

ADVOCACY FACT SHEET

United Kingdom Overview



Population 68.35 million¹ - High-Income¹ - HDI 0.940² - GDP USD 3.34 trillion/GBP 2.69 trillion¹

- Vision Needs:** 73% of the population requires vision correction, with 16.4% experiencing uncorrected poor vision. Vision impairment is on the rise, with 4.3 million people affected in 2020, 39% of which are due to uncorrected refractive errors.
- Access & Barriers:** Barriers to eye care include disparities in socioeconomic status, ethnic minorities' lower healthcare engagement, and challenges in the eye care workforce and pediatric services.
- Action & Recommendations:** To improve eye care, a national strategy is needed to address workforce shortages, expand research, and promote early interventions, especially for myopia in children. Expanding optometrist roles, launching awareness campaigns, and aligning with WHO's SPECS 2030 initiative are key steps.

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**.³

Two sets of research estimate **global prevalence of poor vision** caused by URE



(URE includes myopia, hyperopia, astigmatism and presbyopia. It results in reduced visual acuity, leading to blurred vision and, when severe, visual impairment).⁴

-1.1 billion people live with **avoidable VI** (WHO; visual acuity cut-off 6/12)³, and **2.7 billion** or **1 in 3 people** have URE (Essilor; visual acuity cut-off 6/9)⁵.



Vision impairment costs the global economy

US\$411 billion in yearly **productivity losses**.⁶

Without action, **half the global population**,

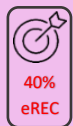
roughly **4.8 billion**, is set to have a VI,

primarily myopia, by **2050**.⁶



Over 90% of VI cases are **preventable**, and/or **treatable** with existing, cost-effective interventions.⁶

Globally, only 36% of people with distance VI due to refractive error (RE) have access to the appropriate care they need.⁷



With this baseline (36%), the 74th World Health Assembly (WHA) endorsed a global target for a

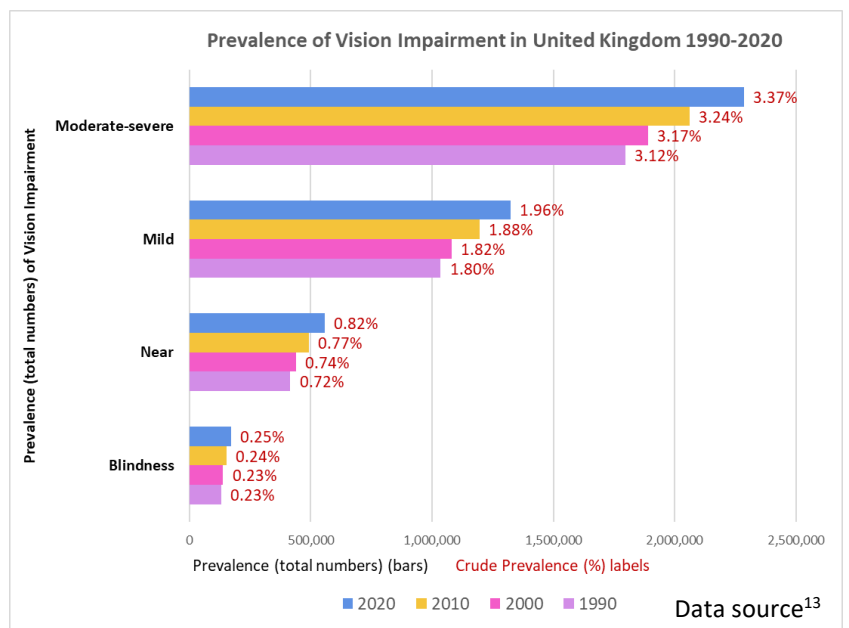
40% increase in effective coverage of refractive errors (eREC) by 2030.⁸

The **WHO SPECS 2030 Initiative**⁹, building on WHA¹⁰/UNGA¹¹ resolutions, particularly the eREC target, assists countries and stakeholders in addressing the unmet need for spectacles while ensuring the delivery of quality eye care.



Vision Needs in the UK (Research Studies)

- In **2022**, **73%** (over 49 million people) of the UK required vision correction. **Nearly 16.4%** (over 8 million people) have **uncorrected poor vision** in the UK.¹²



- In **2020**, total VI (near, mild, moderate-severe) was 4,166,875 - an increase from 2010 - 2020 by 11.15%, and an increase from 1990 - 2020 by 28.31%.¹³
- 2024:** Among 141,237 preschool children screened in The See4School program by NHS Scotland, 1.92–2.42% had bilateral visual impairment (BVI) from refractive error, excluding those under hospital eye care supervision.¹⁴
- 2023:** With children under-5's eye care, optometrists cited barriers like time, funding, and training gaps; enablers included awareness campaigns and system improvements.¹⁵
- 2022:** Two in five cases of vision impairment in the UK are caused by URE.¹⁶
- 2021:** The Royal National Institute for the Blind estimates that VI cases will double to 4 million by 2050. URE causes 39% of VI.¹⁷
- NICER Study:** Myopia among UK teens rose to 16.4%, over double the 1960s rate. Outdoor activity slowed progression, emphasizing prevention and early detection.¹⁸
- 2016:** A UK study of 11,186 children found 9% had poor vision (worse than 0.2 logMAR), lowering literacy scores. Poor vision disproportionately affected children in deprived, multiethnic settings.¹⁹

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Health System in the UK

- **Universal Access and Spending:** The NHS provides free primary, emergency, and psychiatric care based on need, with secondary care for residents and optional private insurance. In 2019, out-of-pocket expenses were 17% of health spending, while public funding accounted for 79.5%, comprising 10.2% of GDP.²⁰
- **Devolved Systems and Integration:** Healthcare is devolved to England, Scotland, Wales, & Northern Ireland, resulting in distinct systems. Integration challenges include fragmented IT and governance, still Northern Ireland has fully integrated health & social care.²⁰
- **Workforce and Innovations:** The UK faces low healthcare workforce densities and recruitment issues post-Brexit. COVID-19 delayed strategic goals but advanced telehealth and care integration. National frameworks support localized healthcare delivery.²⁰

Vision Care in the UK

- **Eye Care Workforce & Appointments:** The UK has over 16,000 optometrists, 3,500 ophthalmologists, 7,000 dispensing opticians, and 1,500 orthoptists. They provide 28.5 million primary eye care appointments and 9 million secondary care visits annually.²¹ However, challenges include delays in specialist care.^{21,22}
- **Regional Eye Care Variations:** Scotland offers free universal eye exams²³, unlike England²⁴, Wales²⁵, and Northern Ireland²⁶, where eligibility is limited to certain groups, such as minors, those over 60 or on specific benefits. Scotland's See4School non-mandatory vision screening program aims to cover preschoolers.¹⁴
- **Barriers to Eye Care:** Disparities exist among socioeconomically disadvantaged communities and ethnic minorities, with lower screening attendance and higher uncorrected refractive error prevalence.^{14,27,28} The growing ageing population, particularly in care homes, need increasing care.²⁹ Additionally, children struggle to access eye exams due to inadequate equipment and policies.³⁰
- **Systemic Challenges:** The NHS is transitioning to Integrated Care Systems (ICS), promoting collaboration among optometrists and ophthalmologists.³¹ However, gaps in commissioning, funding, and practitioner confidence in myopia management persist.^{16,31,32}
- **Policy & Innovation:** In 2022, a bill for a national eye health strategy in England sought to improve outcomes and reduce waiting times.³³ While no national strategy exists^{13,16}, NHS England launched a recovery and transformation program emphasizing digital solutions and better patient pathways^{33,34} (the UK-wide Eye Care Support Pathway) to provide timely information and support.³⁵
- **Socioeconomic Impact:** Sight loss cost the UK £36 billion annually in 2019, with an additional £2.5 billion attributed to the pandemic's effects on delayed care.²²

Professional Bodies and Associations: [Association of Optometrists](#); [British Undergraduate Ophthalmology Society](#); [The Royal College of Ophthalmologists](#); [British & Irish Paediatric Ophthalmology & Strabismus Association](#); [The British and Irish Orthoptic Society](#); [UK Ophthalmology Alliance \(UKOA\)](#); [The College of Optometrists](#); [Medical Ophthalmological Society](#); [North of England Ophthalmological Society \(NEOS\)](#); [The Royal Society of Medicine, Ophthalmology Section](#); [The Association of Eye Care Providers \(FODO\)](#); [UK and Éire Glaucoma Society](#)

Action and Policy

- The growing eye health challenges in the UK demand coordinated action and systemic changes to improve access, equity, and outcomes. The 2023 *The Eyes Have It* report highlights a critical eye care crisis, with over 640,000 patients awaiting ophthalmology treatment and severe workforce shortages affecting 75% of NHS eye units.
- It calls for a national eye care plan to address systemic issues, including better data sharing, workforce expansion, early interventions, and doubling research funding.^{36,37} Expanded funding could enhance coverage in deprived areas and improve referral pathways.¹⁴ Enhanced training and funding are critical for optometrists, as time, funding, and confidence gaps hinder pediatric eye care delivery. National awareness campaigns can educate caregivers on the importance of eye exams.¹⁵ Clear clinical guidelines, NHS integration, affordability and public awareness are essential for equitable myopia management.³²
- The World Health Assembly set a global target of a 40% increase in effective refractive error coverage (eREC).³⁸ The [WHO SPECS 2030](#) Initiative is a global framework aimed at supporting Member States to achieve this target through 5 strategic pillars; (s)ervices, (p)ersonnel, (e)ducation, (c)ost, and (s)urveillance and research.³⁹

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