

**Dr Onkar Sahota speech at the launch of the Health Committee report *Eye health: preventing sight loss in London* 5 December 2017, Royal College of Ophthalmologists**

Good morning and thank you for being here.

It is great to have so many people with us today.

I'd like to start by thanking the Royal College of Ophthalmologists for inviting us to their beautiful headquarters.

My name is Dr Onkar Sahota and I am the Chair of the London Assembly Health Committee.

We are a cross-party committee of Assembly Members and our role is to hold the Mayor to account on his health commitments and to investigate issues of importance to Londoners.

I am delighted to say that my colleague Susan Hall, the Deputy Chair of the Committee, is also with us today.

We are here today to launch our report examining the problem of sight loss in London.

It is shocking that people in London are losing their sight needlessly, even though we know that in many cases this is entirely avoidable.

Our committee has been looking at this issue, and we have found three key problems:

- a lack of public awareness on how to keep their eyes healthy
- people not getting fast enough access to the diagnostics and treatment they need
- and an eye health care system under tremendous pressure from fragmentation of services and rising demand.

On top of this, we also know that there is real inequality in terms of who experiences poor eye health and how people access diagnostics and treatment.

It is clear to us that poor eye health disproportionately affects vulnerable and disadvantaged people in London.

This includes those with learning difficulties, homeless people, and older Londoners, particularly those living with conditions like dementia and diabetes.

And we know that this is a problem that is set to continue in the future: By 2030 an extra 194,000 Londoners are predicted to be living with a sight-threatening eye health condition and an extra 74,000 living with sight loss.

So clearly more action and more focus is needed on this important issue.

As Assembly Members, it is always really important to hear directly from people affected by health issues- both through lived experience and from working on the frontline.

We are very grateful to everyone who took part in our investigation.

We were also particularly grateful to guests from the Thomas Pocklington Trust and the RNIB for their powerful testimony on the realities of living with sight loss.

We know that poor eye health can have profound negative impacts on people's wider health and wellbeing.

As one person told us – your eyesight is precious, it affects every aspect of your life, your freedom.

The impacts of poor eye health and sight loss on mental health, and on day to day living can be huge.

Loss of independence, social isolation and increased risk of hospitalisation due to avoidable falls, for example, all have costs to the individuals affected.

It also has an impact on their families, health and care services, and the wider community.

But we also know that people living with sight loss are not helpless, and that with the right support they can continue to work, and live independent lives.

Better eye health also makes financial sense. It opens up job opportunities for people and reduces public spending on benefits and health and social care costs. Making London a sight-friendly city should be a goal for all of us.

Failing to invest in good eye health has a direct impact on GPs and hospitals. As a practising GP myself I know how difficult it can be for both patients and doctors to handle rising workloads and the difficulties in scheduling appointments.

At a time when we all know our NHS and social care services are under strain, we should be looking at how to reduce this pressure. Focusing on prevention and education, and raising public awareness about how to look after your eyes and your sight, are some of the ways the Mayor can play a role in addressing this issue.

We are concerned by what we are hearing from the frontline- that delays in getting follow-up appointments are causing people to suffer further damage to their sight. And we note with concern that STP leads in London, and Health and Wellbeing Boards, have not recognised the scale and importance of eye health issues in London.

But by working together we can change this.

What struck us most throughout our investigation was the level of consensus about what needs to be done.

Everyone we spoke to – service users, doctors, charities, academics- had a clear understanding of the issues across London and what needs to change.

What seems to be missing is the leadership across London to put some of these solutions into practice.

The Mayor was elected on a promise to provide that leadership in London. **That is why we are calling on him today to work with partners across the eye health sector to develop and implement a London-wide eye health strategy.**

We also want to see eye health considered throughout the Mayor's wider health policies, and in all his policies, such as his housing policy, his transport policy and his planning policy.

We would also like him to use his influence to address the employment gap for people living with sight loss.

At City Hall, the committee will continue to press the Mayor to make the most of every opportunity to promote eye health for all Londoners.

We will also challenge him to use his influence with health and care partners through the new health devolution agreement, and through the London Health Board, to press for greater and faster action towards a joined-up strategy for eye health in the capital.

But we also need your help to keep up the pressure.

You can help us by writing to the Mayor and urging him to act on the findings of our report.

You can also help us raise awareness of this issue through your networks and on social media.

And you can also keep us informed about the work you are doing and let us know how we can support your efforts.

Once again, on behalf of the Health Committee, thank you all again for your participation in our work, and we look forward to working with you in the future.

I'll now hand over to Mr Mike Burdon, the President of The Royal College, and after that we'll take any questions or suggestions from the floor about next steps.