

The United Kingdom National Eye Health and Hearing Study (UKNEHS)

A National Health Infrastructure Proposition

Why This Moment Matters

Good data is the foundation of good health policy. While the national health systems across the devolved nations depend on reliable data to plan, evaluate, and optimise services, there remains a glaring evidence gap in one of the most fundamental areas of population health: sensory function.

Sight and hearing are crucial determinants of health, quality of life, independence, and productivity. Yet the UK lacks up-to-date, population-level data on vision and hearing health, meaning we are currently unable to measure the true scale of unmet need or evaluate the effectiveness of existing services. This is not just a data gap - it is a public health infrastructure gap. This affects how we prevent avoidable sensory loss, support healthy ageing, and allocate NHS and social care resources efficiently and equitably.

The UKNEHS: A Public Health Asset in Progress

The UK National Eye and Hearing Health Study (UKNEHS; www.uknehs.org.uk) is a national initiative to fill this critical knowledge gap.

Led by a cross-sector partnership of researchers, clinicians, professional bodies, and charities, the study has already completed a successful pilot phase demonstrating:

- High participant engagement (65%+ response rate)
- Feasibility of high-quality mobile diagnostics and digital tools in community settings
- Clear unmet needs in both hearing and vision, including undiagnosed disease and low service utilisation even in at-risk groups

With over £500,000 already invested by the third sector and academic partners, the UKNEHS is not a speculative proposal- it is ready to scale.

How UKNEHS Supports Government Priorities

The UKNEHS offers each of the devolved nations data to provide national infrastructure to deliver against multiple government strategies:

- Prevention and early intervention
- Tackling health inequalities and social inequalities
- Multiple long-term conditions (MLTC)
- Healthy ageing and independent living
- Reducing avoidable burden on health and social care

UKNEHS provides essential baseline data to inform preventive strategies, identify high-need populations, and shape targeted interventions that support efficiency and equity across health and social care systems.

Public Health and Economic Impact

Sensory loss costs the UK an estimated £58 billion per year, including productivity loss, increased care needs, and impacts on mental health.

UKNEHS provides a strategic public health dataset, enabling commissioners, providers, and researchers to align services to actual population need — across NHS, local government, and public health systems.

Learnings from the NIHR portfolio pilot study (2024–2025) of a representative sample of people living independently across an Integrated Care System (equivalent to Health and Social Care Partnerships in Scotland, Regional Partnership Boards in Wales, and Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland), whose vision, hearing, cognition, quality of life, access to services and spending on sensory services were measured:

- 1 in 4 adults aged 50+ had vision impairment in one or both eyes — many correctable. 1:11 were vision impaired in both eyes
- 76% had hearing loss; 81% had never been tested
- 72% of people with moderate bilateral hearing loss had never had a hearing test
- 36% of people found to have glaucoma and 50% of those with diabetic retinopathy were unaware of their diagnosis

A second pilot study took place in a representative sample of care homes.

These are not just statistics - they reflect missed opportunities for prevention and a growing burden on NHS and social care services.

A Shared Opportunity

UKNEHS has already secured over £500K in development funding from charities and academic partners. This represents a strong cross-sector commitment to building a vital national asset.

The next phase will require co-investment from UK governments, not just as a funder, but as a partner in delivery. Examples from Australia and other countries show how national sensory health studies can shape impactful, cost-effective policy interventions.

Key Elements of the National Study

- Nationally representative sampling across the UK with digital engagement
- In-home and community-based assessments using state-of-the-art diagnostics
- Real-time referral and feedback mechanisms for participants
- Direct impact on up to 1,500 individuals through detection of untreated conditions, potentially saving sight.

Governance, Delivery and Readiness

- NIHR portfolio study status
- Delivery through a dedicated UKNEHS research network and national steering group
- Pilot completed successfully in both community and care home settings
- High levels of engagement and participant satisfaction

Next Steps: Building the National Study

A national conference will be held on 10 October 2025 in London to:

- Share pilot study findings
- Launch a public awareness campaign
- Initiate the next stage of national study delivery

This campaign will be supported by a UK-based health communications agency and will pursue a mixed funding model, including the UK governments, charities, and industry.

Conclusion: A National Asset Whose Time Has Come

The UKNEHS is more than a study. It is a critical piece of public health infrastructure—ready to be delivered and widely supported.

With modest investment, the UK government can help secure long-term value through:

- Better public health outcomes
- More equitable access to services
- More efficient use of health and social care resources
- A stronger evidence base for national strategy, commissioning, and innovation

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The pilot studies were generously funded and supported by:



The Royal College of Ophthalmologists supports the need for the full national study.

Appendix: Objectives & Benefits of the UKNEHS

Reproduced from the [Case for Investment](#) that was submitted to the government's Spending Review 2025 (co-produced with PA Consulting).



Objectives & benefits of the UKNEHS

Objective theme	High-level objective	Benefits of the investment
<p>Improved outcomes and effectiveness</p> <p>Improve delivery of public services</p>	<p>Direct project objective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a common understanding of the number of people in the UK with a sensory loss • Determine the prevalence and causes of vision impairment conditions across the UK • Deliver the study successfully, safely and ensuring full representation <p>Wider programme objective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute to improvement in the eye health and wellbeing of the UK population • Increase national public awareness and action on eye health conditions • Use data to identify opportunities for new ways of working • Provide the data necessary to baseline other programme interventions • Support national public commissioning bodies and strengthen industry networks to use the data to target resources more effectively • Provide data to inform and support targeted research into treatment for specific eye health conditions 	<p>Direct project benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study will determine, for the first time a baseline of the prevalence and causes of visual impairment and blindness in the UK, in addition to hearing loss • The detection and treatment coverage rate of major eye diseases and conditions including cataract, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration and refractive error • Access to 'hard to reach' groups for example, those residing in care homes, through the offer of household visits and community locations close to people's homes, which will contribute to awareness raising of eye health in local communities • All participants will be provided with feedback on their eye examination results on completion of the clinical examination to help give them a greater understanding and awareness of their eye health • Increased awareness of eye health and more people taking care of their own eye health • A direct impact on ~1,500 people who are expected to have an undiagnosed need through the study <p>Wider programme benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved public health • UKNEHS data will be widely available, and used to support new research and update previous research, for example the RNIB Sight Loss Data Tool, the UK Eye Care Data Hub, and the Imperial College NEHEM model • A national media campaign will build awareness in the wider population • Through using the accessible, anonymised, summary data, commissioning bodies will have a deeper understanding of the geography of visual impairment and eye disease in their local areas and will be able to target resources based on actual need, and have a greater understanding of how the workforce, technology, and health services estate need to be adapted to ensure the right services are provided and appropriate awareness raised in the wider population

Objective theme	High-level objective	Benefits of the investment
Reduce costs	Direct project objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the study to detect vision impairment and hearing loss conditions and follow signposted patients to appropriate treatment services at time of study 	Direct project benefit: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any participant with undiagnosed eye disease/ visual impairment/hearing loss that can be detected through the study's testing protocol will be referred to an eye health/hearing loss professional working within the UKNEHS network, directly addressing identified conditions and reducing future costs associated with late diagnosis
Comply with international standards	Direct project and wider programme objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enable the UK to meet its obligation to contribute towards the World Health Organisation (WHO) goal of reducing avoidable eye health and prevention of deafness and hearing loss 	Direct project benefit: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The identification of unmet need will be a direct benefit of the study, enabling early detection Wider programme benefit: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Robust, up to date data on the prevalence and causes of visual impairment and blindness and hearing loss will allow UK governments and other interested bodies to create an accurate baseline, against which progress can be measured over time

Wider Benefits of the UKNEHS to society

Beneficiary	Benefit description
Patients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will enable 'at risk' groups to be identified and influence provision of better services for those hardest to reach People will have an increased awareness of the services available to them and knowledge of how to access treatment for different conditions Survey participants will also have the option to receive a hearing test (in addition to the sight test), giving them a broader understanding of their sensory processing and contributing to the understanding of hearing loss across the UK Raising awareness of the importance of sensory health, but also of the services that exist to support people to protect and maintain the best possible hearing and eye health
Wider UK society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investment in prevention will impact positively on families and carers of people with visual impairment and hearing loss over the long term through increased knowledge and awareness of conditions and treatment A better understanding of the prevalence and causes of visual impairment and hearing loss will positively support the improvement of services over the long term

Beneficiary	Benefit description
Central government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will enable a clearer strategy on health and social care integration around eye health and hearing loss, due to a better understanding of risk factors and overall prevalence • There will be a positive reputational impact associated with the delivery of the largest study of older adults ever conducted in a high-income country, elevating the UK's status as a world leader in epidemiological research • Accurate prevalence data will make budget forecasting more accurate and therefore enable better budget management and distribution of spend • Government will have better data to enable the targeting of resources, and be able to set targets around reducing avoidable visual impairment and hearing loss, and improving patient experience, against which performance can be measured. The only current sensory indicator in the Public Health Outcomes Framework (PHOF) is numbers certified with vision impairment—an important indicator but we need additional benchmarks of sensory care provision • Research funding can be targeted more efficiently to needs within the sectors • The data can support and inform workforce mapping e.g. to review the distribution of optometrists and audiologists across the UK
Local government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved services will reduce the burden on social care (as visual impairment and hearing loss have an impact on overall health and wellbeing, including specific conditions such as dementia) • Improved targeting of expenditure on public health services and better knowledge on how services should be organised locally e.g. screening programmes
NHS commissioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will provide data on what proportion of patients are 'digitally ready' i.e. will be suitable to be supported through other means e.g. remote testing or self-testing, which could impact on how services can be provided more cost- effectively in the future • A greater understanding of need will enable commissioners to organise their workforce more efficiently, ensuring that patients see the right professional, at the right time in the customer journey
NHS acute, community and primary care providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved awareness, prevention and early intervention will reduce the number of people presenting in primary care and acute settings (e.g. A&E) with conditions that could have been treated earlier • Better organisation of primary care services will enable a focus on where services are needed • Community optometrist providers will be able to assess performance and meet audit requirements through a better understanding of their patient cohort

Beneficiary	Benefit description
Research, professional and regulatory bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research can be prioritised based on areas of greatest need, population characteristics and a better understanding of what is important to the public • Will enable research bodies to review and update previous research e.g. the NEHEM model and attract research investment in the greatest areas of need • Data can support decision-making on behalf of the General Optical Council (GOC) – the regulatory body for optical professions in the UK, which will ensure that service provision accurately responds to the needs identified. It can also support similar work by the Registration Council for Clinical Physiologists (RCCP), the British Society for Hearing Aid Audiologists (BSHAA) <p>UKNEHS data will support the UK's ambitions to develop as a venue to cutting edge international eye and hearing health research. The commitment to gathering these data will encourage investment in UK eye and hearing health research and innovation by industry, and help support UK research centres to compete for funding. The College of Optometrists will use the data from the UKNEHS to support members to engage more effectively with local and national audits, especially in primary care, to improve further our understanding of the populations being served over time.</p>
Third sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A baseline of current, accurate data will inform future research, and local / national campaigns • More informed targeting of support services and community groups • A baseline of current, accurate data to inform future research • More informed targeting of support services and community groups
Private providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There will be an initial increase in GOS and private sight tests due to increased awareness of the benefits • A better understanding of geographies of need will support better location of services, targeting of new customer groups and awareness of harder to reach groups • Improved networking within the sector • Increased production and demand for hearing aid suppliers and manufacturers of optical devices
Pharmaceutical industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will provide better data on conditions and inherited conditions • Will provide a baseline data set to support new approaches and trials • Target the production of medicine and research to greatest areas of need in the UK