



# SpLDs and Visual Difficulties

## SASC Guidance Update

### June 2019

# Where to find previous guidance documents

[www.sasc.org.uk](http://www.sasc.org.uk)

Click on **Downloads** tab on top of home page. **Either** scroll down and select articles you wish to view **or**

Enter ***visual difficulties*** into the Search tab.

[SpLDs and Visual Difficulties a Guide for Assessors and SpLD Practitioners.](#)

[Presentation on Introducing SpLDs and Visual Difficulties a Guide for Assessors and SpLD Practitioners](#)

[V.1. Screening Protocol from SpLDs & Visual Difficulties a Guide for Assessors and SpLD practitioners](#)

+ Enter ***behavioural optometrists*** into the Search tab

[Guidance on behavioural optometrists](#)

+ Enter ***response to questions*** into the Search tab

[Response to questions re Visual Guidance 2018](#)

# 2018 SASC Guidance - Recommendations

Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) and Visual Difficulties

**A Guide for Assessors and SpLD Practitioners**

SASC Working Group June 2018  
Dr Jim Gilchrist, Caroline Holden, Jane Warren.

Visual difficulty, discomfort and disturbance  
Reading and/or writing difficulty - speed, fluency, accuracy

Optometrist  
Ophthalmologist  
Orthoptist  
Optician

Diagnostic / Needs Assessor  
Specialist Tutor  
Disability Adviser

Dyslexia  
Dyspraxia / DCD  
ADHD  
Dyscalculia

SASC SpLD Assessment Standards Committee

## Assessors ADVISED TO ...

be aware/promote awareness

- of visual difficulties
- be aware/promote awareness of vision professionals
- promote importance of clear & comfortable vision
- promote need for correct diagnosis & management
- screen for visual difficulties (discomfort/disturbance)
- refer to optometrist if symptoms reported

## Assessors ADVISED NOT TO ...

- use the term visual stress as a catch-all
- assume specific association of SpLD & visual stress
- undertake screening using coloured overlays
- suggest or diagnose visual stress
- use Irlen-related terminology

# Developments 2018-9

## Collaboration with Jim Gilchrist:

- Training events
- Advisory work
- Updating the **visual difficulties screening protocol** in the light of ideas and comments from practitioners.
- Development of a **list of optometry practitioners** offering a wider range of tests than the standard sight-test.

# Screening protocol

## Problems noted:

- Needed to be adapted for use with younger children / in a schools context.
- Some questions needed clearer phrasing.
- Formatting could be more user-friendly.
- Assessors requested further guidance on interpreting patterns of responses.

# Visual Difficulties Screening Protocol V2 June 2019

## Main changes:

- Questions on eye and vision history adapted for use with parents of children and with adults.
- Additional commentary in separate reference document.
- Main questionnaire for adults reformatted / separate commentary provided on types of questions.
- New questionnaire for use with parents of children / in schools.

# Issues in referral

- More specialist, private services sometimes expensive
- Hard to assess scope, quality and efficacy of services provided
- *Routine referrals* can raise expectations of the potential benefit of any interventions
- Some assessors concerned about opportunities for colour screening being lost /more difficult to access

Key Text 1: *Efficacy of coloured overlays and lenses for treating reading difficulty: an overview of systematic reviews* Catherine Suttle, John Lawrenson, Miriam Conway.  
Vol 101 Issue 4 Paediatric Optometry July 2018

‘Overall, the finding of this overview of systematic reviews is that the available evidence is not sufficiently reliable to conclude that coloured filters are effective for alleviation of reading difficulty or discomfort... **In the absence of potential for harm, the clinician might consider prescribing this intervention for the benefit of a placebo effect.**

It is important, however, to consider the implications for the patient in terms of financial cost and raised expectations, in addition perhaps to neglecting other interventions in favour of this one....**It is possible that they (*coloured filters*) are effective**, but a lack of reliable research to date means that this is not yet known. Therefore a clear implication for research is that **high level, carefully conducted, unbiased research is needed to test efficacy of coloured filters for different forms of reading difficulty and discomfort, in children and adults’.**

Key Text 2: Chapter 17: A theory of visual stress and its application to the use of coloured filters for reading by Arnold Wilkins in *Progress in Colour Studies: Cognition, language and beyond* edited by Lindsay W. MacDonald, Carole P. Biggam, Galina V. Paramei. John Benjamins Publishing Company 2018

- ‘It is argued that colour filters can sometimes reduce the effects of strong visual stimulation when the visual cortex is hyperexcitable.’
- ‘Individuals with reading difficulty who report perceptual distortions of printed text can usually find an overlay or pair of overlays with a colour that reduces the distortion, and when they do their reading speed is generally increased, often by more than 15%, and therefore by more than expected from intra-individual variation (Wilkins, Allen, Monger & **Gilchrist**, 2016).’

# Referral options

- **First point of referral for most cases of visual difficulties-** any optometrist for a sight-test.
- **Re-referral** to a G.P., ophthalmologist or orthoptist generally advisable if an existing visual condition / impairment is reported as worsening.
- **Referral** to a specialist vision professional in cases of possible **pattern related visual stress/sensitivity**.

# Colour Screening

- **Separate from SpLD assessment** but **could inform** that assessment.
- Best carried out by a vision professional in the context of a comprehensive assessment of vision.
- **Assessors experienced in colour screening** *might* establish a working partnership with an optometrist, but only when working with professional guidance from the optometrist.

# Vision Professionals & Services

## The Sight Test

The term *sight test* has a **formal meaning in law** - it is not simply a test of how well someone can see.

In a sight test the optometrist is required to:

- assess **visual acuity**
- determine **refractive error**, and the need for a refractive correction – prescribe if necessary
- assess the **health of the eyes and visual system** – this includes looking for evidence of systemic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, which may affect eyes and vision
- **refer to secondary-care** (ophthalmologist) if there is evidence of disease or if a patient requires further specialist assessment or treatment (e.g. **oculomotor** functions)

Slide with permission from Jim Gilchrist

# Other vision services

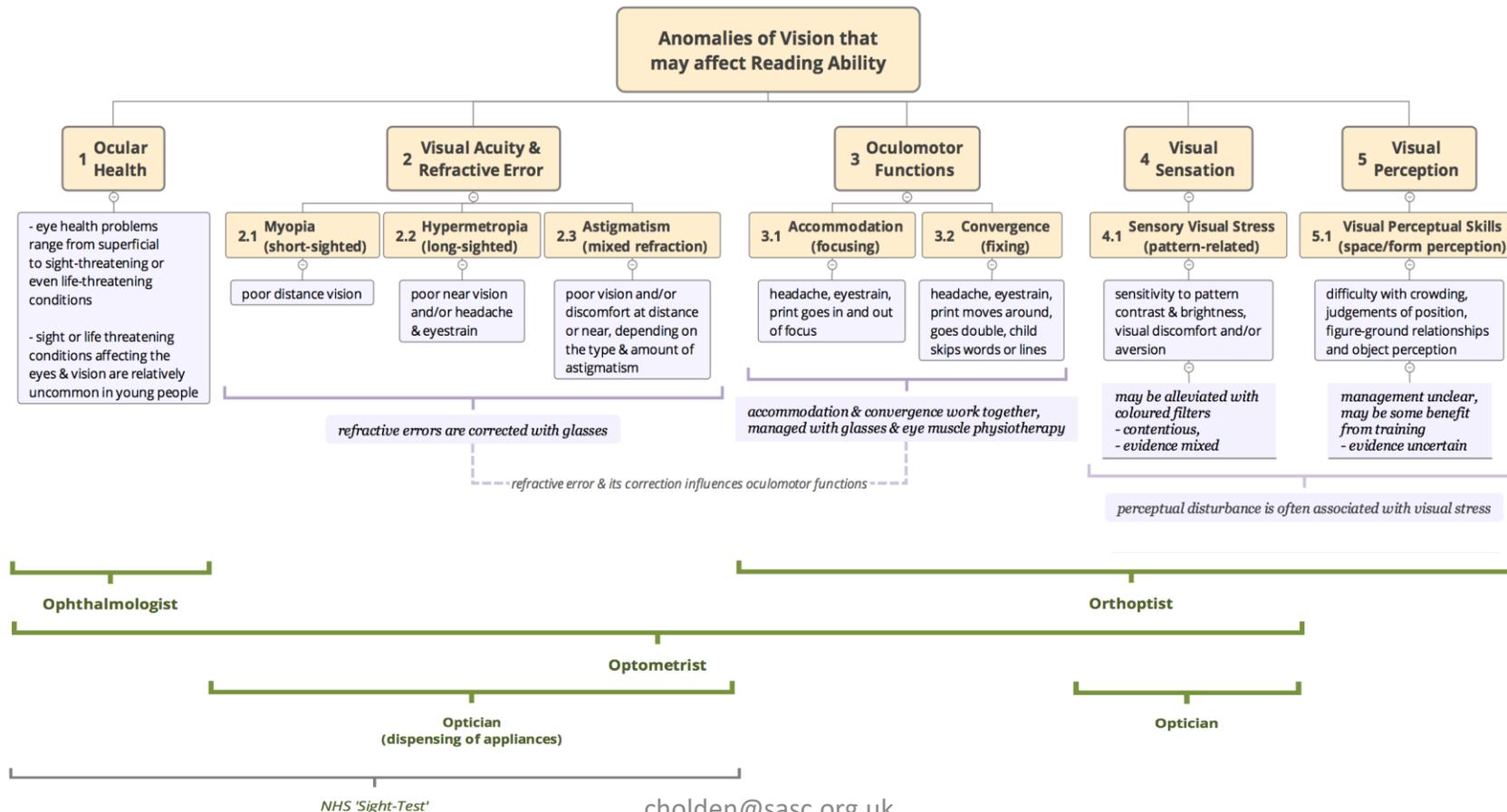
- Many optometrists offer additional eye health assessments such as **retinal imaging**. The cost of these is not covered by the sight test fee, so an additional fee may be charged. Similarly, contact lens fitting and aftercare is not part of the sight test, so separate fees are always charged for such services.
- Most optometrists will include assessments of **accommodation and convergence** in the sight test, especially when patients report symptoms of visual discomfort or disturbance consistent with oculomotor dysfunctions.
- However, the fee paid to optometrists for the sight test is low, and does not cover full assessment and treatment of oculomotor problems or visual stress. For this reason, many optometrists choose not to offer such assessments, and those who do offer them must charge additional fees. Such fees are normally comparable to fees charged by other highly qualified and regulated professionals, such as vets and solicitors for example.

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## Vision Professionals – who does what?

Those shown here are regulated eye & vision professions – all require graduate + professional level qualifications, and registration with a professional, regulatory body.

Other professionals often involved with assessment / management of visual sensation & perception anomalies are occupational therapists and developmental or educational psychologists.



## What are Behavioural Optometrists?

- Behavioural Optometrists are registered optometrists, who have the same minimum qualifications as all optometrists.
- In addition, they specialise in paediatric optometry and visual development, and so can be ideally placed to offer a full range of assessments and treatments, including for oculomotor dysfunction and visual stress.
- There is often close correspondence between the methods used by behavioural optometrists and occupational therapists, and some behavioural optometrists may undertake assessment and training of visual perception skills.



<http://babo.co.uk/>

### What is Vision Therapy?

The term Vision Therapy, also called **Optometric Vision Therapy**, generally refers to methods used by optometrists (and also by orthoptists and some ophthalmologists) to treat oculomotor dysfunctions such as accommodation and convergence insufficiency.

These methods, aimed at treating muscle weakness, are a form of physiotherapy. They have a long scientific history and a strong evidence base supporting their effectiveness for some conditions.

Vision Therapy aims to help people with oculomotor dysfunctions to achieve clear and comfortable vision. Its practitioners do not (and should not) claim that it is treatment for dyslexia or other learning difficulties.

# Key text

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## **The scientific basis for and efficacy of optometric vision therapy in nonstrabismic accommodative and vergence disorders**

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Kenneth J. Ciuffreda, O.D., Ph.D.

*State University of New York, State College of Optometry, Department of Vision Sciences, New York, New York*

Ciuffreda KJ. The scientific basis for and efficacy of optometric vision therapy in nonstrabismic accommodative and vergence disorders. *Optometry* 2002;73:735-62.

**Background:** For nearly 75 years, optometric vision therapy has been an important mode of therapy for both children and adults who manifested a range of nonstrabismic accommodative and vergence disorders.

**Methods:** In this article, the scientific basis for, and efficacy of, optometric vision therapy in such patients will be discussed. Using bio-engineering models of the oculomotor system as the conceptual framework, emphasis will be focused on studies that used objective recording techniques to directly assess therapeutically related changes in oculomotor responsivity.

**Results and Conclusions:** The findings clearly support the validity of optometric vision therapy. Furthermore, the results are consistent with the tenets of general motor learning.

# Referral choices and decisions

- Establish a referral route with a local optometrist or clinic. Check possible waiting times for appointments.
- Provide a list of local opticians / optometrist practices and their contact details.
- Explain potential costs.
- Explain differences between a standard sight test and additional services provided by some optometrists.
- Explain controversies e.g. re vision therapy, use of colour filters, diagnosis of Irlen Syndrome.
- If client is unsure about the outcome of a sight test they have had, suggest they contact optometrist again and request a short email / letter with explanation in writing.

# List of specialist optometrists / orthoptists

- Problems of endorsement prevents SASC publishing a list.
- Have collected together an informal list, by region, of recommended visual practitioners.
- Contact me by email (address on slides) if you would like a copy.
- Happy to add more recommendations to the list if you have them.

# University Schools of Optometry – an additional possible referral route

- A number of UK universities have schools of optometry. These are:  
Anglia-Ruskin, Aston, Bradford, Cardiff, City (London), Glasgow  
Caledonian, Hertfordshire, Manchester, Plymouth, Portsmouth, UWE  
(Bristol), Ulster.
- All of the university schools operate eye-clinics that are open to the public, and will accept referrals from other professionals.
- Most optometry schools run specialised clinics for assessment and management of binocular vision anomalies and visual stress.

# Encourage greater take-up of referral to a vision professional

- Explain the possible positive outcomes.
- Some universities pay for these referrals. Could your institution be persuaded to do the same?
- **BUT...** If good referral advice is given, it is ultimately the responsibility of the client /student/ parent of a child to pursue an optometrist's assessment.