

Transforming eye care services in Wales: Those at highest risk of going blind to receive prioritised treatment in UK first

It is estimated around 111,000 people in Wales are living with sight loss. This is predicted to increase by a third by 2030 and double by 2050.

Evidence suggests around 10% of new patients are at risk of irreversible sight loss compared to about 90% of follow-up patients.

Following concerns raised by consultant ophthalmologists and RNIB, the Welsh Government commissioned an NHS-led group to review the issues facing patients on waiting lists, particularly those who require ongoing treatment.

The £3.3m investment will allow health boards in Wales to start the necessary changes to transform their services.

Actions include:

- expanding services already established to move care closer to home, to ensure patients are seen in the most appropriate setting
- redesigning pathways to those nationally agreed
- introducing and further development of virtual clinics
- expanding the skill mix of staff, to include nurse injectors and optometrists to safely share care between community and hospital eye care professionals.

From April 2019, new guidelines will require hospital eye services to have procedures in place ensuring patients receive their assessment or treatment by the most suitable person within a clinically appropriate time. This means that those high risk patients who need be seen quickly due to their condition, should experience fewer delays.

The measures are based on priority and urgency of care required by each patient. Priority is the risk of harm associated with the patient's eye condition if the target appointment date is missed. Urgency is how soon that patient should be seen given the current state and/or risk of progression of the condition.

Wales is the first UK nation to introduce a measure of this kind for eye care patients.

Health Minister, Vaughan Gething said:

“Ensuring good eye care is absolutely vital, so we do not want people to risk their sight by having to wait a long time for a follow up appointment after having initial assessment.

“The £3.3m investment I’m announcing today will allow health boards across Wales to make the necessary investments to start to transform eye care services. This and the new measure we are putting in place will go a long way to improving services for people in Wales.”

“We were the first government in the world to have an eye care delivery plan, and I’m pleased we are leading the way again by being the first country in the UK to introduce a performance measure of this kind for eye care.”

RNIB Cymru’s Director Ansley Workman said:

“Cancelled and delayed eye clinic appointments can leave patients at risk of irreversible sight loss. No one should lose their sight because of a treatable condition. That’s why it’s so important that all health boards meet the March 2019 deadline for implementing the new Measures and prioritise patients based on their risk of coming to harm.

“This investment from Welsh Government is vital and should transform services across Wales, making sure that those at greatest risk of permanent sight loss are treated quickly and effectively.

“We want to thank Welsh Government for their continued commitment to improving eye health in Wales. Now it is up to health boards across the country to make this positive change happen for their patients and lead the way for the rest of the UK.”