

Objective

This briefing paper has been prepared for Tees Valley Joint Health Scrutiny Committee (TVJHSC), on behalf of Sarah Burns, Joint Head of Integrated Strategic Commissioning, NHS North East & North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (County Durham) and Felicity White Associate Director of Operations, County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust (CDDFT).

Aim

The briefing paper aims to inform TVJHSC of the national and regional situation with Paediatric Ophthalmology Services and the situation with our local service at County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust (CDDFT).

Background and introduction

Hospital eye services are overstretched, due to a combination of an ageing population, new treatment availability and guidelines, and a shortage of sub-specialty Consultants for example glaucoma, medical retina, and paediatric. Nationally Ophthalmology is recognised as the busiest outpatient attendance by specialty and accounts for 8% of the 94 million hospital out-patient attendances.¹

County Durham Commissioners and CDDFT have worked collaboratively for several years to introduce community optometry services to relieve pressures on overstretched clinics to allow Consultants and the wider team to manage those patients with more complex eye conditions.

Consultant Paediatric Ophthalmologists head up a multi-disciplinary team of clinicians to look after eye conditions in babies, infants and children. The main risk areas being prevention of sight loss at birth, retinopathy of prematurity and prevention of amblyopia (lazy eye).

There is a national shortage of Paediatric Ophthalmologists and limited expressed interest regionally, from the current trainee cohort. Service provision has been critically affected in the last 2 years, following the retirement of 2 Paediatric Ophthalmologists and the scaling back of another Paediatric Ophthalmologist, from the 7 across the region.

The Ophthalmology service explored all options to manage the situation including private providers, however, reached the stage at the end of May 2022 where they were no longer able to safely accept routine referrals to the Paediatric sub-speciality of ophthalmology and therefore suspended routine referrals to Electronic Referral System (ERS) from 1st June 2022.

All children under the care of Paediatric Ophthalmology services at CDDFT have continued to have their care delivered as planned. CDDFT have an arrangement in place with regional hospitals to support children undergoing treatment.

A small number of children required transferring to another hospital for specialist Consultant Paediatric Ophthalmology input. Discussions have taken place with the parent/carer to transfer to the most convenient hospital for them and their family. Information around transport arrangements and how to claim back additional travel costs has also been shared.

¹ GIRFT Programme National Specialty Report (2019)
www.GettingItRightFirstTime.co.uk

From 1st June 2022 children requiring a routine referral to Paediatric Ophthalmology have been referred to South Tyneside & Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne NHS Foundation Trust or South Tees NHS Foundation Trust. Communications outlining the change in referral process have been shared with GP Practices, Health Visitors and Local Optical Committee's (LOCS).

Current situation

CDDFT appreciate the support of all our partners in ensuring Paediatric ophthalmology patients receive care whilst CDDFT service is temporary suspended. Whilst the initial term discussed was around 6 to 18 months, following a successful recruitment programme this now looks realistic to reopen from January/ February 23. We will aim to confirm with clarity by the end of November.

NHS North East & North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (County Durham)
County Durham & Darlington NHS Foundation Trust