Visual impairment, when the level of vision is below that which the individual requires for their everyday tasks, has a very significant impact on quality of life. It is also strongly associated with falls, hip fractures, and depression and with a higher risk of suicide.

Ageing, obesity, alcohol consumption and smoking, the demographic and lifestyle characteristics identified in the population of Dudley are key risk factors in one or more of the following eye conditions that cause visual impairment:

- Refractive Errors;
- Cataracts;
- Age Related Macular Disease;
- Glaucoma;
- Diabetic Retinopathy.

Older people from deprived areas and poorer backgrounds are often put off accessing eye care services, thus worsening untended disease. The consequence of not detecting and managing these conditions is permanent visual impairment.

17% of visual impairment in those over 65, and 30% in those over 75, was found to be a result of uncorrected refractive errors. 73% of those over 65 in one study had not visited an optometrist within the past 12 months despite their visual impairment. Improving sight test uptake would result in a reduction of visual impairment amongst Dudley’s population with fewer instances of uncorrected refractive errors, undetected cataracts, ARMD, glaucoma, diabetes and vascular diseases, whilst better all-round health would be promoted.

Attending a sight test is, however, dependent on individual motivation, not just failing vision. Thus, it was necessary to understand why sight tests paid for by the NHS in the older population may not be taken up, and what potential solutions could be employed to remove barriers.

Social marketing is the ‘systematic application of marketing, alongside other concepts and techniques to achieve specific behavioural goals for a social or public good’. It uses marketing techniques of the commercial sector to influence behavioural change in targeted areas of society.

The Choosing Health white paper set out a commitment to improve the nation’s health by assisting people to make healthier choices. Along with the earlier Wanless Report, it recognised that encouraging positive health behaviour (and related behavioural change) can be complex and challenging, necessitating sustained and coordinated action across sectors at all levels. Social marketing was specifically highlighted in the white paper as an approach that has the potential to make a significant contribution to both national and local work.

Dudley NHS’s Communications team began a social marketing project to understand what motivates older patients to attend, or eschew, sight tests, supporting a communications strategy that began in October 2008 to increase uptake of sight examinations amongst 60-70 year olds as the prevalence of eye diseases increases with age:

- Three one-to-one interviews were held with representatives from the local authority, Age Concern and the commissioner for older people at NHS Dudley;
- A focus group was held with 14 borough residents at the Older Peoples Forum;
- Small semi-structured interviews of between one to four participants were held at four locations across the borough. A total of 38 people participated in these interviews.

**Actionable outcomes**

Throughout the research the most common word used by participants was ‘precious’, both when describing eye sight and quality of life. It was used on 26 separate occasions by the focus groups and during the semi-structured interviews, with other responses revealing:

- The biggest motivation to attend a sight test was the risk of not being able to enjoy life;
- A tacit acceptance that sight failure is a part of growing old;
- People in Dudley trust independent opticians as opposed to chains;
- A poor understanding of the range of conditions that could be discovered from a test;
- The cost of spectacles was a big factor in people not attending;
- Personalised communication messages as opposed to generic advertising were preferred.

Participants were reluctant to be described as ‘old’ and many 60-70 year olds stated they were enjoying the best years of their lives. However, there was a consensus among
the groups that failing eye sight was a sign of getting old and that they accepted and expected it to happen.

Quality of life and daily activities were the most referred to themes that participants feared would be affected by a loss of sight, and were the main reason why they would consider attending a test. When asked what activities would be affected by failing sight and what patients feared missing out on, they referred to:

- Driving;
- Family events;
- Reading;
- Watching TV;
- Hobbies;
- Exercise.

As a result of this insight, Dudley NHS has continued to engage the local public with eye health messages, using press coverage, and recently, promotional material that capitalises on the ‘precious’ dimension of activities that would be affected with failing eyesight, and, as of February 2010, personalised eye care messages in the form of 65th birthday card from Dudley NHS.

There were 11,278 million NHS sight test claims in England processed 12 months to 31st March 200914 – an increase of 231,000 (2.1%) on the previous year. In Dudley over a similar period, we have noted a 4% increase suggesting a successful rise in the awareness of the importance and benefits of sight tests and improved access.

5 Dudley Strategic Needs Analysis – Part 1 – Demography
6 Dudley Strategic Needs Analysis – Part 2 - Health Risks
8 Ibid
12 Securing good health for the whole population. February 2004, Department of Health
14 Ibid

A poor understanding of the range of conditions that could be discovered from a sight test was found to be a contributing factor as to why people chose not to attend free NHS appointments.