



Date: 14 January 2026

Dear Colleagues

Subject: New Year letter to Primary Eye Care practitioners in Wales

As we open 2026 together, I want to thank you for the remarkable progress we made across NHS primary eye care services in Wales last year, and set out a shared, stretching ambition for the year ahead. We are leading eye care in the UK, and our collective impact is both measurable and visible to patients. Let's build on that momentum while embracing the challenge to go further and faster for every community we serve.

2025: A year of delivery and momentum

Embedding Wales General Ophthalmic Services (WGOS) and expanding care closer to home.

With the Wales General Ophthalmic Services bedding in, official data show record volumes across core and enhanced pathways. In 2024/25, primary care optometry delivered over 865,000 sight tests, more than 280,000 urgent examinations, and more than 26,000 independent prescribing appointments, supporting our "care closer to home" ambition and easing pressure on hospital services.

Against 2023/24 baselines, 2024/25 activity generated an extra 90,295 appointments across WGOS 1–5 (WGOS1: +24,258; WGOS2: +36,811; WGOS3: +402; WGOS4: +2,520; WGOS5: +26,304). That is a tangible signal of system shift, and of your professionalism and commitment.

Growing capability and coverage.

We expanded access to Certification of Visual Impairment (CVI) in optometry, widened WGOS 4 and WGOS 5 service availability across Health Boards, and increased the number of practitioners holding higher clinical qualifications in medical retina, glaucoma and independent prescribing, positioning Wales strongly for advanced community care.

System investment and integration—making our work easier.

Tripartite contract changes, targeted investments, and digital transformation (Signed Orders from April 2026, OpenEyes (electronic patient record), Opera (electronic referral system) to reduce duplication and help you focus clinical time on patients.

Patient confidence remains high—yet inequalities persist.

Satisfaction with optometry is strong and confidence in care is high; however, younger people (16–24), disabled people, lower-income households, and those with vulnerability markers are less likely to attend or to choose optometry first for eye problems. We must respond to this inequity with practical, local solutions, using our optometry cluster collaboratives where appropriate.

Celebrating More Successes from the 2025 GOC registrant survey — Why Wales is Becoming the Best Place to Work in Eye Care

- **Higher clinical qualifications—Wales out in front.** Uptake of advanced qualifications in Glaucoma, Medical Retina and Low Vision is significantly higher here than the UK average (e.g., Glaucoma 27% vs 13% UK; Medical Retina 35% vs 12%; Low Vision 27% vs 4%), demonstrating capability and readiness for expanded community care.
- **Around 79% of Welsh registrants report being involved in enhanced eye care services,** the highest in the UK.
- **Job satisfaction, the highest across the nations.** Wales also reports the highest job satisfaction across the UK (around 63%), driven by rewarding work, supportive environments, and feeling valued.
- **Career development, clear support and real opportunities.** Approximately 72% of registrants in Wales feel supported to develop their potential, well above the UK average. Many plan to gain further qualifications over the next 12–24 months.

Where We Can Improve — Let's Start the Conversation

While we have much to celebrate, it's just as important to look honestly at the areas where we can do better, both for our patients and for ourselves as professionals. Some of these topics may be new to many in our profession, but by shining a light on them, we can work together to create an even stronger, more supportive community.

1. Workplace culture: bullying, harassment, and wellbeing

Evidence across the sector highlights experiences of bullying, harassment, abuse and discrimination in some settings. These are difficult topics, but they matter for staff wellbeing and patient safety.

Why it matters: A positive, respectful workplace is essential for safe, high-quality care.

What we can do: Ensure confidential reporting pathways; strong leadership; a named wellbeing lead; peer support; and anonymised learning.

2. **Workload and time pressures**

Many colleagues report extended hours, short appointment slots, or commercial targets.

Why it matters: Overload can undermine clinical attention and wellbeing.

What we can do: Review appointment lengths; streamline admin/referrals (including digital tools); escalate systemic issues.

3. **Access and inclusion**

Younger people, disabled people, ethnic minority groups and lower-income households may face barriers to access.

Why it matters: Eye care should be available to everyone.

What we can do: Work collaboratively through our optometry clusters locally; outreach in high-deprivation areas; accessible booking and clear information.

4. **Children and young people**

Only around one-third of under-16s access routine eye care.

Why it matters: Good vision is vital for learning and wellbeing.

What we can do: Work with schools, youth services and parents; encourage annual sight tests; offer child-friendly slots.

5. **Redefining our role: guardians of sight**

Our primary role is healthcare, beyond retail.

Why it matters: Patients trust us to look after their eye health.

What we can do: Make prevention routine; myopia, UV, healthy lifestyles, and self-care advice.

2026: Priorities We Can Look Forward To—Delivered Together

As we look ahead to 2026, several exciting developments and important changes are on the horizon for primary eye care in Wales. These priorities are designed to help us build on our successes, further improve patient care and make our working lives more rewarding and sustainable.

Signed Orders: NHS-Funded Medicines from April 2026

From April, a significant change will make it easier for patients to access the medicines and devices they need. Community pharmacies across Wales will be able to supply NHS-funded

medicines and devices directly, based on standardised NHS **signed orders from WGOS optometrists**. This new approach will streamline patient care, reduce unnecessary GP appointments, and ensure that treatment is more convenient for everyone involved. Now is the time to familiarise yourself and your teams with the new process, so we're ready to make the most of this opportunity from day one.

Digital Eye Care: Electronic Patient Record (OpenEyes) and Electronic Referral Solution (Opera)

Digital transformation is at the heart of modernising our profession, and 2026 marks a major milestone. By the end of March, all Health Boards have been mandated to roll out OpenEyes, the national shared electronic patient record system, bringing safer, more joined-up care for our patients.

In addition, the electronic referral system procured through Digital Health Care Wales (Opera), will finally be available and mandatory for optometry practices wherever it is implemented. This is a significant achievement for our sector, especially after the setbacks and delays we've experienced along the way. The introduction of an electronic referral system is a major step forward: it will streamline referral processes, reduce paperwork, and ensure that patient information is transferred quickly and securely., most importantly, it will help us deliver safer, more efficient care.

Now is the time for every practice to prepare for these changes, embrace the new digital tools, and celebrate the opportunities they bring for both professionals and patients.

Governance and System Alignment

Strong governance and collaboration remain at the heart of our progress. The Eye Care Wales Committee and the Ophthalmology Clinical Implementation Network will continue to bring together colleagues from across sectors to coordinate delivery, track milestones, and support Health Boards with their transition plans. By working together, we can ensure that changes are implemented smoothly and that best practice is shared across Wales.

Contract and Quality Expectations

Finally, it's important to keep up to date with contract changes, payment arrangements, and quality requirements. This includes making sure your practice completes the Information Governance Toolkit by 31 March 2026. Staying on top of these expectations will help us maintain high standards, protect patient data, and ensure that our services remain sustainable and trusted.

Five practical calls to action for every practice in 2026

1. Make access equitable- work collaboratively through optometry clusters to co-design outreach for groups less likely to attend; consider mobile clinics and community hubs.
2. Prioritise under-16s—partner with schools and family services, track uptake and outcomes.
3. Champion a positive workplace culture—clear policies including anti racism; named reporting leads; peer support; review appointment lengths.

4. Get digitally ready—OpenEyes access; Opera referral pathways live; complete the Welsh IG Toolkit by 31 March 2026.
5. Use Signed Orders from day one—train teams; align with pharmacies to reduce avoidable GP demand.

Our collective promise

We are already showing UK leadership, now let's turn excellence into universality: safe, equitable, digitally enabled care in every practice; thriving professionals; children and vulnerable citizens reached; optometry as the first trusted door for eye problems.

Thank you for your commitment in 2025 and for the ambition you'll bring to 2026. Let's lead, include, and deliver together.

With thanks and recognition for all the hard work of the profession in Wales.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Sullivan', followed by a period.

David O'Sullivan OBE
Chief Optometric Adviser
Welsh Government

P.S. Early-year Eye Care engagement events will carry CPD points; details are being finalised with HEIW. Please look out for invitations and encourage colleagues to attend.