



Pre-Budget 2022 submission to government

Protecting the nation's eye health and preventing avoidable sight loss

About us

We are the representative professional body for primary eye care providers in Ireland. Our members provide more than half of all primary eye care. We exist to ensure members can deliver patient-focused care to people of all ages and means in primary care settings.

Pre-Budget 2022 – investing in eye care to prevent avoidable harm and costs

FODO Ireland¹, the National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI)² and the Irish College of Ophthalmologists³ have all raised concerns about excessive hospital waiting lists for eye care as these significantly increase the risk of avoidable sight loss.

These capacity issues and associated risks predate the pandemic and have been made worse by Covid-19 and protracted delays in implementing recommendations in the 2017 Health Service Executive (HSE) Primary Care Eye Services Review Group Report.

To help address system pressures in eye care and to help avoid the associated costs and impacts of preventable sight loss on individuals, their families and wider society, we are calling on the government to:

1. Tackle longstanding inequalities in access to children's eye care services

In most high-income countries, eye problems in childhood are well managed, but, regrettably, in Ireland, services are failing. Census figures show that since 2011 there has been a 20% increase in the number of children with impaired vision.⁴

Today, children experience significant delays in accessing essential eye care services and are at risk of suffering worse visual outcomes as a result. For example, researchers have found children in Ireland have significantly higher rates of 'lazy eye' (amblyopia) than children in Northern Ireland, with uncorrected vision defects and socioeconomic disadvantage as contributing factors. Researchers added that "children without obvious visible eye defects were less likely to access eye care in Ireland, resulting in missed opportunities for intervention where necessary".⁵

To address this, there is now an urgent need to implement the long-overdue government commitment to improve equality in access to children's eye care.⁶ This can be achieved by funding sight tests for children in primary eye care settings. This is currently only available for parents with the ability to pay and represents a major inequality in access.⁷

Action: Allocate funds to allow eye testing for under 16s to be provided by primary eye care (optical) practices

2. Ensure people who depend on the Medical Card have access to preventive eye care services now and into the future

At present, the medical card scheme underfunds eye care services, making them unsustainable. We are calling on the government to invest in eye care and prevention by funding medical card eye examinations at the same rate as PRSI treatment benefit rates as a matter of equality and public health.

Action: Secure the future of primary eye care provided for patients under the medical card scheme by ensuring parity of fees with PRSI funded eye care.

Action: Introduce an online eligibility and authorisation system for medical card patients wishing to access eyecare in the community. The current cumbersome paper system acts as a barrier to the most in need in society getting eye care in the same way as other groups.

3. Help prevent sight loss by investing in enhanced primary eye care services

There is now an urgent need to address chronic capacity issues in the hospital eye care service by utilising the whole care pathway and the skills and facilities in primary eye care to enable patients to be treated earlier, in the right place at the right time. This will help prevent the current high levels of avoidable sight loss, which not only impact the lives and wellbeing of individuals and families but also add to long-term costs for the State.

Investment in enhanced primary eye care services alongside hospitals will offer value for money and ensure sustainable services to reduce the current high levels of avoidable sight loss, the costs of which are currently estimated to be €1.1 billion per year.⁸

Action: Fund an electronic referral system so that eye care professionals in primary and secondary care can work together to meet eye health needs and treat patients at the right point in the pathway, preventing bottlenecks, long waiting times and delays to care in hospitals.

Action: Invest in more care in primary eye care settings to improve the efficiency of eye care services, reduce pressure on hospital eye departments and prevent avoidable sight loss.

Further information

We would be happy to provide further information or to meet with Department of Finance and HSE officials to discuss workable and affordable solutions to these national public health and equalities challenges.

¹ FODO Ireland, Covid-19 correspondence with the Department of Health and HSE

² NCBI, NCBI warns of cases unnecessary blindness due to waiting lists, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/news/2020-05-19-ncbi-warns-of-cases-unnecessary-blindness-due-to-waiting-lists/>

³ Irish College of Ophthalmologists, ICO Statement – Phased resumption of Services for Eye Care Patients during COVID-19, <https://www.eyedoctors.ie/press-release/May-19-2021/ICO-Statement-%E2%80%93-Phased-resumption-of-Services-for-Eye-Care-Patients-during-COVID-19/1138.html>

⁴ NCBI, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/policy-advocacy/facts-about-sight-loss/>

⁵ 2019, Harrington S, Breslin K, O'Dwyer V, et al. Comparison of amblyopia in schoolchildren in Ireland and Northern Ireland: a population-based observational cross-sectional analysis of a treatable childhood visual deficit, [BMJ Open doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2019-031066](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2019-031066)

⁶ HSE, Primary Care Eye Services Review Group Report

⁷ Eye care needs in childhood <https://www.fodoireland.ie/policymakers/#childhood>

⁸ 2016, Green et al. The Cost of Blindness in the Republic of Ireland 2010-2020, <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/joph/2016/4691276/>