

EYE CARE, EVERYWHERE

OT explores how the profession is adapting to meet workforce shortages in remote and rural locations

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annah Einarson has swapped an hour-long commute for a five-minute walk to work.

Rather than watching condensation make its way down a bus window, she looks out at the green curves of the Cuillin Hills and the pastel houses that line Portree Harbour.

At lunch, instead of grabbing a quick supermarket sandwich, Einarson will return home to make soup or tomato tortellini.

As the only optometrist on the Isle of Skye, Einarson told *OT* that she was mentally preparing for the experience to be isolating.

However, she has quickly formed connections within the community – she has learned to sail with a local club, while her boyfriend has joined the football team.

“All my patients have been so lovely. When they find out that I am staying, they put quite a bit of effort into keeping me here,” she said.

Einarson’s appointment in January is the first time in two years that J M MacDonald Opticians has had a resident optometrist – with the Duncan & Todd group practice previously relying on locums.

Challenges recruiting optometrists are not limited to the Inner Hebrides, with practices in rural

and remote locations across the UK also struggling to hire permanent optometrists.

A survey of more than 2000 AOP members in 2018 found that 47% of practice managers in rural locations had one or more optometrist vacancy – compared to 11% of practice managers in city locations.

While Einarson has a substantial level of responsibility as the only optometrist on the island, she has found staff at Raigmore Hospital in Inverness to be very supportive.

She shared that although working in a less populated location may seem daunting, she has gained a lot professionally.

“Because you have to depend on yourself, you absolutely gain confidence,”

Optometrist Hannah Einarson photographed near Sligachan on the Isle of Skye

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Neighbours don’t seem to have any issues dropping whatever they’re doing to help each other out

Hannah Einarson



Skye Commercial Photography



Einarson said. With a large proportion of patients in their 60s, in her daily practice Einarson sees a range of age-related eye conditions. Tourists to the island also present for emergency appointments with conditions such as retinal detachments and contact lens-related corneal ulcers.

Where appropriate, she will co-manage patients with the local GP practice. “It’s reciprocal: if they see someone who is outside of their scope, they send the patient to me. If I’m outside of my scope, I can send the patient to them,” she said.

Einarson, who is Canadian, decided to study optometry at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) after realising that Canada’s sole English language optometry programme is based in Waterloo – a 20-hour drive away from Einarson’s hometown of Winnipeg. “I would have to move regardless so I made the leap over the

water,” she said. After she graduated from GCU in 2022, she completed her pre-registration period at a multiple practice in Kilmarnock and continued to work at the practice following registration.

Einarson shared that the most rewarding thing about living and working on the Isle of Skye is the sense of community.

After her move, she noticed that the chat at the start of the appointment tends to last for longer. With limited public transport options on the Isle of Skye, it is not unusual for acquaintances to step in to provide patients with a lift for an emergency appointment.

“Neighbours don’t seem to have any issues dropping whatever they’re doing to help each other out,” she shared with *OT*.

One of the challenges that Duncan & Todd has experienced sourcing both locum and resident

optometrists within rural and remote areas has been a lack of suitable accommodation.

To address this barrier, the group has taken out a rental within Portree that locum optometrists were based in while working on the island – and which Einarson now calls home.

“That made it really easy to move and not stress about accommodation,” Einarson shared.

Duncan & Todd HR adviser, Janna Swanson, shared that sourcing resident optometrists is a priority for the group because of the consistency it provides both patients and staff.

“Staff morale is probably the biggest thing. We wanted our team to feel like they had someone they could rely on consistently,” she said.

J M MacDonald Opticians practice manager, Emil-Bogdan Petrica, described the recruitment of Einarson to the practice as an “absolute-game changer.” ▶



Optometrist Dr Josie Forte photographed at Wembury Beach near Plymouth

“Before she joined us, many of our patients, particularly those with complex needs, struggled with the inconsistency of seeing different locum optometrists,” he said.

“It was tough watching them have to repeatedly explain their conditions and not always get the care they deserved,” Petrica highlighted.

He shared that it was clear how much patients appreciated seeing the same, trusted face when they walked through the door.

“It’s been incredibly rewarding to know that we can finally offer this level of consistent care. Hannah’s commitment to our patients has made my job so much easier,” he said.

“Having her here has been a blessing for all of us,” Petrica emphasised.

Duncan & Todd regional development manager, Jo Millar, highlighted that optometrists working in rural and remote locations become embedded in the community.

“Across the highlands, we’re so hospitable. Whoever graces the door, we’re always friendly,” she said.

“You’re greeted with open arms – no matter where you’re from, your background or culture,” she said.

In navigating the workforce challenges in rural and remote areas, Swanson and Millar have broadened their search to Northern Ireland – recruiting pre-registration optometrists from Ulster University.

This year they have made offers to three Ulster University students for placements in Ayrshire, Aberdeenshire and Tayside.

Swanson encouraged optometrists to consider roles outside of areas that are saturated for recruitment, such as Glasgow.

“You’ll never know whether it’s for you unless you try it. My eyes have been opened when I’ve been traveling across Scotland – I’ve caught myself thinking that I would like to live further north,” she said.

University challenge

The launch of the University of Highlands and Islands (UHI) optometry programme in 2019 aimed to address workforce shortages within Scotland.

UHI head of optometry, Alison MacPherson, shared that it is not unusual for patients to wait 10 weeks for a routine appointment at an optometry practice in parts of Scotland.

“It’s well documented that across healthcare, not just within optometry, there are real challenges with recruitment and retention in rural areas,” she said.

She added that the ageing population has implications both in terms of patient demand but also regarding the individuals who deliver that care.

MacPherson shared that in rural and remote parts of Scotland it is common for practices to be owned by a single optometrist. “You’ve got

to look at the succession planning. Those clinicians get to a point where they are ready to retire,” she said.

The optometry programme has aimed to connect students with rural and remote employers by offering placements in a wide range of locations – including one placement in the Shetlands and another in the Western Isles.

MacPherson, who is from Inverness, was working as an optometrist in a semi-rural practice before taking up the position at UHI.

“I’ve seen firsthand how important optometry services are in these communities,” she said.

“Working in these locations is really rewarding. That’s one of the things that we as a university feel very passionate about – trying to encourage more people to embrace the idea of working somewhere a bit different,” she said.

The Optometry Scotland view

Optometry Scotland chair, Julie Mosgrove, highlighted that it is more common for optometry graduates to stay close to where they trained – opting for a familiar setting rather than a significant lifestyle change.

Mosgrove added that securing housing in rural areas can be challenging, which adds another layer of complexity to relocation.

“Workforce challenges in rural and remote communities can significantly impact access to eye care by reducing the availability of services,” she highlighted.

“With fewer optometrists, patients may experience longer waiting times, reduced appointment availability,

Recruitment challenges

11%

of managers in UK cities report having one or more optometrist vacancy

47%

of managers in UK rural areas report having one or more optometrist vacancy

69%

of managers in rural areas say it is ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ to recruit newly-qualified optometrists

Source: AOP Optometrists’ Futures survey, 2018

“By conducting placements in the community, students gain exposure to various practices across multiple locations, offering them insight into what it’s like to work in different areas. This programme could help alleviate some of the staffing pressures by encouraging graduates to pursue careers in more rural locations,” she said.

Embracing rural practice

UHI graduate Kiera Logan is completing her pre-registration year at a practice in Dunfermline. She is in the first cohort of graduates to complete their optometry programme at UHI.

Perth was the furthest north that Logan, who grew up on the outskirts of Glasgow, had travelled before she began her course in Inverness.

As part of a small cohort that navigated the hurdles of the pandemic together, Logan shared that UHI optometry students looked out for each other during their course of study.

“We were all in the same boat, and we didn’t know what to expect, but we were pleasantly surprised,” she said.

During her study, she completed placements in Stonehaven and Forfar. If everyone in both towns went to a concert at London’s Wembley Stadium, only a third of the seats would be full.

Logan observed how staff would take time with patients – who were often elderly and had travelled some distance for their appointment.

Turning to her future career plans, Logan shared that she would prefer to work in a rural area.

“In terms of the next five years, I would like to be able to find

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It has been 13 years of building relationships. You have to open your doors and support students when they arrive **Dr Josie Forte**

a practice that I can work in permanently, so that I can start building relationships with the patients in that area.”

Sea change in the south west

In 2011, the University of Plymouth launched an optometry programme – with one of the aims being to address recruitment challenges in the south west of England.

Professor Phillip Buckhurst, who helped to establish the course, told *OT*: “The south west is one of those areas where it is very sparse in terms of the numbers of optometrists. That is still the case – but there were even bigger shortages before we opened.”

At present, around one in five students who study optometry at the University of Plymouth come from the south west. “That’s lower than we’d like it to be, but it has risen over the years,” he said.

The university has a series of outreach initiatives, such as delivering school presentations, that aim to boost the proportion of optometry students who come from the local area.

Around 40% of students graduating from the University of Plymouth optometry course stay in the south west – which means that now when Buckhurst visits his local practices, he often sees his former students.

“That is lovely to see. So many of our students have gone on to own or manage practices here,” he said.

Buckhurst, who is originally from Cheshire, relocated with his wife to Plymouth to work at the university.

“Before the university was looking to offer optometry, it never occurred to me to move to the south west. Now I’ve lived here, I realise how wonderful it is,” Buckhurst shared.

“It is a holiday destination for a reason,” he highlighted.

An employer’s perspective

Optometrist Dr Josie Forte owns Specsavers practices in Plymstock, Marsh Mills and Plymouth city

centre, alongside her Plymouth Hearcare business. She told *OT* that when she became a partner in the Plymouth practices in 2014, the optometry programme had not been open long enough to have an effect on workforce challenges.

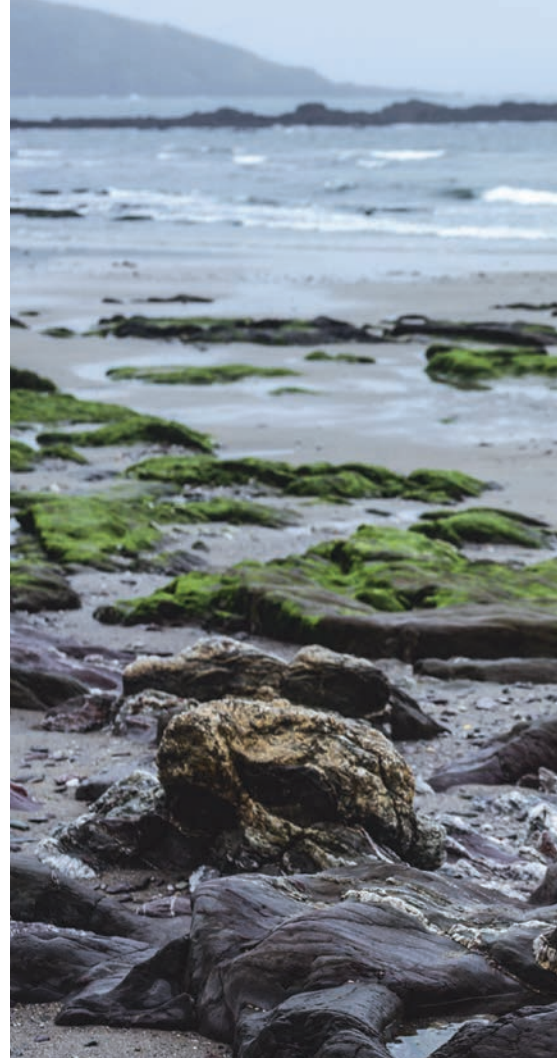
During that time, patients might wait three to four weeks for a routine appointment. Forte struggled to convince optometrists to take on permanent positions in Plymouth, while recruiting locums was also challenging because of accommodation shortages during the summer months. “People thought that there would be this instantaneous flood of optometrists, which didn’t happen,” she said.

Fast-forward to 2024, and most of the pre-registration and newly-qualified optometrists Forte employs are graduates of the University of Plymouth. Her practices are less reliant on locums and waiting times for appointments have dropped.

“We’re beginning to see, certainly in the town centre, the fruits of that labour,” Forte said.

However, she added that even 10 miles from Plymouth, there remains a recruitment problem.

Forte highlighted the need for the broader industry to support the university in addressing workforce challenges. “It has been 13 years of building relationships. You have to open your doors and support students when they arrive,” Forte said. Forte sees offering careers in optometry as a tool for social mobility in the south west. Around one in five households in Plymouth earn less than £17,500, while the



neighbourhood of Stonehouse in Plymouth is among the most deprived in England.

She shared that before the university opened, there was limited awareness of optics as a career when she went to speak to local schools.

“Particularly in the south west, you were trying to explain what optometry is when there was no history of study within the local area,” Forte shared.

“But now we have the university on our doorstep I think we’re starting to break that barrier down,” she added.

Forte observed that there is a range of rewarding careers available within optics, providing opportunities for people in the surrounding area.

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I saw what an impact the staff were having on someone’s life in such a short period of time

Emily Todd



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I never really wanted to move back home because I was so happy here

Eva Oberg

cohort size at the University of Plymouth, which enhanced the accessibility of teaching staff.

Oberg completed her pre-registration period at Forte's Plymstock practice – a suburb on the outskirts of Plymouth that has a slightly slower pace to the city centre practice. After she qualified in 2018, Oberg continued to work at the Plymstock practice before transferring to the city centre practice this year.

“From day one, I had a really good rapport with patients. I still see patients who have followed me over from Plymstock,” Oberg shared.

Oberg has purchased a house with her boyfriend, who is from the south west. Outside of work, she can be found walking, kayaking or cycling.

“My partner and I have a small dog – so he is often in the backpack,” she shared with *OT*. “I never really wanted to move back home because I was so happy here,” she said. ●



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“First and foremost, the most important thing is that the service is provided, but if you can get as many local people involved in offering that service, there's an added sense of pride in helping people in your local community in other ways too,” she shared with *OT*.

Generation rx

A school talk by Forte at Plymouth High School for Girls prompted Emily Todd to become interested in optometry as a career. After her biology teacher thought the profession could be a good fit for Todd, she contacted Forte, who arranged for her to come in on a Saturday.

“I did the work experience and knew that this was something that I wanted to move forward with,” Todd said. “I saw what an impact the staff were having on someone's life in such a short period of time,” she shared.

Todd was offered a Saturday job, studied optometry at the University of Plymouth, and now works at Forte's Marsh Mills practice.

Todd told *OT* that she is unsure whether she would have studied

optometry if a course had not been available within Plymouth.

“I don't think I would have been happy living away,” she said.

“I know some people want to move as far as possible from home, but there are a reasonable number of people who just want to stay where they are,” Todd highlighted.

Forte shared that it has been rewarding to observe Todd's career journey over the years.

“I've watched her progress and she has been very successful both inside and outside of work,” she said.

Eva Oberg chose to study optometry at the University of Plymouth after growing up in Castlebar – a town with a population of around 12,000 in County Mayo, Ireland. She saw the south west as a region offering a similar relaxed atmosphere to her hometown, with the added benefit of more daily sunshine hours.

“Birmingham, London or Manchester would have been too much for me and too many people. I wouldn't have known even how to navigate the city,” Oberg said.

She valued the relatively small