



# Optimeyes end of project report



Supporting people  
with sight loss

# Introduction

The Optimeyes project was funded for two years from April 2015 by the Big Lottery Fund (BLF)'s Reaching Communities programme. It was a partnership between RNIB and six societies for blind and partially sighted people in York, Selby, Ryedale, Lincolnshire, Sheffield, Hull and East Riding and two Fire and Rescue Services in North and South Yorkshire. This report looks at the project's aims and outcomes, achievements and learning.

A more detailed analysis of our evaluation and learning is available separately in our external evaluator's report.

## Partners

The partners involved in the project covered large areas of Yorkshire and South Lincolnshire and are listed below.

- York Blind and Partially Sighted Society (YBPSS)
- Selby District Vision (SDV)
- Sight Support Ryedale (SSR)
- South Lincolnshire Blind Society (SLBS)
- Sheffield Royal Society for the Blind (SRSB)
- Hull and East Riding Institute for the Blind (HERIB)
- South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service (SYFRS)
- North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service (NYFRS)

## Project aims and outcomes

The overall aims of Optimeyes were:

- to help identify older people with or at risk of sight loss
- to address its practical and emotional impact for people across both urban and rural areas
- to help older people to better understand their eye condition, learn how to deal with sight deterioration and take control of their lives.

These aims were informed by consultation with older people with sight loss which highlighted a number of common issues, including:

- the challenges they face with day to day tasks, such as using transport
- the importance of learning new skills, such as making use of IT
- the need for access to early support when sight loss is diagnosed
- the value of peer support to reduce isolation and depression, including joining with others to campaign for better services.

# Outcome one

Older people with sight loss better understand managing their eye health, seek support to prevent dependency, and report reduced isolation.

## 1.1. Number of older people with or at risk of sight loss offered eye health advice and screening to help them develop better understanding of how to manage their eye health to prevent sight loss

Partner	Year 1	Year 2	Total	Expected
YBPSS	451	806	1257	500
SLBS	1046	233	1279	700
HERIB	626	499	1125	400
SRSB	3367	1510	4877	500
SSR	565	191	756	120
SDV	262	266	528	80
Totals	6317	3933	10250	2300

Each organisation has exceeded their target and the time and effort devoted to this activity has raised the profile of the partner organisations in their local areas and beyond. 'At risk' was determined in most cases by establishing if the person had had an eye examination within the advised time limits recognised by RNIB and NHS (i.e. every two years for healthy adults up to 70, every year for those over 40 with a family history of glaucoma, over 70 or those at any age living with diabetes) and offering a screening with the Eyes Right Toolkit (ERT).

ERT designed by Thomas Pocklington Trust, is a simple lay person tool so it doesn't require an eye health qualification to use. It can be used by anyone and is designed to screen near and distant vision. The partners used the ERT as a conversation starter to prompt discussions around eye health, as well as using ERT to encourage regular eye examinations by trained optometrists.

In addition to these numbers we also saw large amounts of the general population from different age groups. These are not counted here but we did find, particularly amongst working with black and ethnic minority (BAME) groups, that we were mostly coming

into contact with people under 50. We also worked with some hard-to-reach groups, for example people who were homeless. Here too, we found that many didn't fall into the over 50 age group so were not counted in the Optimeyes project targets.

One development under this outcome was the creation of a volunteer role to support outreach activity and the recruitment of a number of blind and partially sighted people, who then attended events to talk about eye health in settings such as retirement homes, community fairs and even local employers.

ERT and 'simulation specs' were used to great effect at a range of events, highlighting the need for regular eye checks with an optometrist and raising awareness of sight conditions which can lead to sight loss. These have the added impact of being interactive which can often be an attraction at events where the local society's presence may have been overlooked previously. It provided a talking point to discuss many other aspects of eye health and support services. This outreach work has positively impacted the growth of the partners involved in Optimeyes as shown in the evaluation report.

Below is a case study from a beneficiary in Ryedale demonstrating one aspect of our learning under this outcome.

### **Kenneth Carr case study**

The "beautiful game" took on a whole new meaning for football fan Kenneth Carr, when a new pair of glasses brought his sight back into focus and turned his life around.

Kenneth was working for a parcel delivery company 11 years ago when he noticed that he was struggling to read the consignment numbers on the packages.

"My boss told me to get some glasses, so I bought a cheap pair from a chemist," Kenneth says. "They didn't help much and it turned out that the prescription was too strong. I bought some different ones and made do with them for quite a while."

However, he was still unable to read a newspaper and television was a blur. He was put in touch with Janice from Sight Support Ryedale by a carer's organisation, having cared for his brother until he died.



"Janice screened my vision [with ERT] and recommended I visit the opticians – the last time I did that was 20 years ago. The optician said I needed varifocals. I didn't realise how much of a difference they would make! With my new glasses I can follow the scores of my favourite teams on the TV. I have another pair I take with me to watch my local football team so I can see the action in more detail," says Kenneth.

"I'm as useless as a bat without wings without my glasses and can't believe I managed so long without them. I hope my story encourages more people to get their eyes checked."

## 1.2. Number of older people with sight loss who say they are more aware of support available

Partner	Year 1	Year 2	Total	Expected
YBPSS	27	95	122	120
SLBS	240	60	300	140
HERIB	57	96	153	120
SRSB	149	93	242	150
SSR	25	39	64	40
SDV	60	45	105	30
Totals	558	428	986	600

During the project, partners sought to ensure that older blind and partially sighted people knew what support and services were available to them. This was achieved through provision of confidence building courses and peer-led information sessions which offered a chance for people to get to know more about the services, aids and benefits available. To establish how much better informed this made people, we developed a number of monitoring and evaluation tools, which were used with beneficiaries following an intervention, for example, their attendance at a coffee and information session.

### Quotes from service users

“I didn’t expect to get so much info and meet people going through similar things. [The session was] well supported by peers; couldn’t believe how much info was packed in.”

“Brilliant, I learned something new from it.”

“It opened up the opportunities I didn’t know existed. It was very useful.”

### 1.3. Number of older people who report reduced isolation

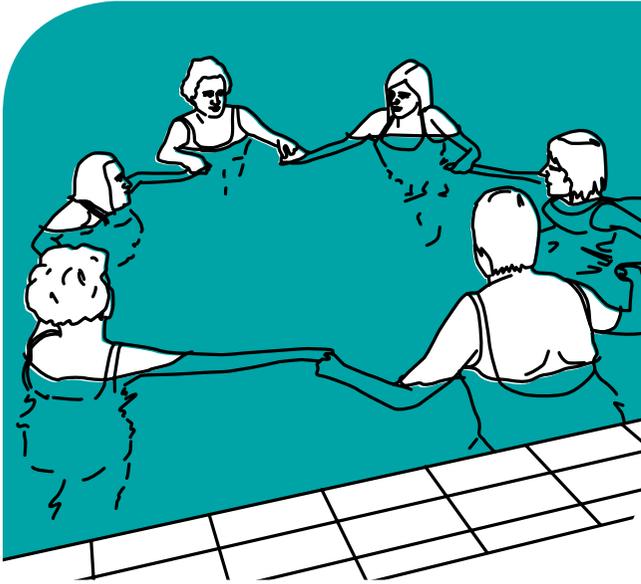
Partner	Year 1	Year 2	Total	Expected
YBPSS	24	36	60	60
SLBS	50	125	175	70
HERIB	22	72	94	60
SRSB	43	78	121	75
SSR	0	25	25	20
SDV	31	67	98	15
Totals	170	403	573	300

We are particularly proud of the over-achievement of this outcome as it demonstrates a really important outcome for older people with sight loss who we know isolation affects in significant ways. Over the course of the last two years, many people told us that prior to getting involved in the project they had largely cut themselves off from friends and family, spent increasing amounts of time at home, and stopped taking part in hobbies and interests. RNIB’s research and surveys with blind and partially sighted people highlight time and again what big issues loneliness and isolation are, and their detrimental effects on individuals’ emotional and physical wellbeing.

To establish how well our activities were reducing isolation, we took advice from an external evaluator in how best to capture this information. The feedback gathered focused on new contacts being made and people feeling more connected and taking part in more activities. The evidence for reduced isolation was collected following more in-depth involvement in activities, such as attending courses or joining social and leisure groups. We have also completed more thorough analysis of this outcome with baseline and follow up assessments as well as focus groups and one-to-one interviews.

The findings from this are discussed in more detail in our evaluation report.

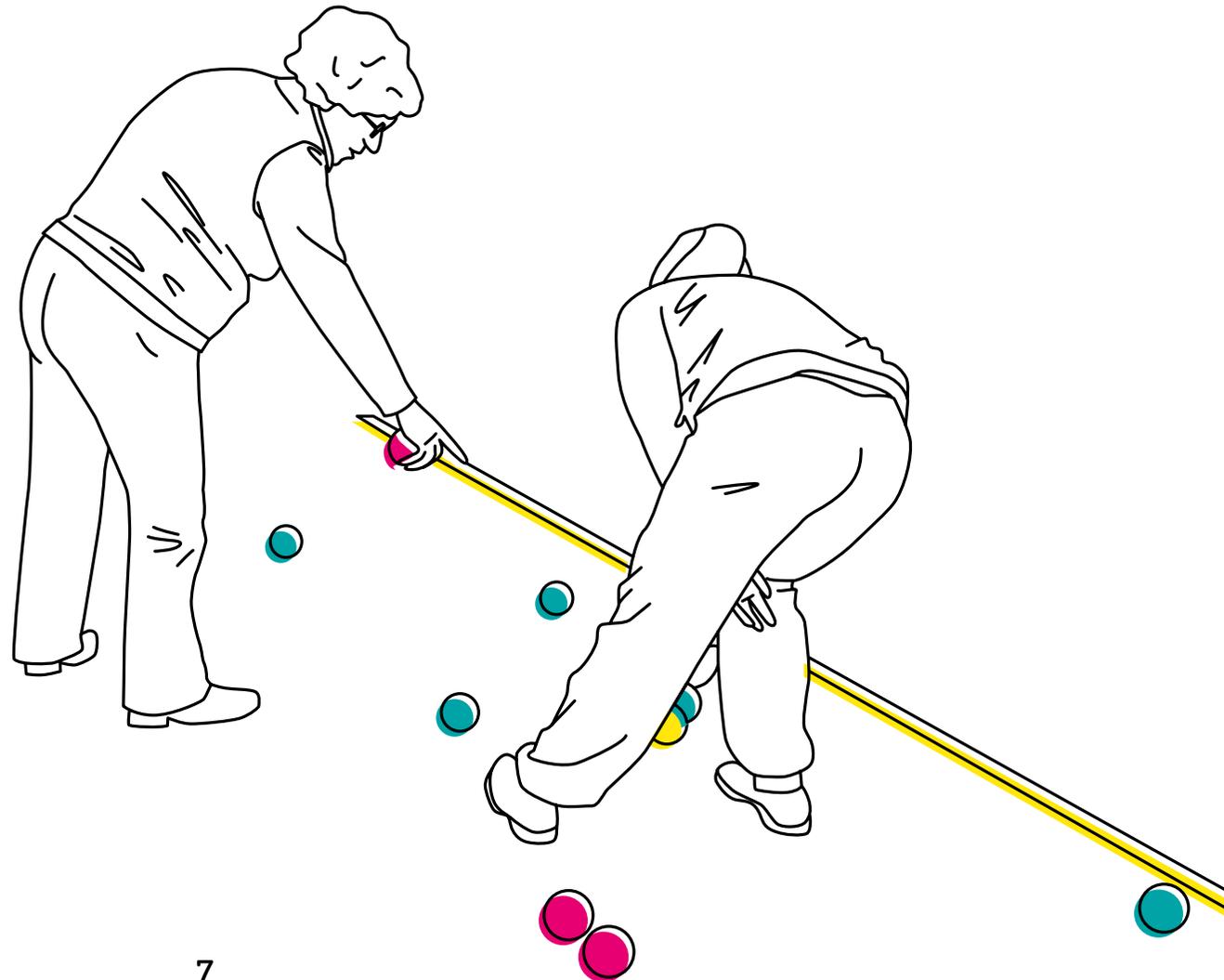
Through sharing this knowledge and collaborating with beneficiaries, the partners developed a series of taster sessions for activities and hobbies like boccia and swimming. These sessions were, at least to begin with, supported by project staff, transport was provided where necessary and people were able to attend with a “buddy” if they needed one, thanks to the development of this as a volunteer role. Many people came away from their involvement in these sessions with new contacts and friends.



“I have been swimming and I’m glowing and love it! I would not have the confidence to go on my own and this opportunity has made me feel confident and involved. I have made new friends.”

Reduced social isolation was also achieved by increasing access to technology through one-to-one and group sessions.

“I have now been in contact with an old friend by email that I haven’t seen for ages!”



# Outcome two

Older people with sight loss demonstrate improved confidence and independent living skills after accessing relevant information, advice and training

## 2.1. Number of older people attending training and empowerment courses, such as finding your feet, healthy cooking, access to technology

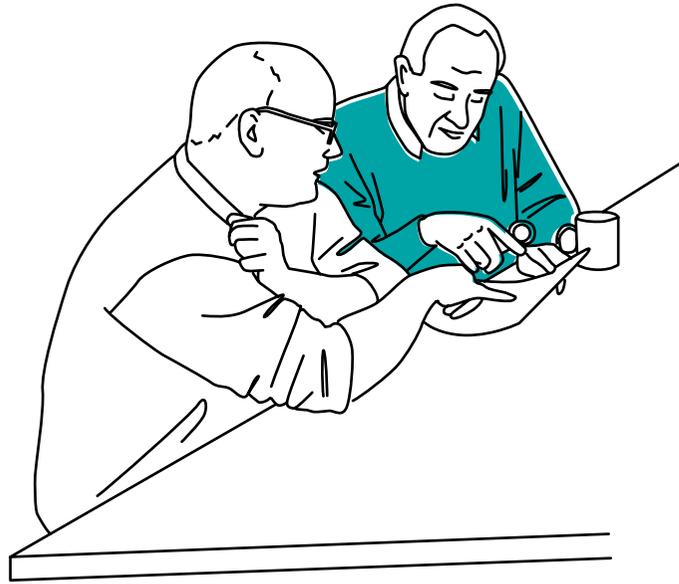
Partner	Year 1	Year 2	Total	Expected
YBPSS	29	80	109	60
SLBS	73	135	208	70
HERIB	58	62	120	80
SRSB	43	156	199	70
SSR	0	44	44	40
SDV	38	68	106	90
Totals	241	545	786	410

Confidence-building courses focused on independent living skills, wellbeing, and the range of aids and equipment available, were run by all six partners during the project. HERIB and RNIB have good experience in running these courses and were able to share learning and resources amongst the partners and develop these courses with those that hadn't undertaken this type of activity before.

Additionally, each of the local partners ran a range of shorter sessions and courses in topics such as IT, nutrition, family history and creative writing. All were suggested by the beneficiaries during consultation activities.

A development in Year 2 of the project was the Peer Facilitation course being made available to active blind and partially sighted volunteers, as well as potential new ones. The course trained the participants in facilitation skills while examining some of the challenges with facilitating group activity. Three of these courses were offered to 29 people with sight loss, and feedback was gathered from 26, 96 per cent of whom expressed increased confidence in facilitation, responding to the emotional needs of someone with sight loss, listening skills and living with their own sight condition.

Following attendance at the course, participants have gone on to use those skills in voluntary roles ranging from trustee positions to group facilitation of IT skills.



“I found the whole course fascinating and now have the desire to complete a project that I have been hoping to do for years.”

These courses are usually the first time a person with visual impairment has met and been able to share their experience of sight loss with others. Also, the combination of learning new skills, receiving new information and experiencing emotional support from peers was particularly beneficial to people.

“Listening to the contribution of other attendees, especially the emotional affects we have, there was information I wasn’t aware of so it was very beneficial for me to attend.” (service user)



## 2.2 Number of older people with sight loss supported by peers in groups or by buddies

Partner	Year 1	Year 2	Total	Expected
Partner	Year 1	Year 2	Total	Expected
YBPSS	38	69	107	60
SLBS	149	29	178	100
HERIB	37	44	81	80
SRSB	107	140	247	140
SSR	17	15	32	30
SDV	32	52	84	90
Totals	380	349	729	500

13 new peer groups were created across the partnership and some of the areas of interest were IT and assistive technology, gardening, crafts, fitness and reading, all led by a volunteer with sight loss. Feedback from the the group participants highlighted the benefits of learning with peers, in particular how valuable it is to share experiences of how people in similar situations are coping.

**“People welcome the opportunity to learn new skills from peers as it gives them a sense that ‘if they can do it, I can do it too’. Seeing other people there who had a similar condition, and whose condition was much worse than mine was most useful. I could see they were coping, and living in their own home – which is something I am worried about.”**  
(service user)

The benefits of peer delivery are also experienced by those delivering the session or leading the group.



**“I enjoy helping others learn to get the best out of life with sight loss.”**

### Graham Pounder case study

Graham Pounder set up and runs Selby District Visions “IT for VIPs” (visually impaired people), a peer support group which teaches people with sight loss how to use technology. “I took part in the Peer Facilitator training at York, which came at the perfect time for me. I picked up tips on how to draw information from participants and to consider many other essentials to running a group. These skills have gone on to be invaluable in my role as the IT group facilitator.

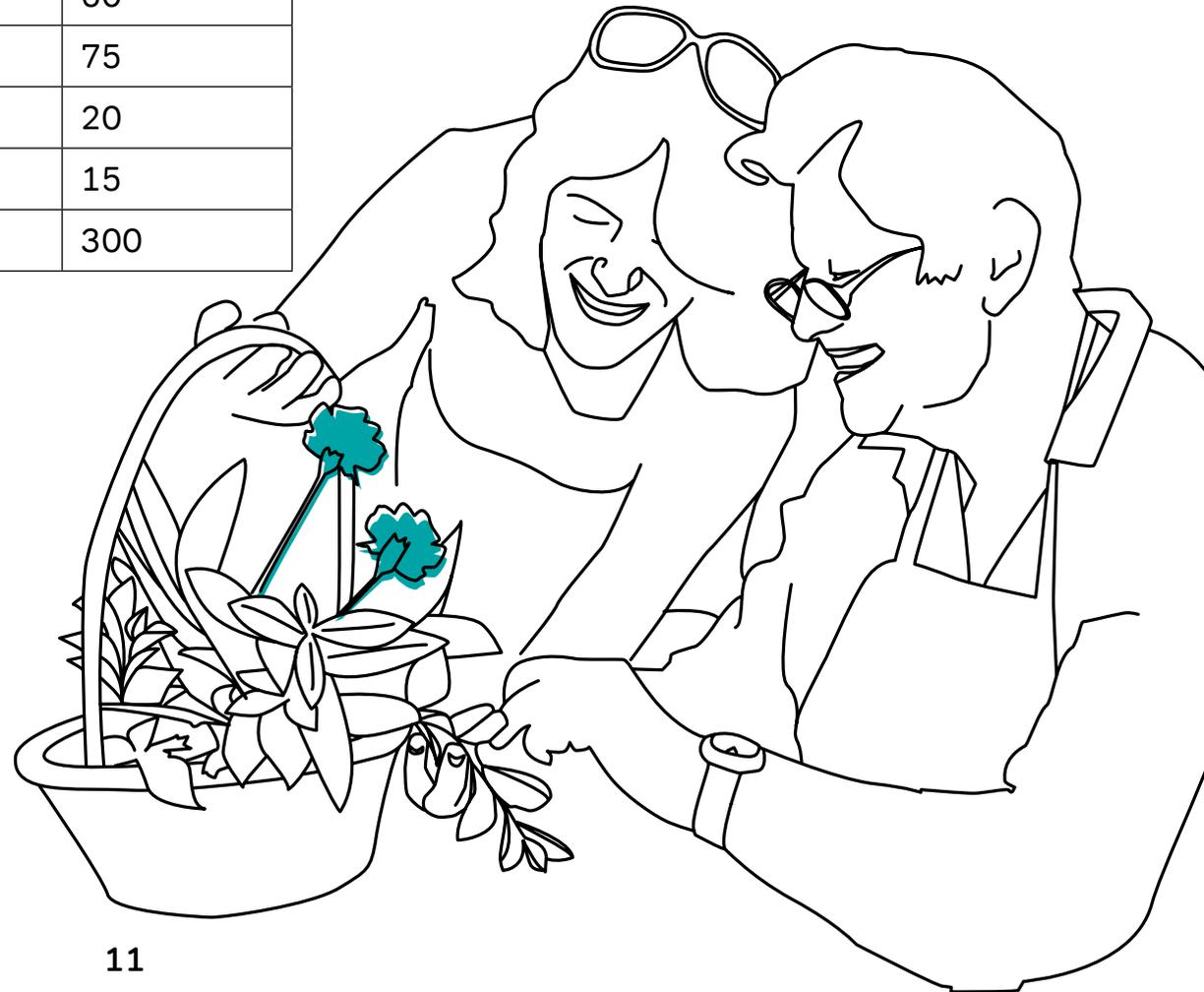
“Everything I have been involved with has helped to increase my confidence and given me the opportunity and ability to help other VIPs.”

## 2.3 Number of older people who state that they have improved levels of confidence

Partner	Year 1	Year 2	Total	Expected
YBPSS	25	50	75	60
SLBS	10	144	154	70
HERIB	39	88	127	60
SRSB	21	80	101	75
SSR	0	57	57	20
SDV	31	68	99	15
Totals	126	487	613	300

Increased confidence was a key theme explored in the evaluation of the project and was expressed by beneficiaries in a number of ways: from confidence in new activities and skills, to increased confidence in living with their sight loss and getting out and about.

These outcomes were achieved across a range of opportunities provided by the partners and a lot of confidence was attained from the beneficiaries meeting other blind and partially sighted people and working together to achieve objectives.



## The Optimeyes Garden case study

The photos below show a piece of waste land transformed into a garden by volunteers with sight loss from Selby District Vision (SDV). This gardening project came about after a number of Optimeyes beneficiaries, told SDVs project worker, Emily, they were interested in gardening but struggling to find a way to take part.

Emily had recently met Brian Nicholson who had visited SDV after seeing them in a newspaper as he had recently been diagnosed with sight loss. He had recently had to give up his allotment but was missing it terribly.

Emily linked the individuals, including Brian, to each other and supported them to establish a gardening group; they set about finding, securing and then developing a piece of wasteland. “The group were tireless and enabled every element of the project to happen. Their involvement ensured that this was led and

realised by and for them and their passion and determination was what drove this project forward,” said Emily.

For the beneficiaries this project has been transformational, particularly Brian who is able to get back to doing something he loves:

“I was really struggling at the time with an allotment I had. It was everything to me and got me out of the house. My sight was getting worse and going to new places is very difficult for me. Meeting people was really hard. SDV told me about some other visually impaired people who were interested in starting a gardening group and asked if I would like to be involved, I knew I wanted to be a part of it straight away and I have gone on to be heavily involved in the Optimeyes Garden project.

“I also take part in the IT group and learning about eating for healthy eyes was very interesting. I have now been on the Living with Sight Loss course, which was brilliant and I’m also a member of the Audio Book Club. Being involved is doing me so much good – it is the best thing I’ve ever done. It gets me out of

the house and I have such a laugh with other people. My confidence is definitely improving. I have never had other people I can talk to about dealing with sight loss, I didn’t know how to make that happen. I feel very comfortable at SDV, I can ask questions about continuing to live independently. It’s important to have my own interests, Optimeyes has made me so much less isolated.”



**Brian holding the Optimeyes Garden 'Pride of Goole' Award.**

# Outcome three

Older people with sight loss actively work together to influence local policies and practice via local campaigning groups

## 3.1. Number of older people with sight loss involved in local action activity or influence groups

Partner	Year 1	Year 2	Total	Expected
YBPSS	4	43	47	20
SLBS	5	5	10	10
HERIB	0	21	21	20
SRSB	59	42	101	20
SSR	3	23	26	10
SDV	7	3	10	10
Totals	78	137	215	90



Before and after shots of Selby garden.

We ran workshops to talk to people about campaigning, including RNIB's national campaigns such as 'Need it to Read it' which gave people the tools and confidence to take part. Other activities involved blind and partially sighted people working with local theatres, bus and train operators and local councils to advise on their experiences of the services they were providing and how to make things more accessible to blind and partially sighted people.

This quote comes from a transport organisation who benefited from hearing the views of a group of Optimeyes beneficiaries.

**“We had a full house of attendees and from both my point of view and the suppliers we felt the workshop went really well and we were able to take a number of things from it which we hope will improve the experience for users with visual impairment. It was also useful to hear that some of the changes we are already making will benefit this set of users and will increase their independence when travelling.” (Feedback from a consultation)**

The following case is from partnership work between SRSB and Crucible Theatre Sheffield and highlights some important learning about the importance of listening to the experiences and access barriers of people with sight loss in order to fix them.

Following Vision Impairment Awareness training to staff from the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield, Sheffield Theatres requested some first-hand experience of how the built environment affected the experience of sight impaired people attending theatre performances. Beneficiaries from SRSB were invited to a workshop to discuss the barriers and challenges facing vision impaired people who wanted to go to the theatre but found they no longer or had never attended performances

As a result of this workshop, Sheffield Theatres have committed to signing a partnership agreement with SRSB to train all of their front line staff to better understand the needs of blind and partially sighted people. They have also developed, based on feedback from the participants, a programme of changes to the buildings to make them more accessible and hopefully attract people with sight loss back to performances. Jackie Pass from Sheffield Theatres told us “these conversations are really important because it's the passion of those visitors who desperately want to come to theatre and now can't that's the most motivating factor, that is what spurred us on... these people are as passionate about theatre as we are. We have to do something about this and that's made a real difference.”

### 3.2. Number of people engaged as buddies, volunteers and group leaders

Partner	Year 1	Year 2	Total	Expected
YBPSS	8	4	12	20
SLBS	15	13	28	10
HERIB	0	14	14	12
SRSB	17	23	40	10
SSR	3	5	8	8
SDV	8	9	17	8
Totals	51	68	119	68

We have developed 10 new volunteering roles across the partners, involving people in helping to run activity sessions, helping at eye health events, delivering sessions on confidence building courses and leading peer support groups. Involving volunteers in delivering services has meant that some of the activities developed during the project are now sustainable and peer-led.

The project partners were able to run three peer-facilitation courses in year two to boost the skills and confidence of potential blind and partially sighted volunteers. The courses had positive outcomes for attendees, including the uptake of a range of volunteering activities or the role of peer-group leaders and trustees.



# Outcome four

Previously unengaged older people with sight loss take more control of their lives due to local partners having increased capacity to identify and support older people.

## 4.1. Total number of older people supported during the project

Partner	Year 1	Year 2	Total	Expected
YBPSS	529	1003	1532	1600
SLBS	1285	599	1884	1000
HERIB	721	640	1361	400
SRSB	3517	1846	5364	500
SSR	252	292	544	250
SDV	293	311	604	240
Totals	6597	4691	11287	3990

In order to reach more older people, outreach work featured heavily in our activities in Year 1 of the project. This had a number of benefits for the partners, over and above being able to increase their own reach to people living with sight loss. Taking a wider view of eye health meant that the partners were relevant to a wider audience. This in turn has raised their profile in their local areas. Additionally, the development of volunteer role profiles means that we have enabled beneficiaries to take an active role in outreach work in Year 2, attending events and talking about the importance of eye health or giving information about services offered by the local project partners.

## Mike Salter: case study of a volunteer from SRSB

Mike was at a very low point having had two heart attacks and a stroke which caused sight loss: “I was certified visually impaired in both eyes. I was also seeing visions and became convinced that I was suffering from dementia now, as well”. He became totally housebound for three months, depressed, feeling useless and unable to do any of the things he used to do such as drive, do jobs around the house and help his wife around the house. “I didn’t mention the visions I was seeing to anyone, not even my wife”.

Since becoming involved with SRSB, Mike realised his visions were part of his sight loss, a condition called Charles Bonnet syndrome and he joined a support a group which has now been running for two years. As his confidence grew through courses such as LWSL and peer facilitation, Mike began supporting the Optimeyes project as a volunteer, promoting both eye health and talking about his own sight loss at events and groups across



the city, and on LWSL as a speaker. He has also assisted in training staff from organisations such as SYFRS, Sheffield Libraries and Sheffield Theatres in vision impairment awareness. Mike feels much more positive and enjoys his varied volunteer role and being able to make a difference, raising awareness of sight loss around the city. “There is a new tomorrow and life still has meaning after sight loss. Thanks to the Optimeyes project, I am ‘Optimized’.”

## 4.2. Number of staff from the public, private, voluntary sectors trained by Optimeyes to raise understanding of eye health and support available locally

Partner	Year 1	Year 2	Total	Expected
YBPSS	78	44	122	100
SLBS	152	7	159	25
HERIB	63	185	248	120
SRSB	733	384	1089	100
SSR	23	38	61	60
SDV	13	35	48	19

## 4.3. Number of local partners engaged in extended Optimeyes partnership working

Partner	Year 1	Year 2	Total	Expected
YBPSS	13	3	15	10
SLBS	13	12	25	25
HERIB	6	8	14	6
SRSB	5	20	25	5
SSR	11	1	12	5
SDV	13	17	30	11

4.2 and 4.3 are grouped together because the same activities to capture these outcomes were used for both. It was decided early on in the project to create a training offer to take to potential partners so that we could raise awareness of the issues people with sight loss face in their everyday lives. To achieve this, we brought together resources across all partner organisations, including previous versions of vision impairment awareness training, and, the project team, with support from blind and partially sighted people, redeveloped it, to address the needs of the project. This training was then offered for free to organisations for their staff and volunteers, which increased the attractiveness of the training, especially to smaller organisations that wouldn't have been able to buy in this kind of training previously. Our learning during this activity showed that the inclusion of someone with sight loss in the delivery of training was more effective at demonstrating the impact of sight loss. They were able to answer questions from training delegates using their first-hand experiences of the challenges they faced as a result of their eye condition and feedback on this was very positive.

# Legacy and sustainability

Optimeyes will have a lasting and sustained presence throughout Yorkshire and Lincolnshire thanks to the range of new opportunities for blind and partially sighted people. The IT groups will continue being run by peers and in Hull IT services have been expanded beyond Hull and into East Riding. Leisure and social activities will continue, including swimming, audio shooting, crafts and boccia. The boccia team in York has recently attended and reached the semi-final of a regional competition and continues to go from strength to strength.

The partnership continues to work as a network for learning and creativity. An external piece of work highlighting this continued partnership is the invitation from HERIB to all partners to participate in a project as part of Hull's City of Culture celebrations culminating in a sculpture designed by blind and partially sighted people being erected at Hull Eye Hospital.

Partners will continue to use the ERT and promote the eye health message. This has been particularly beneficial to

Selby District Vision, who were able to secure additional funding to take eye health talks into schools thanks to the evidence and learning from Optimeyes.

Working with partners to identify people living with sight loss and to raise greater awareness of eye health will continue. This year we created a good practice guide for fire and rescue services collating the learning from Optimeyes and Optic. It was co-produced with blind and partially sighted people, fire service staff and the local sight loss partners. A great accomplishment is that the guide was recently endorsed and disseminated by the Chief Fire Officers Association.

Thanks to staff from the fire and rescue service undertaking this training, a further 6,149 older people were given eye health information and advice during home safety checks and the eyes right toolkit was used at 230 events. There were 60 referrals made to local society partners by the fire and rescue service to receive more in-depth support, including advice on IT support, mobility training, onward referrals to social services, independent living advice and social and leisure opportunities and the referral pathways we set up will remain in place.

Optimeyes has found a good fit within the fire and rescue's current Safe and Well strategy. The learning from Optimeyes has resulted in the creation of a good practice guide for Fire and Rescue services to encourage more fire services to incorporate eye health into their Safe and Well home checks.

**“I am extremely excited by the work that has been going on and the positive impact that this will have on people. Social isolation, because of a condition affecting someone's vision, has a massive impact on someone living a full and independent life as well as putting them at risk from fire in the home. The Good Practice Guide and training we received will help make a real difference to people who are affected by sight loss by recognising the signs and referring them to appropriate specialists.”**  
**Martin Blundell SYFRS**

Overall, we are incredibly proud of what we have achieved with Optimeyes. From our original target of reaching 3,990 older people, it has been an amazing achievement of the project that we reached 11,287. As one partner put it:

**“Optimeyes gave us permission to dream and to make those dreams a reality.”**

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