

Annual Activities Report 2023/2024



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**EQUALITY FOR CHILDREN
WITH VISION IMPAIRMENT**

Foreword:

CHAIR'S NOTE

Despite the buffeting of the external political, health, and overall financial uncertainties, Angel Eyes has had another very successful year. Total revenues for 2023-24 were 10% higher than the previous year! Our average annual revenue increase over the past four years has been 17.7%. This success is a tribute to the energy and expertise of Sara and her excellent team in gaining and sustaining the trust and support of so many existing and new trusts, foundations, and individual donors. On behalf of my fellow board members, I congratulate you all!

Our growing financial resources are being put to excellent use; Sara's operational report details the extensive growth in the numbers of young people and families receiving support, and also the development of additional ways of doing so.

Family support includes not only the traditional close advice and guidance through the maze of bureaucracy but also direct financial help during the recent cost of living crisis, which has impacted those with visually impaired children especially hard. Sara's team has been able to unlock more special grants for laptops and white goods, and also provide money and vouchers to meet some families' basic needs for food and heating.

Support and services to families has also broken new ground in arranging financial information provision to help families cope with the ever-changing complex social welfare regulations. This assistance is also made available online, which is relatively cheap and easy for both sides and which has proved very valuable to several families. We also now have more specialist eye clinicians to provide individual support when needed. This latter service is combined also with our Empathey virtual reality technology to inform and train both families and educational staff.

As well as direct support for families Sara's team are providing a growing range of social and cultural activities for children and teenagers. The feedback from residential weekends, the annual pantomime, and other meetings and social events has been universally positive and welcomed.

Given continuing uncertainty in government policy and what is clearly going to be the greater financial stringency to provide for all of children's

special needs, and indeed education in general, we are stepping up our lobbying and campaigning work. The revamped website and extra social media activities underpin the direct lobbying of politicians and senior educational officials. Alongside this work, we are developing new relationships with similar organisations in ROI, which have shown great interest in our virtual reality technology and teaching assistant certifications. We plan to gather comparison data for each jurisdiction to illustrate gaps and inadequacies of NI's legislation and services (and vice versa).

This impressive progress has been achieved by both increasing staff numbers somewhat but also, very importantly, improving management and operational efficiencies. A new management/financial reporting system means that the activities report from the different departments can be brought together and assessed every month in much less time than before, thus giving everyone freedom for more productive 'frontline' work. The system also has enabled our departmental heads to take more responsibility for planning and direct operational management. This enables Sara to avoid becoming a bottleneck to further development.

I cannot conclude without thanking the entire staff of Angel Eyes, all of our invaluable donors and supporters, and, of course, my fellow trustees, who are an enormous support to me in particular. Thank you all so very much.

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Dr Brian Scott
Chair, Angel Eyes NI
July 2024

Introduction

As the CEO of Angel Eyes NI, I am delighted to present the Annual Report for the 2023-2024 financial year. This report encapsulates our collective efforts and achievements, detailing the significant impact we have made in supporting children with vision impairments and their families across Northern Ireland. Throughout this period, our team has worked diligently to provide essential services, secure crucial funding, and advocate for the rights and needs of children and young people with a vision impairment and their families.

I want to extend my thanks to the wonderful staff team and Board of Trustees along with our volunteers, partners, funders and donors. Their contributions and support make our work possible and enable us to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for children with vision impairments and their families.



Sara McCracken
CEO and Founder, Angel Eyes NI
June 2024

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Overview

This year, we focused on enhancing our operational efficiency, growing our reach, and expanding our impact. Our services have continued to grow to meet the needs of children and young people with a vision impairment and their families. We now offer Education, Family and Youth Services as well as having an Eye Clinician inhouse to provide clinical knowledge for families and our staff.

The following report provides a detailed account of our activities and achievements over the past year.

Education Services

Our Education Service has made substantial strides this year in advocating for and supporting the educational needs of children with vision impairments and provided much needed school support to increase knowledge and understanding of supporting vision impairment within the education sector.



Figure 1/the members of the Equaleyes Project steering group sitting around a table all smiling at camera

Key activities and achievements include:

- **Family Support:** The EqualEyes project provided critical support to 42 new families and continued to assist 107 existing families. This included personalised guidance on navigating the education system, securing appropriate accommodations, and advocating for necessary resources.
- **Young People Assistance:** The project supported 79 young people in accessing educational opportunities tailored to their needs, ensuring they have the tools and confidence to succeed.
- **Specialist Accommodation:** We submitted a detailed response to the Education Authority, advocating for the inclusion of specialist accommodations in schools to better equip students with vision

impairments. This is a significant step towards inclusive education in Northern Ireland.

- **Collaborations:** Engaged in discussions with the Equality Commission regarding SEAG (Special Educational Needs Advice and Guidance) access arrangements for children with vision impairments, ensuring fair and equitable treatment in the education system.

Events/Training

- **Teen Residential:** Summer 2023. This event provided a unique opportunity for teenagers with vision impairments to build independence, socialise, and gain confidence in a supportive environment. Feedback from participants and their families has been overwhelmingly positive.
- **VR Training:** Delivered virtual reality (VR) training to 22 schools, enhancing teachers' ability to support children with vision impairments. This innovative approach has proven effective in helping educators understand the challenges faced by visually impaired students and adapt their teaching methods accordingly.
- **School Partnerships:** Worked closely with both mainstream and special schools to improve the educational experience for visually impaired students. This included information on how to adapt resources and incorporating assistive technologies to create a more inclusive learning environment.

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Advocacy and Support

The Education Team have been instrumental in advocating for children with vision impairments:

- **Tribunal Success:** Successfully represented a family in a tribunal case, securing the necessary educational support for their child. This victory highlights the importance of legal advocacy in ensuring equal educational opportunities.
- **Inclusion Efforts:** Secured the inclusion of children with vision impairments in various school activities, promoting a more inclusive school culture.
- **Education Advocacy:** Provided ongoing support to numerous families dealing with in-school support issues and statementing, helping them navigate the complex education system and secure the best possible outcomes for their children.

Training and Workshops

- We delivered workshops to 20 CA's and 20 SNA's as part of an innovative collaboration with Féach to equip education staff with the necessary skills and knowledge to support students with vision impairments effectively.
- **Special School Partnership:** Engaged in partnerships with special schools, sharing our expertise and resources to enhance the educational experiences of pupils in special schools with vision impairments.



Figure 2/ A representative from Feach, a charity partner delivering a session on Assistive Technology to Classroom Assistants who look on

Summary

Our Education Services Team have made remarkable progress this year in supporting and advocating for the educational needs of children with vision impairments. The Education Service has successfully provided vital support to numerous families, empowered young people, and advocated for necessary changes within the educational system.

Through continuous advocacy, collaboration, and tailored support, we have significantly contributed to creating equal educational opportunities for children with vision impairments.

Family Support Services

Key Achievements

Supporting Families

Over the past year, Family Support Services has made significant strides in supporting families within our community. We have secured funding for the next 5 years to provide comprehensive family support throughout Northern Ireland.

We achieved a record high of supporting 112 new family referrals and continued providing ongoing support to 346 existing families. Our efforts were boosted by securing funding for the SpecialEyes project, which will commence in November 2023.

Financial Assistance

In response to the observed impact of the cost-of-living crisis on families, we proactively implemented a series of strategies to provide support to families in Northern Ireland with visually impaired children. Recognising the heightened financial pressures these families face, we prioritised identifying and addressing their specific needs.

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We processed a total of 316 applications for financial assistance which included laptops which helped children in the education as well as social interactions. Additionally, we secured grants for food and fuel as well as funding to provide essential white goods through the Emergency Essentials funding scheme.

Our team expanded with new staff members, allowing us to extend our reach and enhance service delivery. We also conducted 6 home visits and hosted 8 family events, with a total attendance of 670 individuals. The inclusive Christmas Panto hosted at the Lisburn Arts centre was a highlight, with 487 attendees enjoying memorable show!

We have collaborated with Employers for Childcare to deliver financial workshops, addressing changes in Family Tax Credits and Universal Credit, ensuring families are well-informed and supported through these transitions.



Figure 3/ A group of representatives from the Health Coalition standing on the grand staircase of Parliament Buildings holding a sign

Summary

This year, Family Support Services has significantly impacted our community by providing essential services including training and financial assistance. With the addition of our home visits service, we are able to provide tailored support for our most vulnerable children and families.



Figure 4/ a young girl skating with a large plastic penguin designed to assist on the ice



Figure 5/ two young girls sitting on a step both smiling at the camera

Youth Services

Angel Eyes NI's Youth Service was established in August 2023 to engage with teens and young people with vision impairment to address their issues.

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From focus groups we learned that they felt isolated and embarrassed of their vision impairment which was compounded by challenges such as not being able to drive and requiring assistive technology, leading to feelings of isolation and misunderstanding.

Angel Eyes NI has recruited a Youth Advocate to focus on the emotional well-being of these teens, to promote inclusion in school activities and to help develop meaningful strategies to overcome anxiety.

Key Achievements and Activities

One to One Support and Advocacy:

Registered 44 young people across Northern Ireland, providing them with ongoing support.



Figure 6/ A group of young people some sitting and some standing looking at camera on a grassy bank

Accessible Activities:

Delivered six events, including:

Mental health support workshop

Two Bowling and Pizza nights

Employment rights session with Labour Relations Agency

Education rights workshop with Children's Law Centre

Participation in All Party Working Group and Youth Forum at Stormnt

Peer Network Development:

Established closed Facebook and WhatsApp groups for young people (12 members) and parents (80 members) to facilitate communication and co-design events.

Young People Committee to co design project and discuss project goals and activities.

Resource Database:

We have developed a comprehensive database of services and supports, including grants for education, which will be available on our new website launching in July 2024.

Stakeholder Engagement:

Engaged four young people in All Party Groups for Youth Participation and Mental Health, contributing to policy discussions and advocacy efforts.

Collaborated with the Children's Law Centre to present findings to the All Party Working Group for Mental Health.

The Youth Service has made significant progress in supporting visually impaired youth, emphasising the importance of independence and community engagement.

Clinical Services

Established in 2021 this service continues to support both parents and professionals around understanding the impact of visual impairment. Primarily this service, headed up by an eye clinician delivers training on eye conditions, understanding clinical information and working with the whole Angel Eyes NI team to develop training sessions that are effective and meaningful. The Clinician uses the Empathey Virtual Reality software to demonstrate and explain eye conditions.



Figure 7/ Rebecca leading a VR session with two people in foreground wearing headsets

Key Achievements:

Delivered 29 VR parent session for 83 family members

Delivered along with the Education Team 22 school sessions to over 250 education staff

Delivered 8 VR sessions for stakeholders and partners.

Developed school training resources.

Delivered VR Training sessions to Centre for Public Health as part of the Wellness Week at QUB.

Organisational Development

HR and Team Structure

- Welcomed HR consultants Beyond HR for recruitment and policy review.
- Created a new Senior Management Team
- Implemented regular one-on-one meetings for staff and introduced flexible working arrangements to support work-life balance.
- Conducted Live Well Work Well health checks, promoting staff well-being.

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IT and Cybersecurity

- Transitioned to a fully managed IT support service with Precept IT, enhancing data security and staff training.
- Implemented Microsoft 365 backup services and Bitdefender for robust cybersecurity measures.

Public Relations and Media Coverage

- As part of our strategy, we have implemented a Communications Plan and as a result have seen a significant increase in the followers across all social media platforms.
- Secured significant media coverage on Good Morning Ulster, Radio 5 Live, and BBC World Health Service, raising awareness of our VR initiatives.
- Participated in international conferences and events, expanding our network and influence.
- Continued to issue a quarterly Ezine for families and stakeholders.

Conclusion

The past year has been marked by growth, resilience, and firm commitment to our mission. The achievements outlined in this report reflect the commitment of the team, the support of our partners, and the trust of the families and children we support. As we look ahead, we will focus on continuing to grow and refine our services to meet the needs of our families. Being cognisant of the current financial climate we will continue to seek out individual grants for our families in need and strive to secure sustainable funding. We will as always continue to keep the needs of children with vision impairments at the heart of everything we do.

Thank you to all our children, families, volunteers, partners and stakeholders for your continued support and engagement with Angel Eyes NI. With your support we are determined to continue to make a positive impact on the lives of children and families across Northern Ireland.



Figure 8 The Angel Eyes Team around a tree, some hanging from the branches.