Health Organization. (n.d.). SPECS 2030. www.who.int/initiatives/specs-2030

(8) Resolution WHA73.4. Integrated people-centred eye care, including preventable vision impairment and blindness. In: Seventy-third World Health Assembly, Geneva, 3 August 2020. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020. https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA73/A73_R4-en.pdf

(9) United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/75/L.108 – Vision for Everyone: accelerating action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, 6 July 2021. New York: United Nations; 2021. <https://www.unodocs.org/en/A/75/L.108>

Vision Care in Ireland

- **Public:** Publicly funded eye care services through the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive (HSE)¹⁷, are available, and include eye examinations and treatments for certain eye conditions.¹⁸
- **Private:** Optometrists and ophthalmologists offer services beyond public coverage. These services may include more comprehensive eye examinations, prescription glasses, and specialized treatments.¹⁹
- **Coverage:** Basic eye examinations are available through the public health system, particularly for demographics like children and those with medical cards. However, coverage for glasses and specialized treatments may vary. With a medical card, you receive a free eye examination every 2 years and receive free standard spectacles if needed, with additional needs considered for those with certain medical conditions. If you do not qualify for free services, the Treatment Benefit Scheme may provide coverage, which is based on social insurance (PRSI) contributions, also called the Optical Benefit Scheme. Private health services are covered by private health insurance, or else paid for by the patient, out of pocket¹⁷.
- **School screening:** Children can get free eye tests and treatment under pre-school developmental checks. School health services also do testing and refer children to free treatment.²⁰
- **Providers:** Ophthalmologists per million (2015) : **38.4** -- ranked 81 out of 191 globally
Optometrists per million (2020) : **155.9** – ranked 17 out of 157 globally¹⁰
- **Accessibility:** Access to vision care services can depend on factors such as geographic location, waiting times, and affordability, particularly for those relying solely on public services.¹⁶
- **Other governing bodies:** *Optometry Ireland* provides a voice for eye-care professionals in Ireland to advance the Optometry profession and advocate for high quality eye-care and good vision²¹ and, the *Irish College of Ophthalmologists* is the recognised training and professional body for medical and surgical eye doctors in Ireland, promoting high standards of care and improvements in patient safety and eye health.²²

Action and Policy

- There are **no specific statistics** on the number of **people without access** to health and vision care in Ireland, however ongoing **efforts are made by the government** and healthcare providers to improve accessibility and reduce disparities in health access.¹⁷
- Ireland has been committed to the global **Vision 2020 Strategy** since 2003, when the country's leaders committed to eliminating preventable blindness in Ireland by 2020. Through the National Vision Coalition, a **National Vision Strategy** was called for, requiring cohesive strategy, support for citizens from birth to old age, and achievable and implementable care pathways.²³
- This strategy and a **National Eye Health Plan**, with a specific national vision care policy, have **not yet been established**.¹⁰
- On 23 July 2021, the UN declared a commitment for member nations to achieve a global target to provide universal access to eye care by 2030, and eliminate preventable sight loss. This pledge however, will only be successful if governments, including Ireland, **commit** to providing access to these services and institute an actionable plan with guiding policies.²¹
- In Ireland, **waiting lists** to access public health services are continuously growing while the resources available at the community level from **optometrists remain underutilised**.²¹ Some individuals unable to access public eye care, or who have **specialized needs**, may face **financial barriers** in accessing private eye care or purchasing health insurance. **Rural areas** have **limited access** to specialised services, or even healthcare facilities altogether, compared to urban areas.¹⁶
- Organisations such as Vision Ireland¹², Optometry Ireland²¹ and Fighting Blindness²⁴, among other non-profit organisations and agencies, act and advocate for fair and accessible eye care for all Irish citizens. The OneSight EssilorLuxottica Foundation aims to eliminate uncorrected poor vision in a generation, and strives to establish eye clinics and vision care services in underserved and in-need communities, while leveraging the expertise of eye care professionals and partnerships with local organisations.²⁵
- Joint efforts of government, public and private actors will allow the nation to ensure care, and meet the growing demands of the eye health sector.

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