



Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0EU

Thursday 8th October 2020

Re: UK National Eye Health and Hearing Study

We are writing in our capacity as Chair, Co-Chair and Vice Chairs of the APPG on Eye Health and Visual Impairment.

2020 is a key year for the global eye care community as it marks the culmination of a decade-long global project (Vision2020) supported by the World Health Organization, which aimed to reduce avoidable vision impairment worldwide. Also today - Thursday 8th October - is World Sight Day where the global numbers of people blind and vision impaired will be published by the Vision Loss Expert Group (VLEG) and the Global Burden of Disease Study. These data will show that despite the efforts to control eye disease, the ageing of the World's populations is outpacing these efforts. This is the case not only in the developing World, but also in high income countries such as the UK, where we use studies of eye disease in individual countries to understand the burden of unmet need. Shockingly, unlike many countries in developing World and a few high-income countries, such as the Australian government funded national survey, the UK has never surveyed its national population for numbers of people with reduced eyesight and its causes. A small UK study 20 years ago showed 3% of 65-74 year olds were vision impaired rising to 35% of those aged 85+ years. People in care homes were almost 3x more likely to be vision impaired. Using data from other high-income countries we predict that over the last 20 years this has increased significantly in the UK, with probably 3.7 million people unable to meet the driving standard because of undiagnosed problems with their vision. 90% of this is estimated to be preventable but relying on data from other countries to predict our own situation means we can at best be speculative.

Sight loss has been estimated to cost the UK more than £28 billion per annum, and unaddressed hearing loss more than £30 billion - but we don't have the information we need to improve services and deliver them more efficiently and effectively to reduce these losses. We need reliable, up-to-date data on sensory loss and its main causes if the NHS's Long-Term Plan is to be delivered successfully in the eye health and hearing sectors. This is particularly pressing given that there is now evidence that the Covid-19



pandemic is rapidly scaling up the unmet need in the population. Experts in June this year estimated that from the period between March and June 2020, over 10,000 people were at risk of suffering irreversible damage to their sight because of missed care during lockdown.

We have been supporting the development of the UKNEHS for several years now – the case for investment has been endorsed by Sir Michael Rawlins and created by professionals in the UKs ophthalmology, optometry, orthoptics and hearing loss communities.

Professor Rupert Bourne, Chief investigator for the UKNEHS has said *'In my practice as an eye consultant, a third of people I see with glaucoma who have been diagnosed for the first time have moderate to advanced glaucoma which could have been halted if seen earlier- the vision loss they have is now irreversible. 100 people under 40 last year lost their sight due to glaucoma'* - This is a disgrace and unacceptable in a country with a free NHS and even free eye tests. If we don't know what the level of need is at the community level, we cannot plan services effectively. £2.5 billion is spent on eyecare by the NHS currently, yet we do not know whether this is targeted efficiently and clearly it isn't given the scale of unmet need we are witnessing.

The UKNEHS study will close this gap as it will use a random sample of the population and is specifically designed to target data collection towards traditionally hard to reach individuals. There are huge variations in access to care for vision and hearing loss across the UK, despite the opportunity for early diagnosis and prevention, and we need to better understand these barriers. The study will apply innovative digital strategies to produce a live dataset of the population's sensory health, and how this interrelates with many associated issues such as general health, cognition, mental health, social isolation, and barriers to uptake of care. Only by doing this can we devise targeted strategies for the alleviation of unnecessary sight and hearing loss and deliver a reduction in associated costs to the UK economy. Importantly, the UKNEHS will enable us to evaluate the services that we currently have and help us to better understand why people are still going blind or deaf due to preventable conditions or are living with correctable impairing sight or hearing loss.

This week, the UKNEHS was received by the Treasury for consideration in the government's revised replacement for the proposed Comprehensive Spending Review. Also this week Jo Churchill MP informed us that there are still no plans for a National Eye Health Strategy, so in the absence of this, on this World Sight Day we urge you to do the following:



- Engage with the UK National Eye Health and Hearing Study (UKNEHS) Chief Investigator – Professor Rupert Bourne: rupert.bourne@addenbrookes.nhs.uk
- Commit to addressing the huge lack of up to date data the UK currently holds on eye health and hearing loss.

We also ask:

- Without these data how do you plan to successfully deliver the NHS's Long-Term Plan in the eye health and hearing sectors?
- Over the last 12 months, what steps have you taken to understand why people are still going blind due to preventable conditions or are living with correctable impairing sight or hearing loss?

Along with this letter we have attached a copy of the UKNEHS investment case, which includes a more detailed case for change and research methodology.

We look forward to your timely response.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marsha de Cordova".

Marsha de Cordova MP
Shadow Women and Equalities Secretary
Chair – APPG on Eye Health and Visual Impairment

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "C. M. Low".

Lord Low of Dalston
Co-Chair – APPG on Eye Health and Visual Impairment

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Blunkett".

Lord Blunkett
Vice Chair – APPG on Eye Health and Visual Impairment



Jim Shannon

Jim Shannon MP
Vice Chair – APPG on Eye Health and Visual Impairment