North Cheshire and Mersey
NHS Foundation Trust

Visual Processing Difficulties Clinic (VPD) Referral and Overlay Assessment Pathway

Why is the referral pathway changing?

Over recent years the number of referrals relating to visual discomfort during reading and requests for coloured overlay assessments has increased significantly. Many pupils can be appropriately supported within school through educational interventions, reasonable classroom adjustments and structured overlay trials without requiring specialist orthoptic assessment.

This revised pathway ensures that specialist clinic appointments remain available for children with persistent visual symptoms and those requiring assessment of binocular vision, accommodation, eye movement control or visual perceptual skills.

The aim is to provide earlier support within school while improving access to specialist assessment for children with more complex visual difficulties.

Schools are not being asked to diagnose visual conditions or visual processing difficulties. They are asked to document whether educational adjustments, including coloured overlays where appropriate, appear to provide a perceived functional benefit within the classroom.

What we will continue to do

The Visual Processing Difficulties (VPD) Clinic assesses children and young people who experience difficulties with reading, tracking text, visual attention, visual perception, or visual comfort, where an underlying visual factor may be contributing.

The clinic provides assessment of:

- Binocular vision to identify difficulties with eye teaming, convergence, divergence and ocular alignment.
- Accommodation (focusing) to identify reduced or unstable focusing ability that may affect reading and near work.
- Eye movement control (saccades and pursuits) to assess how efficiently the eyes move between words, lines and targets, and whether difficulties with tracking text may be related to oculomotor control.
- Visual perception skills. These skills support the ability to recognise, remember, interpret and use visual information during reading, writing and classroom activities.

The assessment aims to identify whether visual, oculomotor or visual perceptual factors are contributing to a child's difficulties and to provide appropriate advice, management strategies and recommendations where indicated.

In England, schools do not normally need authorisation from an orthoptist, optometrist or other healthcare professional for a child to use a coloured overlay in examinations, provided it is being used as part of the student's normal way of working in school. JCQ guidance lists coloured overlays as an access arrangement that centres can provide without a formal application to the awarding body.

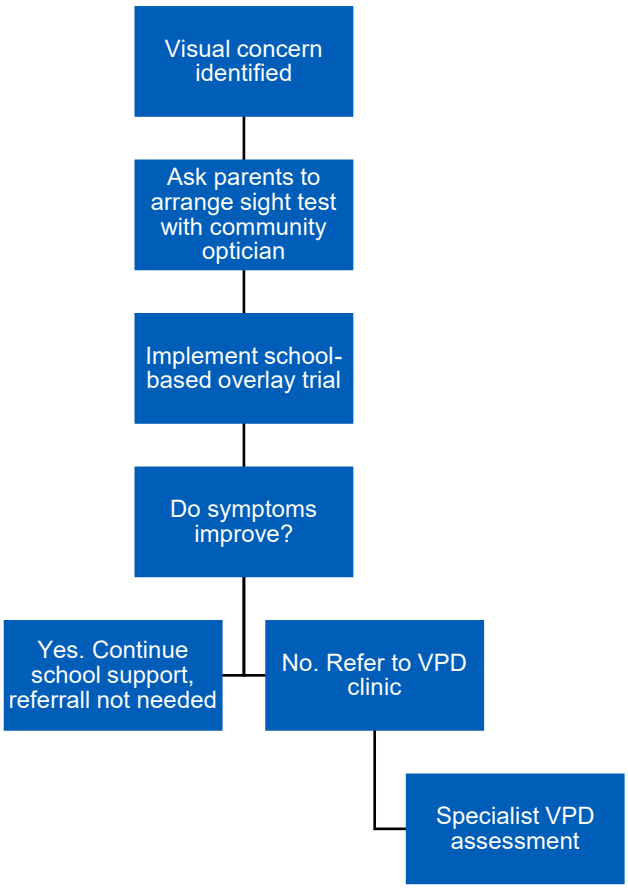
This means a school can:

- trial coloured overlays themselves
- record which colour (if any) the pupil prefers
- ensure the overlay is used routinely in classwork, reading tasks and internal tests
- allow the pupil to use the same overlay in examinations as their normal way of working

The Orthoptic Service will no longer routinely assess for coloured overlays. Schools are encouraged to undertake their own classroom-based trials of coloured overlays and monitor any reported benefit from their use. If an overlay is found to be beneficial and is used consistently as part of the pupil's normal way of working, schools may make appropriate examination arrangements in line with current JCQ guidance.

Coloured overlays should be regarded as an educational support strategy rather than a medical treatment. The use of coloured overlays does not confirm the presence of a recognised medical condition. Information regarding overlay use should be considered alongside educational assessments, classroom observations and clinical findings.

From a workload perspective, we suggest that overlay selection is an educational strategy that schools can trial themselves, reserving VPD clinic appointments for more complex cases where symptoms persist **despite** classroom adaptations.



This is a practical protocol that schools should implement independently, promoting a consistent school-based approach to educational interventions and visual adjustments before referral.

School guidance for visual processing difficulties (VPD) referrals

Guidance for schools and educational settings

Purpose

This guidance supports schools in implementing educational interventions and structured overlay trials before considering referral to the VPD Clinic.

Before considering referral

Before a referral is made, schools should ensure that the student's vision has been checked

The child should have:

- had a recent sight test with an optometrist
- been prescribed glasses if required
- been encouraged to wear their glasses consistently

Many reading and visual difficulties can be caused or exacerbated by uncorrected vision / glasses problems

Educational needs have been considered

Schools should review whether difficulties may be associated with:

- literacy difficulties
- learning needs
- attention and concentration difficulties
- environmental factors
- curriculum access requirements

Appropriate educational support should be implemented and reviewed before referral.

Classroom strategies

The following strategies may help pupils who report visual discomfort when reading:

Presentation of printed materials

- increasing font size where appropriate
- using clear, uncluttered page layouts
- avoiding dense blocks of text
- increasing spacing between lines and paragraphs
- using matt rather than glossy paper where possible

Digital adjustments

- adjust screen brightness
- use coloured backgrounds on digital devices
- use reading ruler tools
- alter contrast settings
- increase text size

General strategies

Consider:

- providing regular visual breaks
- reducing unnecessary copying from boards
- presenting information in smaller sections
- using visual supports where appropriate

Schools should monitor whether these strategies improve comfort and access to learning.

Coloured overlay trial protocol

Purpose

The purpose of this pathway is not to diagnose ‘visual stress’. The clinic assesses children who present with persistent visual symptoms or suspected visual processing difficulties after appropriate educational interventions and reasonable classroom adjustments have been implemented. Information regarding coloured overlays is collected as part of the overall clinical picture and does not confirm the presence of a recognised medical diagnosis or visual processing difficulty.

Overlay assessment resources

Schools purchasing coloured overlay assessment tools are advised to use the assessment procedures provided by the manufacturer. These assessment packs are designed to assist schools in identifying a pupil's preferred overlay colour and recording whether the pupil reports a perceived benefit from its use.

In many cases, pupils who experience improved visual comfort with overlays can continue to use them within school without requiring referral to the Orthoptic Service. Referral should be considered only where symptoms persist, concerns remain regarding visual function, or difficulties continue to impact educational access despite appropriate interventions.

Pupils suitable for a trial

A trial may be considered where a pupil reports one or more of the following when reading:

- words appear blurry
- text appears uncomfortable to look at
- letters or words seem to move, wobble or distort
- glare from white paper
- headaches associated with prolonged reading
- improved comfort when reading from coloured digital backgrounds

These symptoms are subjective experiences reported by the pupil and are not diagnostic of a visual processing difficulty or recognised medical condition.

Step 1: Discuss symptoms

Ask the pupil:

- what happens when you read?
- does the page appear bright or uncomfortable?

- do words appear blurry, distorted or moving?
- do symptoms improve on coloured backgrounds or screens?

Record responses on the school's intervention record.

Step 2: Trial different overlays

Provide a range of coloured overlays.

Ask the pupil to:

- read a passage without an overlay
- compare several overlay colours
- choose the overlay that feels most comfortable

Staff should:

- avoid suggesting a preferred colour
- allow the pupil to make their own choice
- focus on comfort rather than reading speed

No specific colour is considered superior.

Step 3: Classroom trial

Where a preferred colour is identified:

- provide the overlay for everyday use
- encourage use during reading and written tasks
- allow use across different curriculum areas
- continue the trial for approximately 4 to 6 weeks

Teachers should observe:

- whether the pupil chooses to use the overlay voluntarily
- whether reading tasks appear more comfortable
- whether engagement with reading activities improves
- whether use is maintained over time

Review of the trial

After 4 to 6 weeks, review the outcome.

Reported benefit from overlay trial

A pupil may be considered to have experienced a perceived benefit if:

- the pupil consistently chooses to use the overlay
- the overlay is used across a range of subjects
- the pupil reports improved visual comfort
- staff observe improved engagement with reading tasks

Where a pupil reports a consistent benefit from overlay use and symptoms are adequately managed, referral to the VPD Clinic is not normally required.

No reported benefit from the overlay trial:

The trial should be discontinued if:

- the pupil no longer wishes to use the overlay
- no benefit is reported
- use is inconsistent despite encouragement
- the overlay does not appear to improve comfort or engagement

Examination arrangements

Where a coloured overlay has become part of a pupil's normal way of working, schools may permit its use during assessments and examinations in accordance with current JCQ guidance.

Schools should retain evidence that:

- the overlay is routinely used in lessons
- the overlay has been used during internal assessments
- it forms part of the pupil's normal way of working

Schools are responsible for ensuring examination arrangements comply with current JCQ requirements.

When to refer to the Orthoptic Service

Referral may be appropriate where:

- significant visual symptoms persist despite classroom adaptations
- symptoms remain despite educational interventions regardless of whether an overlay trial demonstrates perceived benefit
- there are concerns regarding eye movements, binocular vision or visual function.
- the pupil experiences severe or unusual visual symptoms
- visual difficulties are significantly affecting access to education

Referral should not be based solely on a positive response to a coloured overlay trial. Referral should be based on the presence of ongoing visual concerns, symptoms or functional difficulties despite appropriate educational support and reasonable classroom adjustments.

VPD referral requirements

Before referral, schools should provide evidence that:

☐ the child is 8 years of age or older

☐ the referral form has been completed in full and difficulties persist despite interventions

☐ educational interventions undertaken prior to referral

☐ where visual adjustments such as coloured overlays, coloured paper or altered background colours have been trialled, their perceived effect has been documented, or a reason has been provided explaining why this was not appropriate

☐ difficulties persist despite educational interventions and any beneficial visual adjustments identified through the trial

☐ sight test completed within previous 12 months

Please see referral tool

Referrals that do not demonstrate evidence of appropriate school-based intervention may not meet the referral criteria for the VPD Clinic.

Frequently asked questions

Where can school obtain coloured overlays?

Coloured overlays are available from a range of educational suppliers. Examples include commercially available coloured overlay assessment systems designed for educational settings. Schools may use any suitable overlay system and are not required to purchase a specific product.

Does a child need approval from the Orthoptic Service to use an overlay?

No. Schools may undertake their own overlay trials and implement overlays where pupils report a benefit from their use as part of their normal way of working.

Does the VPD Clinic assess for dyslexia?

No. The VPD Clinic does not assess for or diagnose dyslexia. Assessment for dyslexia should follow educational pathways. Visual difficulties and dyslexia may coexist, but they are separate conditions. The VPD Clinic assesses visual factors that may affect access to written information.

When should we refer?

Referral should be considered when significant visual difficulties persist despite appropriate educational strategies and a school-based intervention programme.

This pathway and referral tool were developed in collaboration with Orthoptic colleagues, service management and educational professionals, including SENCOs and occupational therapists. The aim was to ensure that the process is evidence-informed, practical for schools to implement and supports appropriate access to specialist Orthoptic assessment for children with persistent visual difficulties.

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