



# A new apprenticeship to train specialists in children's eyecare and vision problems

BY JAMES SWEETMAN

**A** pioneering apprenticeship has launched that will create new opportunities for people to train as eyecare specialists while helping to tackle growing vision problems in children and adults across England. For the first time, aspiring orthoptists can now train through paid apprenticeships in their local NHS hospitals, rather than having to relocate to attend university courses in Liverpool, Sheffield or London.

The timing is crucial, with childhood vision problems on the rise and waiting lists for eyecare services growing. Orthoptists play a vital role in identifying and treating vision issues in children before the age of seven – after which treatment becomes much more difficult. They also support patients with serious neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease.

Julie Dowdney, Head Orthoptist at University Hospitals Dorset and Vice Chair of the British and Irish Orthoptic Society, said, "This is a game-changing moment for eyecare in England. By training people in their local communities, we can better serve patients who need early diagnosis and treatment. This is particularly important in areas like southern England, where we've struggled to recruit enough specialists."

The apprenticeship will:

- Allow people to earn while they learn, removing financial barriers to entering the profession
- Enable NHS trusts to 'grow their own' talent from their local communities

- Help meet increasing demand for eyecare services across the country
- Create new career opportunities for people who can't relocate for traditional university courses.

This development marks a return to the profession's roots, as orthoptists were originally trained in hospital schools before university-based courses became the norm.

The apprenticeship will maintain the high standards that have made British orthoptic qualifications internationally recognised while making the career more accessible to a wider range of people.

Jennifer Coupland, Chief Executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), said, "This alternative quality route into optometry will open out opportunities to people from all backgrounds to enter what is an incredibly important profession. They do so much fantastic work to improve the lives of children and people of all ages who are struggling with their eyesight. I can't wait to see the first apprentices qualifying through hospitals across the country."

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