

# Seeing the Problem: The Struggles of Accessing Specialist Eye Care in Sandwell

**March 2025**



**healthwatch**  
Sandwell



**Engaging  
Communities  
Solutions**

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## Introduction

*Healthwatch England* says “Eye care is the busiest outpatient speciality in the NHS in England, and with an ageing population, demand is set to grow further. According to NHS statistics, of the nearly 59,000 people currently waiting for specialist eye care as of December 2024, only two thirds (66.8%) have been waiting less than the 18-week target set by Government, compared to a target of 92%.”

## What we did

Healthwatch Sandwell engaged with residents to understand their experiences with specialist eye care services. We spoke to individuals who were waiting for treatment, as well as those who had already received care, to gather insights into the challenges they faced and the quality of support they received. Our aim was to highlight any concerns, identify areas for improvement, and ensure that patient voices are heard in shaping better eye care services.

## Who took part

As part of the project criteria, Healthwatch Sandwell engaged with a diverse range of people, including a number of Black and Asian residents, to understand their experiences with specialist eye care services. We explored their journeys, from waiting times to receiving treatment. By highlighting these voices, we aim to ensure that eye care services are accessible to the needs of all communities. We visited people at Sandwell Visually Impaired (SVI), Sandwell Asian Support Service (SAFS), Tipton Bangladeshi Community Centre and Sandwell Outpatient Eye Treatment Centre.

A demographic breakdown of participants can be found on pages 13 and 14.

## Our findings

Healthwatch England new report **A strain on sight: Waiting for NHS specialist eye care** has now been published.

During our engagement in Sandwell, **80%** of people told us their eyesight had worsened while they waited and **30%** said it had deteriorated significantly.

Our findings have been divided into two sections.

- Currently waiting for specialist eye care
- Received specialist eye care

Each section will show what participants were asked and provide the answers that we were given. All the questions are non mandatory, which means some participants chose to not answer.

## Currently waiting for specialist eye care

### Key Findings

Our findings show that long waits for specialist eye care are a common issue. **40%** of people we spoke to had been waiting for over a year, while another **40%** had been waiting between four months and a year. Only **20%** had been seen within three months. One person told us *“the wait has been very long - appointment cancelled as consultant was on holiday, offered replacement appointment 7 months later. Vision impairment services are not vision impairment friendly.”*

Another two respondents shared how the wait has affected their mental health saying *“losing my sight has sent me into years of deep depression which was very hard to come out of. Sandwell Visually Impaired Group (SVI) have been a brilliant and supportive organisation and community.”* and *“I was anxious about the wait and wondering how long I would have to wait. It did not help my mental health.”*

These delays have had a real impact on people's vision. **80%** told us their eyesight had worsened while they waited – **30%** said it had deteriorated significantly. We received the following comment *“I had to wait a long time in the eye clinic A&E and am Type1 diabetic. I was not informed about what was wrong with my eyes, they are not a lot better still.”*

**40%** of respondents had to see multiple healthcare professionals before finally being referred, and **30%** were told to speak to their GP first. Only **10%** were referred directly to a specialist at their first appointment, one person told us *“I suffer badly with dry eyes and visit the eye centre often for this but have not been offered any specialist treatment to sort the problem out. This is having a very negative impact on my life”* another person told us *“I had a stroke 5 years ago; my speech is affected. I am not happy that my GP Practice gives my appointments over the phone, I need in person with my daughter's support.”*

**50%** of respondents said they would never go private, while **33.3%** said they would if they could afford it.

Waiting for specialist eye care has had a serious impact on people's daily lives with **63%** saying it had affected their ability to work, and **50%** reported an impact on their independence. **43%** told us they were struggling with household chores and **57%** find it harder to care for others.

Social and mental well-being have also suffered, **38%** said the wait had affected their ability to socialise, while **63%** found it had impacted their relationships with loved ones. **57%** of respondents said it had interfered with hobbies like reading or watching TV, and **50%** reported a negative effect on their mental health. **63%** said their ability to stay active had been affected.

Despite these challenges, support while waiting has been limited with **44%** had been offered mental health support, and **22%** had received help with day-to-day activities, updates about their waiting time, or guidance on who to contact if their condition worsened. No one reported receiving any other kind of support, and **22%** said they had not been offered any help at all.

**Q. What specialist eye care or treatment are you currently waiting for?**

Macular degeneration – laser treatment

Glaucoma

Eyes are affected by cold and makes them water, the patient needs an operation to correct it.

Cataracts – 3 people

I have a cyst inside eye socket – chalazion, had it for 2 years now

Glaucoma, I have type 2 diabetes and I'm on insulin have had multiple check-ups

My glass eye keeps coming out, I need someone to look at my bottom eye lid to see if it can be bought up to hold eye in

**Q. How long have you been on a waiting list for specialist eye care?**

Less than 1 month – **1 (10%)**

1 to 3 months – **1 (10%)**

4 to 6 months – **2 (20%)**

7 to 12 months – **2 (20%)**

Over 1 year – **4 (40%)**

**Q. Have you noticed any deterioration of your vision whilst waiting?**

I have experienced considerable deterioration in my vision – **3 (30%)**

I have experienced some deterioration in my vision – **5 (50%)**

I have not experienced any deterioration in my vision – **2 (20%)**

**Q. How many times did you see a GP, optician, or other eye care professional before you were referred to an eye care specialist about your condition?**

The first time I saw a health professional about my eye condition, I was referred directly to an eye care specialist – **1 (10%)**

The first time I saw an optician or another eye care professional about my condition, they told me to speak to my GP. My GP immediately referred me to an eye care specialist – **4 (40%)**

I had multiple appointments with my GP, optician, or another eye care professional before being referred to an eye care specialist – **3 (30%)**

Other – **2 (20%)**

If you chose other, please tell us more below.

Routine eye test but also have T2 diabetes

Can't get into GP so visited the eye clinic in Birmingham

Raised the issue about 6 months ago part of my diabetic screening

**Q.** We'd like to ask you about your willingness to access private treatment. Please select one of the statements from the following list that best applies to your situation:

- I'd have gone private for a shorter wait, but I can't afford it - **2 (33%)**
- I'm looking into whether I can afford private treatment because the NHS wait is too long - **0**
- I'm considering borrowing money to access private treatment - **0**
- I can afford private treatment and am arranging it - **0**
- I would only pay for private treatment in the most extreme situations - **0**
- I won't use private treatment and never would - **3 (50%)**
- Other - **1 (17%)**

**Q.** To what extent has the wait for eye care or treatment negatively impacted the following areas of your life?

Negative impact	None	Slight	Substantial
Ability to work (voluntary or paid)	5 (63%)	1 (13%)	2 (25%)
Ability to live independently	4 (50%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)
Ability to carry out daily household tasks	2 (29%)	2 (29%)	3 (43%)
Ability to care for others	4 (57%)	0 (0%)	3 (43%)
Ability to socialise	3 (38%)	2 (25%)	3 (38%)
My ability to exercise	5 (63%)	2 (25%)	1 (13%)
My mental health and wellbeing	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	4 (50%)
Relationships with my partner, close friends, or family	5 (63%)	1 (13%)	2 (25%)
Ability to continue with hobbies (e.g. reading, watching tv, for example)	4 (57%)	0 (0%)	3 (43%)

**Q.** Have you been offered any of the following types of support from the NHS whilst waiting for care or treatment for your eye condition? Please select all that apply.

Mental health support – **4 (44%)**

Getting information, advice, and support to help with day-to-day activities such as employment, driving, claiming benefits, care – **2 (22%)**

Being kept up to date about your waiting time – **2 (22%)**

Knowing who to contact if your condition changes or you have any questions – **2 (22%)**

Don't know – **0**

None of the above – **2 (22%)**

Other kind of support – **0 (0%)**

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### Received specialist eye care

#### Key findings

**86%** of people were seen within six months, and **24%** received treatment in less than a month. However, **14%** had to wait over a year before getting the care they needed. One person told us their wait wasn't that long because they *"said it was impacting on their mental health due to appearance."*

For many, these waits came at a cost to their vision. **38%** said their eyesight had deteriorated significantly while waiting, while another **33%** experienced some deterioration. One person told us *"not sure as they state my eyes have changed. Pay for new glasses and still can't see out of them."* **29%** reported no change in their vision.

Getting referred to a specialist wasn't always straightforward. Just **19%** were referred immediately at their first appointment. Meanwhile, **38%** had to go to their GP after first seeing an optician or other professional, and another **38%** needed multiple appointments before finally being referred, we received the following comment *"Not enough care! You are going blind – Goodbye!!"* Another person told us *"High street services are more interested in selling glasses than having skills, training is needed. I had checks at such places, but they didn't pick up my eye problems, a family optician did."*

Private treatment was not an option for most people due to cost. While **37%** said they would have gone private to avoid long waits, they couldn't afford it. **32%** said they wouldn't use private healthcare under any circumstances, and **11%** said they might consider it in the future if their condition worsened. One person shared the following feedback *"Treatment was complex – cataracts. Originally offered cataract glasses, not happy with decision. Operation done under local anaesthetic but with nystagmus eyes, could not stay still, had to stop operation and have under general anaesthetic later. I feel decisions are made on cost rather than what is best for patient."*



**38%** of respondents told us waiting has affected their ability to work, **44%** said it had made living independently more difficult and **56%** struggled with household tasks.

Caring for others has also been challenging, with **45%** reporting an impact. People's social lives have also suffered, with **70%** saying they found it harder to meet up with others. Mental health has been particularly affected, **53%** of people said they had noticed a slight decline, while **35%** reported a substantial impact.

Relationships with family and close friends have also been affected for **44%** of people, and almost half (**47%**) said they had struggled to continue hobbies they enjoy, like reading or watching TV.

Despite the challenges people have faced, we were told that support while waiting has been limited with only **18%** being offered mental health support, and **18%** receiving advice on day-to-day activities like work, driving, or benefits. One person told us *"I need carer support as I still can't see well after treatment, can't see steps etc or read, do my hobbies"* and another person said *"Hard when blind getting to treatment sites."*

**27%** were kept informed about their waiting time, and **32%** knew who to contact if their condition worsened and **45%** said they hadn't been offered any support at all.



We asked.

How long did you have to wait before receiving treatment from specialist eye care?

Less than 1 month - **5 (24%)**  
1 to 3 months - **8 (38%)**  
4 to 6 months - **5 (24%)**  
7 to 12 months - **0 (0%)**  
Over 1 year - **3 (14%)**

Did you experience any deterioration of your vision whilst waiting?

I have experienced a lot of deterioration in my vision - **8 (38%)**  
I have experienced some deterioration in my vision - **7 (33%)**  
I have not experienced deterioration in my vision - **6 (29%)**  
Don't know - **0 (0%)**

**Q.** How many times did you see a GP, optician, or other eye care professional before you were referred to an eye care specialist about your condition?

The first time I saw a health professional about my eye condition, I was referred directly to an eye care specialist - **4 (19%)**

The first time I saw an optician or another eye care professional about my condition, they told me to speak to my GP. My GP immediately referred me to an eye care specialist - **8 (38%)**

I had multiple appointments with my GP, optician, or another eye care professional before being referred to an eye care specialist - **8 (38%)**

Other - **1 (5%)**

Other responses - I self referred to the eye clinic A&E as in pain and lost vision. skin cancer on eye lid

**Q.** We'd like to ask you about your willingness to access private treatment. Please select one of the statements from the following list that best applies to your situation:

I'd have gone private for a shorter wait, but I couldn't afford it - **7 (37%)**

I borrowed money to access private treatment - **0**

I could afford private treatment and decided to get it - **0**

I didn't access private eye care, but I would consider it in the future if my condition was bad enough - **2 (11%)**

I didn't use private eye care and never would - **6 (32%)**

Other - **4 (21%)**

**Q.** To what extent has the wait for eye care or treatment negatively impacted the following areas of your life?

Negative impact	None	Slight	Substantial
Ability to work (voluntary or paid)	5 (38%)	3 (23%)	5 (38%)
Ability to live independently	5 (28%)	5 (28%)	8 (44%)
Ability to carry out daily household tasks	3 (17%)	10 (56%)	5 (28%)
Ability to care for others	5 (45%)	3 (27%)	3 (27%)
Ability to socialise	6 (35%)	6 (35%)	5 (29%)
My ability to exercise	5 (38%)	5 (38%)	3 (23%)
My mental health and wellbeing	2 (12%)	9 (53%)	6 (35%)
Relationships with my partner, close friends, or family	8 (44%)	4 (22%)	6 (33%)
Ability to continue with hobbies (e.g. reading, watching tv, for example)	4 (21%)	6 (32%)	9 (47%)

**Q.** Have you been offered any of the following types of support from the NHS whilst waiting for care or treatment for your eye condition? Please select all that apply.

Mental health support – **4 (18%)**

Getting information, advice, and support to help with day-to-day activities such as employment, driving, claiming benefits, care – **4 (18%)**

Being kept up to date about your waiting time – **6 (27%)**

Knowing who to contact if your condition changes or you have any questions – **7 (32%)**

Don't know – **0**

None of the above – **10 (45%)**

Other kind of support – **0**

## Government Manifesto

In their manifesto, the new Labour government committed to allowing eye care professionals, such as opticians, to make direct referrals to specialist services or tests. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

**'I trust an optician to refer me directly to NHS specialist services or tests for any eye condition I might have, without having to see a GP first.'**

Strongly Agree - **10 (34%)**

Agree - **13 (45%)**

Neutral - **4 (14%)**

Disagree - **1 (3%)**

Strongly Disagree - **1 (3%)**

**'I would be comfortable going to qualified professionals working in a high-street opticians for the monitoring or treatment of an eye condition.'**

Strongly Agree - **6 (21%)**

Agree - **5 (18%)**

Neutral - **8 (29%)**

Disagree - **7 (25%)**

Strongly Disagree - **2 (7%)**

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## Conclusion

Our findings highlight the significant impact that long waits for specialist eye care are having on people in Sandwell. Delays in treatment are common, with many waiting months or even over a year to be seen. These extended waits have led to worsening vision for most people, affecting their independence, mental health, and ability to carry out daily activities. Many shared how the uncertainty and deterioration in their eyesight left them feeling anxious, depressed, and struggling with everyday life.

Getting referred to a specialist is not always a smooth process, with many patients having to navigate multiple healthcare appointments before finally receiving the care they need. Some expressed frustration with a lack of support from healthcare providers, delays in receiving treatment, and the feeling that their concerns were not being taken seriously. For those who considered private treatment, financial barriers meant it simply wasn't an option, leaving them with no choice but to wait for NHS care.

Beyond the physical impact, the emotional and social effect has been significant. Many respondents reported being unable to participate in hobbies or social activities and struggling with their mental well-being. Relationships with family and friends have suffered, and for those in work, their ability to do their job has been affected. Despite these challenges, support while waiting for treatment has been limited. Many felt uninformed about their waiting times, uncertain about who to contact if their condition worsened, and without access to practical or mental health support.

These findings make it clear that improvements are needed in both reducing waiting times and ensuring that people receive better support while they wait. Addressing these issues will not only improve patient experiences but also help prevent further deterioration in people's vision and overall well-being. Specialist eye care services must be more accessible, responsive, and person-centred, ensuring that no one is left feeling abandoned while waiting for vital treatment.

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## Recommendations

Based on our findings, we recommend the following actions to improve specialist eye care services and support for those waiting for treatment in Sandwell:

- Explore options for fast-tracking urgent cases, particularly for those experiencing significant deterioration in vision.
- Ensure clearer and more consistent referral pathways so patients are not delayed by multiple appointments with different healthcare professionals.
- Improve collaboration between primary care, high street opticians, and hospital eye services to streamline patient journeys.
- Provide regular updates on waiting times so patients are informed about their care journey.
- Improve the accessibility of vision impairment services, ensuring they are truly user-friendly for those with sight loss.
- Expand access to mental health support for those struggling with anxiety or depression due to delays in treatment.
- Offer practical advice and support on managing vision loss, including help with employment, benefits, and independent living.
- Ensure transport and accessibility issues are addressed so patients can attend appointments without additional stress.
- Ensure equal access to care, particularly for those with additional needs such as disabilities, language barriers, or complex health conditions.

## Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Sandwell would like to thank all the participants who the time to talk to us about their eye care experiences. We would also like to thank Sandwell Visually Impaired, SAFS Sandwell, Tipton Bangladeshi Community Centre and Sandwell Outpatient Eye Treatment Centre.

## Demographics

Below is a breakdown of people who took part in our survey.

Are you:

A woman - **21 (72%)**  
A man - **8 (28%)**  
Non-binary - **0**  
Prefer to self-describe - **0**  
Prefer not to say - **0**

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Please tell us your age:

16 to 17 years - **0**  
18 to 24 years - **0**  
25 to 49 years - **2 (7%)**  
50 to 64 years - **6 (21%)**  
65 to 79 years - **15 (52%)**  
80+ years - **6 (21%)**  
Prefer not to say - **0**

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Please select any of the following that apply to you:

I have a disability - **12 (44%)**  
I have a long-term condition - **20 (74%)**  
I am a carer - **1 (4%)**  
None of the above - **1 (4%)**  
I prefer not to say - **0 (0%)**

Please select your ethnicity:

Asian/Asian British: Bangladeshi – **3 (10%)**  
Asian/Asian British: Indian – **1 (3%)**  
Asian/Asian British: Pakistani – **1 (3%)**  
Black/Black British: Caribbean – **7 (24%)**  
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: Black Caribbean and White – **1 (3%)**  
White: British/English/Northern Irish/Scottish/Welsh – **16 (55%)**

How would you describe your current financial situation?

Very comfortable (I have more than enough money for living expenses and a lot spare to save or spend on extras or leisure) – **0**

Quite comfortable (I have enough money for living expenses and a little spare to save or spend on extras or leisure) – **15 (52%)**

Not very comfortable (I have just enough money for living expenses and little else) – **7 (24%)**

Not at all comfortable (I don't have enough money for living expenses and sometimes or often run out of money) – **3 (10%)**

Prefer not to say – **4 (14%)**

We asked participants which area they lived, below are their responses. **\*this was not a mandatory question.**

Oldbury – 2  
West Bromwich, Sandwell – 5  
Great Barr, Sandwell – 4  
Smethwick, Sandwell – 2  
Tipton, Sandwell – 1  
Rowley Regis – 1  
West Bromwich / Smethwick border – 1  
West Bromwich, Greets Green – 1  
Stone Cross – 1  
Tipton Green – 1  
Hateley Heath – 1  
Wednesbury, Sandwell – 1  
Sandwell – 3

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## Get in touch

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