

CHAIR'S NOTE

Our CEO's annual report shows vividly the extensive and growing range of activities carried on by the charity. My overriding impression of the year is the passion, dedication, skill, and commitment shown by Sara and all her team. They are tireless in their support for families grappling with great difficulties in their personal lives. We know also, from the feedback we receive, how much of a difference their expertise and caring makes to the visually impaired young people and their families.



Sara's report notes the continuing growth of services. In the past, to be able to do this, we would have greatly welcomed financial support from the government. But we are now, in a way, fortunate in that Angel Eyes is not in receipt of statutory funding of any kind. Thus, we have not been affected by the swingeing budget reductions now being experienced by so many other charities and voluntary agencies. The resources driving this growth come, of course, from all our invaluable fundraisers, our donors, and the several trusts and foundations that have put their faith in Angel Eyes ability to bring really substantive benefits to visually impaired young people. To all of you, I add my gratitude to that expressed by Sara in her report. Without your help it would be impossible to continue.

While the harsh government expenditure reductions have not affected Angel Eyes directly, it is clear that meeting statutory requirements is now more remote than before. In recent years Angel Eyes has provided hard data to demonstrate government failures to meet its legal obligations to visually impaired young people. Regrettably, there is even less prospect of it doing so in the near future. This makes the work of Angel Eyes, and your hugely important support, all the more vital.

Sara's report draws attention to our excellent progress in developing and expanding qualifications for those working with visually impaired students. It is clear that professionally trained teaching assistants do a much better job in providing classroom support. We are stressing to the government that investing in such training not only enhances the visually impaired students' educational experience but can also save public money. Trained professionals are more efficient and can therefore work with more students and also reduce the number of possible future problems. Everybody wins!

Our social enterprise, Empathey, adds to this efficiency. The vividness of the virtual reality experience quickly brings it home to all concerned what visual impairment truly is. Understanding and retention of lessons learned by the classroom assistant is very much better via virtual reality. And those trained in this

way comprehend immediately how to provide the best support to the visually impaired child.

I cannot finish without thanking Sara and her team for their excellent work, and also my wonderful board colleagues upon whom I depend for so much expert advice and support. Without you all Angel Eyes would not be making the strides in providing more and more support to visually impaired young people and their families. Thank you so much.



Dr Brian Scott
Chair, Angel Eyes NI

CEO REPORT

April 2022 – March 2023

I am delighted to present the Activities Report for Angel Eyes NI, covering the period from April 2022 to March 2023. It gives me great pleasure to outline the remarkable achievements and milestones we have reached during this period.



This year has been incredibly eventful for the charity, as we had the privilege of presenting at both Global and International Conferences. One notable highlight was our participation in the Equality Commission podcast, where we shared insights from our Education Report on the profound impact of COVID on children with visual impairments. Additionally, we delivered two presentations at the Vision 2022 conference in Dublin, focusing on the positive outcomes of our Level 4 Qualification for Classroom Assistants supporting learners with visual impairments and the innovative VisualEyes Virtual Reality Project.

Furthermore, our Social Enterprise Empatheyeyes gained international recognition when I was invited to speak at the Women in Tech Conference in Sweden. This was a remarkable opportunity to showcase our cutting-edge virtual reality visual impairment simulator and the transformative effects it has on supporting visually impaired individuals.

During the reporting period, we successfully launched our EyeDentity Project, funded by the Department of Health Carers Fund, at the Angel Eyes Parents conference held at the Dunadry Hotel. This event received extensive support from both statutory and voluntary organisations. Additionally, we had the privilege of presenting at the Belfast Eye Conference, which drew eye clinicians from across the UK.

Notably, we unveiled our ambitious strategy for 2023-2026, which builds upon our existing expertise while addressing identified gaps. This strategic roadmap will guide our efforts as we continue to make a lasting impact on the lives of visually impaired children and their families.

We are acutely aware of the challenges faced by our families due to the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. As a result, we have witnessed an increase in the number of families seeking benefit support. To address this critical issue, we established the "Grants in NI" page on our website to facilitate easier access to financial assistance and resources.

I am delighted to share that our 3rd cohort of students successfully completed the Classroom Assistant Qualification in partnership with Ulster University in December 2022, further expanding the pool of skilled professionals equipped to support learners with visual impairments.

I am proud to announce that our exceptional achievements have been recognised by sector organisations. Our chairperson was honoured with the CO3 Award for Trustee of the Year, and I myself won the CO3 Award for Social Innovation for Empatheyas. Furthermore, we were overjoyed to receive the Tech for Good award at the Digital DNA Awards, which celebrated the impact of Empatheyas as a social enterprise.

In recognition of our commitment to excellence in professional development, Empatheyas Training for Health and Social Care workers and Professionals has been granted CPD Accreditation.

These accomplishments would not have been possible without the unwavering dedication and tireless efforts of our incredible team, partners, and supporters. Together, we continue to make a significant difference in the lives of children with visual impairments, empowering them to thrive and overcome challenges.

As I reflect on the past year's achievements, I am grateful for the collective commitment and passion that drives Angel Eyes NI. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to all our stakeholders who have played an integral role in our success.

I would also like to express my thanks to our Trustees for their invaluable guidance and support throughout this period. Their strategic vision and commitment have been instrumental in shaping our organisation's growth and impact.

Thanks to all that support us and our committed team we are transforming lives and creating a more inclusive and equitable society for visually impaired children.



Sara McCracken

Chief Executive Officer

The following report sets out the activities and impact of the following services over the period April 2022 – March 2023.

1. Education Service
2. Family Support Services
3. Accessible Clubs

Education Service

We have delivered three projects in this year to meet our strategic aim that all children and young people who are blind and partially sighted in NI will have equal access to education, with a team of 2 Education Advocates and a part time Eye Clinician who work across all projects.

1. **EqualEyes Project** in partnership with Childrens Law Centre and funded by National Lottery Community Fund

The first purpose of the EqualEyes project is Children and Young people with a visual impairment will demonstrate an increased understanding of their rights to equitable education, feel more confident in voicing their opinions and concerns about their educational experiences; and develop the skills to communicate effectively with all professionals involved in their school journey.

To achieve this goal the Education Team delivered the following activities for **30 children and young people:**

- One to one support provided to each young person.
- Residential in summer 2023 which 8 young people attended.
- Teen Hub events for young people to connect and talk.
- Technology workshop on accessibility functions and apps that are useful.
- Focus Groups to engage with young people about topical issues.

The second purpose of the EqualEyes Project is that families of children and young people with visual impairment, from across NI will demonstrate increased understanding of the specialist education support services and feel more knowledgeable and empowered to make key decisions in this area.

To achieve this goal the Education Team delivered the following activities for **99 Families:**

- One to one support provided to each family.
- Attendance at school meetings of Angel Eyes NI Education Advocate to support the family.

- Individual contact with schools to enable support for children with vision impairment.
- Tribunal actions and case statements submitted.
- Multidisciplinary meetings including Angel Eyes NI Education Advocate to represent vision impairment in education and support the child and family.
- Development of 'Rights' in education leaflet which is available on website for parents to access.

Finally, the EqualEyes project seeks to raise awareness of vision impairment, highlighting the impact on children and young people when their needs are not met, how this can be overcome with support and knowledge and the importance of listening to our children and young people and learning from their experience to better inform support, policy, and legislation.

To achieve this the Education Team attended 32 meetings of the following groups:

- Children's Disability Strategic Alliance
- All Party Group for Visual Impairment
- Civic Government
- Education Authority Joint Consultative Forum
- Visual Impairment Sector Forum
- Equality Coalition

2. Education Insight Project funded by Thomas Pocklington Trust.

Objectives:

- Parents will have a safe platform to talk about their experience with their child in education.
- Increase confidence and reduce isolation felt by other parents when advocating for their child.
- Raise awareness of the challenges faced by parents advocating for their child.

Through the Education Insight project, we provided the following:

- Online Themed Meet Ups
- Closed Parents Only Facebook Page
- Parent Ambassadors to talk at meet ups about their own personal experience of supporting their children through the education system.

3. Level 4 Qualification and Workshops in partnership with Ulster University and Education Workshops using Virtual Reality Training was successfully funded.

The objective of the Project was to ensure that children with vision impairment receive the necessary assistance and accommodations required to fully engage in their educational journey, promoting inclusivity, independence and maximising their learning potential. By equipping classroom assistants with a higher level of expertise through an accredited qualification and education workshops, the initiatives were aimed to improve the children's access to the curriculum.

Activities Delivered as part of the Project:

- Deliver an online Level 4 accredited professional qualification in partnership with Ulster University for Classroom Assistants who support children with visual impairment through a 10-week course covering 5 topics.
- Deliver Education Virtual Reality Workshops to support and enhance the skills of classroom assistants and other school staff supporting children with a vision impairment.

Impact of the Angel Eyes NI Education Service have included:

- Empowering parents with strategies and knowledge.
- Enabling children and young people with knowledge of rights and strategies and technology to improve access.
- Improving learning environments and accessible resources through training.
- Communication between home and school improved.
- 2 leading issues identified as Statements of Special Educational Needs and in school support.
- Development of bespoke VR training sessions
- Impact of paediatric visual impairment is understood in a meaningful way to improve services, support, and resources.

Family Support Services Activity Report

To meet our strategic aim that all families with a child who is blind or partially sighted in NI will have access to the services and support they require to bring up and support their child we have delivered 3 projects in this period that supported 198 families. The services are delivered by two Family Services Coordinators.

Projects:

1. **EyeDentity** –funded by Department of Health through the Carer’s Fund
2. **Parent’s Conference May 2022** funded by Belfast Association of the Blind
Parent’s Conference Mar 2023 funded by BHSC Microfund
3. **Family Support** funded by Hospital Saturday Fund and the ARN Foundation.

The overall activities of Family Support Services have included:

- One to One family Support, which included emotional and practical support.
- Quarterly Contribution to the Angel Eyes NI Ezine on issues and events for families.
- Advising parents on how to register as carers in their HSC Trust.
- Two carers focused events to enhance carer knowledge and to give practical advice.
- Two community events to raise awareness of Visual Impairment.
- Early years parents’ events in partnership with RNIB and Sense NI
- Emergency Essentials Grant and financial advice available to secure grants.
- New Grants Advice support developed for website.
- Secured assistive technology for families that did not qualify through other funding from local companies.

The Family Services Team have advocated and represented the needs of parent carers at the following groups and meetings:

- Cost of Living roundtable event,
- Visual Impairment Sector Consultative Forum,
- Carers Coalition,
- All Party Group for Disability and Mental Health
- Member of all 29 Family Support Hubs
- Childrens Health Coalition
- Fermanagh Council inclusion in toolkit

Impact of the Family Services team have included:

- New service developed.
- Increased parents seeking support.
- Increased community engagement
- Parents reported increased knowledge of support available to their child and increased registrations as carers with trusts.
- Became and associate member on all 29 Family Support Hubs
- Increased number of forums attended to represent the voice of parent carers of visually impaired children.

Accessible Clubs Activity Report

To meet our strategic aim that all children and young people who are blind or partially sighted in NI will have equal opportunity to accessible clubs and activities we delivered three projects that supported 133 families. The Clubs are delivered by a Family Support Coordinator, a part time Club Facilitator and volunteers.

Projects:

1. **InTune in partnership with Open Arts** funded by Children in Need
2. **ArEyes My Mini and Me** funded by Awards for All.
3. **Christmas Party and Panto** funded by Belfast Harbour Commission and Belfast Association for the Blind.

Clubs and Events Delivered:

Early Year Play Sessions - 9

InTune Workshops – 49

Panto 2022 for 149 parents and children

Christmas Party for 40 parents and children

The projects funded by Children In Need and Awards for All have had a significant impact on the lives of children with vision impairment and their families. Through the InTune project, an accessible arts programs, leading to increased confidence and inclusion in mainstream activities. The ArEyes My Mini and Me project has supported parents and carers, providing them with support, knowledge, and practical tools and resources.

Through hosting our Christmas Pantomime in the Island Arts Centre, we were able to meet the needs of our families with on-site parking and disabled spaces. The centre has state-of-the-art changing places facilities and wheelchair access. We were able to offer 12 wheelchair spaces to accommodate children who required this. The touch tour insured that the show was a fully accessible experience for our families.

Impact of Accessible Clubs and Event for Children and Families:

- Early Years families benefitted from practical learning and play experiences, improving their confidence and knowledge in supporting early learning.
- Increased confidence and knowledge with families being more confident and informed about supporting their child.
- Improved support for parents by developing a toolbox of ideas and resources to support the development of their child at home, enhancing their ability to provide appropriate care and learning opportunities.
- Peer support as families participating in the projects have formed meaningful relationships with other families facing similar challenges, creating a support network and fostering a sense of community.
- Increased accessible creative arts session which increased accessible creative arts sessions for children ensuring their inclusion and participation in the arts.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Angel Eyes NI has made significant strides in supporting children with vision impairments and their families. Through the comprehensive Education Service, the charity has provided invaluable resources and assistance to ensure that children receive the necessary education and support tailored to their specific needs.

Furthermore, the Qualification and Workshops for classroom assistants have equipped professionals with the knowledge and skills required to effectively support children with vision impairments in educational settings. By investing in the training of these individuals, Angel Eyes NI has enhanced the overall learning experience for pupils with a vision impairment, supporting and enabling them to reach their full potential.

The Family Services offered by Angel Eyes NI have proven to be instrumental in empowering families to support and nurture their visually impaired child. By providing guidance, a listening ear and practical resources, the charity has fostered an inclusive and supportive environment, enabling families to navigate the challenges they may face.

Angel Eyes NI is committed to creating accessible clubs and events for children with vision impairments. By providing opportunities in the arts, play and organising fully accessible family events, to give children a platform to explore their talents and interests. These inclusive activities not only foster a sense of belonging but also promote socialisation, self-expression, and personal development.

Overall, Angel Eyes NI continues to demonstrate an unwavering dedication and a genuine passion for improving the lives of children with vision impairments and their families. Through their comprehensive range of services, the charity has undoubtedly made a great impact, ensuring that children with vision impairments are provided with equal opportunities to thrive, learn, and participate fully in society.