



# A lifeline for people with low vision

## **Gateshead and South Tyneside Sight Service**

A local partnership works with people who have visual impairment, helping develop their skills, confidence and independence to improve their quality of life.





## Background

In 2006 Gateshead Council reviewed the assessment function of its Sensory Support Team. It considered: skill mix, referral patterns, demand, capacity and care planning outcomes for Gateshead residents with a sensory impairment. As a result the partnership with Sight Service was formalised to commission assessment provision for people with a visual impairment and enable access to high quality information, advice and specialist support.

Sight Service offers services and support to any person who is living with sight loss. Sight Service also supports families, carers, advocates and friends. The organisation works closely with visual impairment professionals and with other service providers, for example, it provides specific rehabilitation services for people on the Gateshead Supporting People programme and for people who attend the Gateshead Pilot Low Vision Service. Sight Service also works in partnership with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB). The organisation also has a campaigning role.

Gateshead Sight Service, the RNIB, Gateshead Council and Gateshead PCT led the low vision service national eye care pilot.

## Aims

The aims of the project were to:

- share the learning from the Gateshead pilot
- undertake an 18 month initiative to set up a sub-regional approach to developing integrated low vision services
- investigate the workforce development implications if other areas adopted this integrated approach.

## What happened?

A range of activities were carried out:

- Sight Service worked with people who use services and identified gaps and shortfalls in the services; it did this through its network of support groups and service user groups
- it also worked with the RNIB, which sent out 'good practice in sight' guides to all councils
- people who use services were encouraged to assess those services against the standards identified in the guide and this information was used by the sub regional councils
- a regional event was held to bring together commissioners and planners, to raise awareness of the needs of visually impaired people. There was a focus on how to create integrated service delivery.

"I used to have to go the Royal Victoria Infirmary once a year to have my sight reassessed. This [local service] is nearer than Newcastle and it's better to come here and have the same facilities and to meet people. They just like, look after you totally...it's a lifeline." **Service user.**



## Outcomes

The outcomes of the partnership project were:

- the voluntary sector began to take a more central role in the preventive approach for people who are visually impaired
- the roles of the rehabilitation officer for the blind (social care) and optometrist (health) were reworked
- information gained from the work was shared with the local authorities and PCTs
- after the commissioners' and planners' event, action learning sets were set up at a local level to consider workforce design.

“I went blind in 12 months...joining here is the best thing I've done. My family say, ‘Since you went blind you've got a new lease of life!’” **Service user.**

## Impact

Impacts from the project include cost-savings for the delivery organisations and improvements for people using the service:

- availability of a local integrated assessment and rehabilitation service meant that travel distances and times have been reduced for people with visual impairment
- an on-site multiprofessional team, comprising optometrists and rehabilitation staff meant that joint appointments could be offered and equipment could be issued immediately
- a number of PCTs have already commissioned similar pathways under the Quality Innovation Productivity and Prevention agenda and have realised cost savings following implementation (Bosanquet, 2010).

Other benefits include:

- this joint appointment system was valued by patients as it reduced the need for them to have separate appointments at a tertiary eye centre
- joint working led to the project team sharing expertise from other work being undertaken nationally by the RNIB and work by the UK Vision Strategy.

“I was learning to swim when I went blind and now I've started again. I'm starting a walking group. I go to meetings. I help out when I can. I used to come in by transport, now I don't need it, and I've got basic skills in business administration.” **Service user**



## Simple aids make a difference

Aids assist people with low vision to read, cook, travel unaccompanied and communicate with others. These aids promote independence and wellbeing which facilitates self-care and reduces reliance on health and social services.

The local service was able to maintain regional responsibility for the budget and supply of low vision aids, bringing significant impacts to people using their service.

## Next steps

The following objectives will inform the direction and ongoing priorities of work:

- create a job description for the new type of worker (Rehabilitation assistant)
- produce workforce development plans
- develop illustrated career and qualifications pathways for Sight Service
- work with the Sector Skills Council, Learning Resource Network and other stakeholders to influence and shape future pathways and new qualifications to support the new way of working.

Sight Service have also been involved in raising awareness about potential visual problems resulting from long term conditions, such as diabetes and health behaviours including smoking.

The low vision service has been asked to participate in the local clinical commissioning group and this will be a mechanism to continue to raise awareness in the future.

## References

Bosanquet, 2010    Bosanquet, Prof. Nick; Liberating the NHS: Eye Care  
Making a Reality of Equity and Excellence, Imperial College London, 2010.  
[http://www.epolitix.com/fileadmin/epolitix/stakeholders/liberating\\_NHS.pdf](http://www.epolitix.com/fileadmin/epolitix/stakeholders/liberating_NHS.pdf)

## Contacts

[www.sightservice.co.uk](http://www.sightservice.co.uk)

## Links

[http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/workforce\\_strategy/workforce\\_innovation\\_programme/partnership/NToW1.aspx](http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/workforce_strategy/workforce_innovation_programme/partnership/NToW1.aspx)

## Further information

For further information about the health and social care integration work between Skills for Health and Skills for Care please contact:

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