

# ANGEL EYES NI



## EQUALITY FOR CHILDREN WITH VISION IMPAIRMENT

**Activity Report 2021 - 2022**



## Chair's Report for Year Ending 31 March 2022

**Dr Brian Scott**

**Chair**



It's been another very successful year for the charity. During the past twelve months we have particularly emphasised:

- Increasing the range and quantity of services, and
- Gathering more and better data to highlight the difficult daily experiences of visually impaired children.

Under Sara McCracken's excellent and enthusiastic leadership, our growing team is now providing more support to more families than ever before. Our playgroups, social activities, individual parent advice, etc have all expanded; and as well we can now enable some families obtain 'Emergency Essentials' funds, which can help them cope with sudden difficulties and special needs. An important part of all these busy activities is also the intangible emotional support provided by our sensitive and caring staff during what are especially stressful times for families.

The second very important aspect we have concentrated on during the year is gathering hard evidence to show the inadequacies of public services for visually impaired children. These are particularly apparent in education. During the year we issued two reports quantifying the especially deleterious effect of COVID on the schooling of these children, and we were pleased that they caught the attention of officialdom and the politicians. We continue, however, pressing for action to have public services come up to the statutory requirements laid down in law. And we will also lobby politicians to do more e.g. by requiring classroom assistants to be properly trained to support their visually impaired pupils.

Our VisualEyes project, funded by the National Lottery, continues to progress well. It uses our unique virtual reality software to enlarge families' understanding of their children's eye conditions while also generating valuable data to verify its efficacy. When the project is

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completed, we will be able, with confidence, to spread the technology more widely so as to benefit more families.

Similarly, our EqualEyes project, run in conjunction with the Children's Law Centre, is helping families be more aware of their statutory rights and how best to obtain them for their visually impaired children.

Finally, our subsidiary social enterprise, Empatheyeyes, has made a great start providing training to a wide range of people who work with the visually impaired of all ages. These include social workers, care home staff, health attendants, etc.

None of this work would be possible without the support of our donors, both individuals and institutions. We are all extremely grateful for this, especially in these trying times of pressure on living standards and tightening budgets. I want also to thank Sara and her excellent team for their sustained hard work over the year - it is they who are the main actors in making possible these wonderful achievements. And I cannot conclude without expressing my particular gratitude and appreciation to our trustees. Their varying skills and experience provide an essential support to me as well as to the management team.

Thank you all so much.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Brian Scott", written over a light blue horizontal line.

Dr Brian Scott

Chair, Angel Eyes NI

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## Chief Executives Report for 2021 – 2022

Sara McCracken

Chief Executive



This year has been another one of growth for the organisation, and it has been exciting to expand the services that we offer to children and young people and their families.

The highlight of the year was the launch of our follow up report COVID: One Year On event in the Long Gallery, sponsored by Chris Lyttle MLA, the chair of the Committee for Education. The event was attended by a wide range of stakeholders and parents who told their compelling stories of their children’s experience in education. You can access the link here <https://tinyurl.com/ykffbhr4>

We were delighted to secure funding for a 5-year Education Project EqualEyes that launched in September 2021 in partnership with Children’s Law Centre. This project will provide Education Advocacy to parents and children to increase knowledge, confidence and understanding of rights and how to access support. We will also give our young people a platform to share their educational journey to influence support, policy, and legislation.

In May 2021 the second cohort of Classroom Assistants successfully completed the Level 4 Qualification “Supporting Learners with a Visual Impairment in Education” we developed in partnership with Ulster University. We offered this free of charge through funding secured to increase skills and knowledge to improve learning experiences and access to the curriculum.

Emma Hitchen joined our Family and Children’s Team in April 2021 bringing a wealth of experience and skills. Emma quickly registered the organisation as an Emergency Essentials referrer and has secured vital grants for families with visually impaired children. Kerrie and Emma have seen referral rates increase significantly over the last 12 months and have been meeting with sensory support teams and others to ensure no family falls through the cracks of getting the support they need.

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Another new member of the team is Rebecca McCracken who is an orthoptist and leads on the Virtual Reality Project VisualEyes delivering bespoke sessions to parents to enable them to see through the eyes of their child. Alongside this she had been delivering this impactful training to schools and other professionals supporting children with a vision impairment. This project is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.

The social Enterprise Empatheyeyes Ltd which is the commercial entity for the Virtual Reality Sight Loss Simulator for Adult Services has commenced business and we are excited at the opportunities to continue to grow this part of the charity. This is impacting the way services are delivered to support adults with a vision impairment.

Thank you to Dr Brian Scott and all the trustees for another year of fantastic support and guidance that has enabled us to grow. The board have a wide range of skills and to give their time freely. We were delighted to welcome Rosemary Rainey MBE, Colin Higgins and Naomi Nixon to our board who bring further experience in education, human resources and lived experience of visual impairment.

Our projects and activities are made possible by funders from whom we have successfully secured grants from including The National Lottery Community Fund, Halifax Foundation, Hospital Saturday Fund, ARN Foundation, Children in Need, Power NI and the Hedley Foundation.

A big thank you to the incredible Angel Eyes NI team who are passionate at creating solutions to improve the outcomes for children with a visual impairment in Northern Ireland.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Sara McCracken'.

Sara McCracken

Chief Executive

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Our services are developed and designed to achieve our strategic aims as set out for 2020 – 2023.

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## **1. All blind and partially sighted children in Northern Ireland will have equal access to education**

### **Education Advocacy Service**

The Family Insight Project was launched Jan 2016, in partnership with RNIB NI, in response to the demand for educational support services for families of children with vision impairment, as evidenced by Angel Eyes NI in the preceding years. The project concluded in August 2021 following an extension, granted by the National Lottery Community Fund, in response to COVID.



### **Family Insight Five Year Project Outcomes:**

350 families engaged with the project over its duration with the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area having the largest number of families (26%) and Belfast the lowest (17%)

Year 1 saw the highest number of referrals within a 12-month period @ 38% of total numbers

Over 50% of the total families remained engaged in the project for at least 2 years. Families returned at new pressure points in their child's educational journey: Transitions, examinations etc.

Most of the first-time referrals were for children aged 5-9 years @ 39%. Although the project was for children aged 0-12 years – 28% of referrals for 13 years +

### **EqualEyes Project September 2021 – August 2026**

Funding was secured from The National Lottery Community Fund for t5 years for the Equal Eyes Project. This is a partnership project with Children's Law Centre (CLC) and will provide Education Advocacy Services to families and children and young people with a vision impairment.

**Impact:**

Consultation responses to Education Authority's Planning Strategy – raising awareness

Queen's University – request for Angel Eyes NI to participate in their 'Master Your Leadership' course for master's Students – presenting the problems faced by pupils with vision impairment in education (being valued as the experts in this area)

Committee on the Administration of Justice article - submitted and published in Feb 2021 online Newsletter, *Just News*:  
<https://caj.org.uk/2021/02/25/just-news-february-2021/>

Article submitted & published in Equality Commission Project Paper, *Family and Community Engagement in Northern Ireland, March 2021*,  
<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/Education-LearningFromPandemic.pdf>

Launch of Education Report Covid-19 One Year on: The Impact on Children and Young People with Vision Impairment in Education in Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings in February 2022  
<https://tinyurl.com/ykffbhr4>

**Classroom Assistant Qualification**

Family Insight Project highlighted the need for effective training of classroom assistants, with over 33% of parental concerns (of 350 parents) relating in-school supports for children, including effective use of the classroom assistant.

Angel Eyes NI conducted a pilot study, in partnership with Ulster University (March 2018), attended by 27 classroom assistants from a variety of school settings. Of these, 44% reported to not know the eye condition of the pupil they supported. 55% reported to have received no training on visual impairment nor how to adapt resources. 78% reported they received no training on using Assistive Technology. This information led to the development, through Ulster University's Flexible Learning Centre of a Level 4 Qualification for Classroom Assistants supporting children and young people with a vision impairment.

**Outcome:**

March – May 2021, 26 Classroom Assistants undertook the training, that was completed exclusively online, due to COVID Restrictions.

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All participants were from a mainstream setting - 42% primary level & 58% post-primary, participants from all health trust areas represented

10-week course covering 5 x topics

100% completed training successfully

100% of Classroom assistants were satisfied with the course content and learning they gained, applying it to their role/ workplace

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**2. All families and carers with a blind and partially sighted child in Northern Ireland will have access to the services and support they need.**

**Family Support Service**

The Family Support team provide emotional and practical support to families at each step of the journey of bringing up a child with a vision impairment. This year we added an additional service to provide advice and assistance to access financial support, which is particularly pertinent in the Cost-of-Living Crisis we are currently experiencing.



**Family Support Outcomes:**

Registered as an Emergency Essentials Referrer

156 families received bespoke one to one support which included 82 new families

11 families accessed grants through our service

3 families were supported with housing issues

100% of families seeking support were successfully supported

100% families reported benefitting from the service

Information Workshops delivered:

2 x Newly Diagnosed Families

Benefits advice Workshop with Employers for Childcare

Return to school workshop

Cerebral Vision Impairment Workshop with Janet Harwood

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Family Fund and Centre of Independent living Workshop

Sensory Play and Christmas ideas Workshop

The Team also provides information and signposting services to Statutory Services including Sensory Support Teams and Eye Clinics. This year they met with and presented to 8 teams within HSCB. Currently we represent our community on 9 health forums to advocate for the rights, support and services for parents/carers at regional levels.

The Family Support services in 2021/22 increased the number of families reached and the capacity of representing families at policy and planning level.

### **VisualEyes – Virtual Reality Vision Impairment Simulator**

Funded by The National Lottery Community Fund

We were able to further develop the scope and reach of our services for families and professionals supporting children with a vision impairment in Northern Ireland by providing Virtual Reality Vision Impairment experiences through the VisualEyes Project funded by The National Lottery Community Fund. The project will conclude in October 2022.

#### **Outcomes:**

- 46 parents/carers and siblings received demonstrations of how their child sees through virtual reality.
- 8 schools have registered for demonstrations

Parents are reporting post demonstration that they feel better informed and more knowledgeable about their child's visual impairment

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### **3. All blind and partially sighted children in Northern Ireland will have equal opportunity to accessible clubs and activities.**

#### **InTune Project with Open Arts**

Angel Eyes NI delivered accessible clubs through the InTune Project in partnership with Open Arts across Northern Ireland throughout April 2021- March 2022. This was the second year of COVID-19 pandemic so providing social opportunities, supporting self-esteem of young people and connecting early years families was even more relevant, as families reported feeling isolated through this time.

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The organisation adapted to the needs of the young people and their families throughout the Covid 19 pandemic and delivered a blended approach to the sessions with some online and majority face to face.

### **Outcomes:**

44 accessible events were delivered

65 families supported through clubs

124 child participants in clubs

7 volunteers were trained to support children with VI

100% of visually impaired children seeking accessible sessions were accommodated

97% of participants think their social opportunities are improved due to attendance at a club

### **Other Events**

Christmas Panto funded by The Hedley Foundation and Power NI

Lyric Theatre in Belfast including audio description and touch tour.

350 attended over 2 performances which included 130 children and with 10 wheelchair spaces

### **Areyes Pilot funded by Awards for All**

4 early years sessions for parents of children aged 0 – 5 designed to support and empower parents with knowledge and information through diagnosis and early years with their child which was attended by 24 parents

2 play therapy sessions with an expert in the field who demonstrated a range of methods of play including sensory play, fine motor play and gross motor play and a resource bag of multi-sensory toys and a book.

2 Goalball sessions with Disability Sport NI

1 Vision Impaired Football session with IFA

Halloween walk and crafts

