Sight Research UK Impact Report 2020-2026

Introduction

This Impact Report reflects on the achievements of our Research Grants Strategy 2020–2026 and looks ahead to the next chapter of our work from 2026–2031.

Over the past five years, Sight Research UK has **invested more than £2,410,079 million into 48 research projects across the UK**. While our funding may be modest compared with larger organisations in our sector, our approach has been intentionally focused, strategic and firmly aligned with our mission: *to champion and accelerate innovative eye-disease research, delivering meaningful impact for people living with sight loss.*

Our grants have acted as a powerful catalyst. Primary investigators reported **securing additional funding in 35% of Sight Research UK–supported projects**, enabling them to expand promising ideas, explore new avenues and accelerate progress. We have supported researchers at every stage of their careers—from early-career scientists taking their first steps, to established leaders whose long-term work is now nearing translation into treatments and diagnostics that could transform lives.

Beyond the research itself, our funding has sparked collaboration, strengthened scientific networks, influenced policy and practice, and nurtured the next generation of innovators. The impact of this work is already emerging, and its long-term potential is profound.

This report highlights some of the projects we have supported and the evidence underpinning the ongoing need for investment in sight-loss research. It also introduces our strategy for 2026–2031—one that will

broaden our reach, embrace more diverse research, and ensure we continue backing the most promising science for years to come.

If this report showcases what we can achieve with targeted investment and a focused strategy, imagine what becomes possible with greater ambition, wider reach and increased commitment in the years ahead.

Lucy Culkin

Chief Executive Officer
Sight Research UK

Our Research Strategy 2020-2026

The objective of our research strategy 2020-2026 is to turn scientific discoveries into tangible patient benefit.

Laboratory-based science research projects that have already established a clear line of progression from the bench to the bedside and are strong candidates for early phase clinical trials.

Applied healthcare research projects that can fast-track tangible improvements in patient benefit.

Clinical research projects which are eligible for National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Clinical Research Network support (Sight Research UK is an NIHR non-commercial Partner).

The Funding Challenge:
Bridging the Gap Between Science and Health

Sight Research UK has chosen to focus on funding translational research. Translational research involves the effective transfer of scientific discoveries into new options to detect, diagnose, treat, or even prevent disease.

While almost countless interesting and promising discoveries are made every year in every field of medicine, for the most part, they remain just that: unfulfilled promises.

The reason is a systematic lack of funding at the translational research stage which creates a block to science progressing towards being turned into the sight-saving and life-changing therapies that are needed.

The evidence presented throughout this report makes one thing clear: Sight Research UK's work is valued, essential and urgently needed.

The outcomes and impacts achieved over the past five years demonstrate the power of targeted investment in eye research—and the importance of continuing to drive progress in a challenging landscape.

The period from 2020–2026 has been shaped by significant economic and structural pressures. Charitable giving has declined, reducing the capacity of many organisations to sustain grant-making programmes. At the same time, government priorities have shifted, with sight loss research still not recognised as a strategic focus within government.

The political context adds further complexity. Following the dissolution of NHS England and the move toward devolved models of care, England remains the only UK nation without a National Eye Health Care Plan. In contrast, Wales has invested £150,000 to develop a National Clinical Strategy for Ophthalmology and has set out a long-term approach to optometry services.

From the

£1.4 billion

invested in medical research, only

1.5% (£24 million)

supported eye research

This disparity underscores the need for continued advocacy and investment.

Although precise figures for eye research are difficult to isolate, estimates from 2018 suggest that of the £1.4 billion invested in medical research by UKRI, government and charities, only 1.5% (£24 million) supported eye research. The Eyes Have It coalition argues that public investment must urgently double to at least £50 million per year by 2030, particularly as the number of people living with sight loss is projected to reach 3.5 million by 2030.

***Charitable giving has declined**

From 58% in 2019

To 50% in 2025

The Eyes Have It coalition argues that public investment must urgently double to at least

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Particularly as the number of people living with sight loss is
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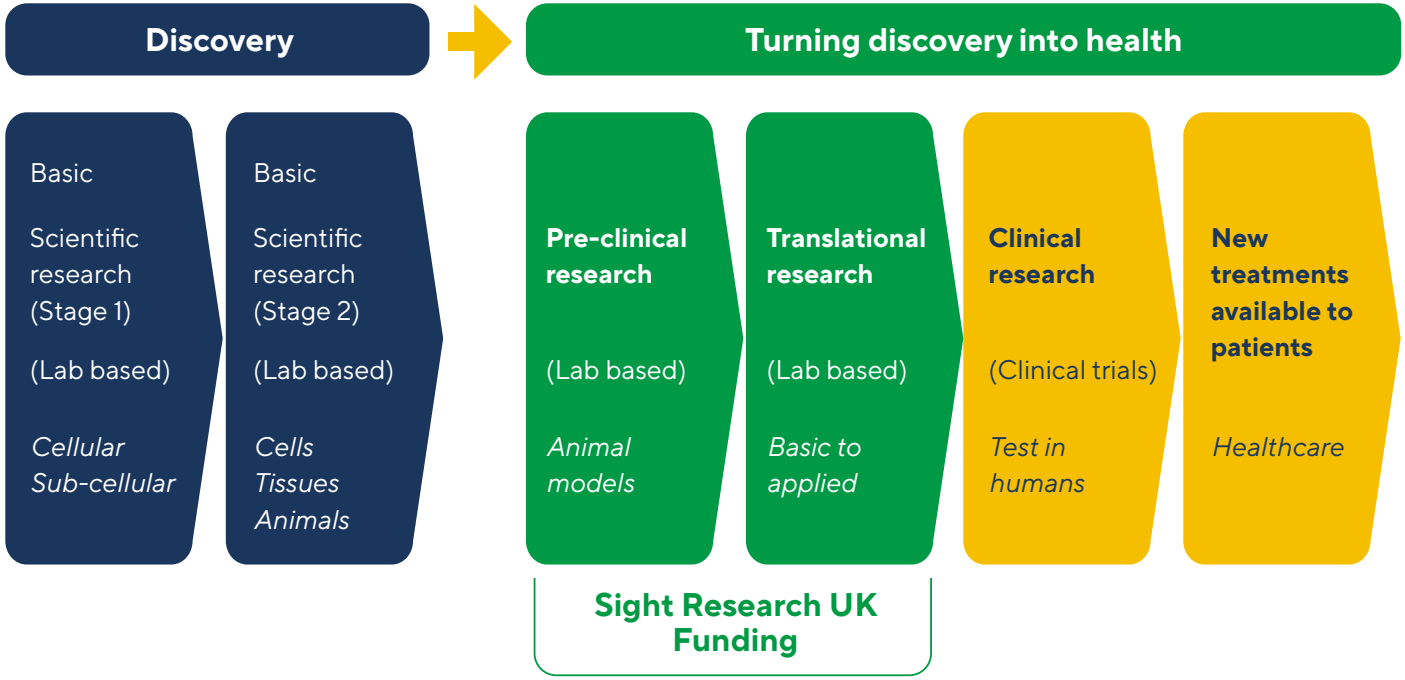
*Sourced from:
Charitable Aid Foundation, Charity Giving Report 2025



Looking forward to the next 5 years, we will build on this work and be able to invest earlier into translational research, to support researchers for a longer part of their journey and provide commitment and stability to their teams and projects.

Headline Statistics

2019 - 2020 to 2025 - 2026 Financial Years

48 Research Grants Awarded

£2,410,079 funding committed

With each £1 invested generating approximately £2.52 in further research funding, which represents a 152% return on investment.

With support from

SIGHT RESEARCH UK

researchers have obtained an additional

£43,576,021

in funding to further their projects

Impact and Outcome Overview

This data represents an indicative snapshot of project outcomes, funded by Sight Research UK, which are active or have been closed in the last 5 years.

The following examples are showcase projects taken from this snapshot.

Sections	Number of unique outcomes
Awards and recognition	21
Collaboration and partnerships	31
Creative products	2
Engagement activities	41
Facilities	0
Further funding	43
Influence on policy and practice	10
Intellectual property and licensing	2
Next destination	30
Other outputs and knowledge	5
Products or intervention	2
Publications	224
Research database and models	1
Research materials	7
Spinouts	1
Technical products	0

(Note that this includes 18 grants from 2016-2018)
Source: Researchfish data 2025.

Awards and Recognition Showcase Projects

Dr Patrick Yu Wai Man

Project name: Enhanced neuroprotection of the murine retina using capsid mutant exosome-associated AAV.2.PEDF gene transfer

Project Type: Seed Award

Institute: University of Cambridge

Patrick was awarded the Ludwig von Sallmann, MD award for his research.

Patrick advised

"It was a great honour to be awarded the Ludwig von Sallmann Clinician-Scientist Award by the ARVO Foundation. This award will highlight the significant unmet needs for individuals affected with mitochondrial optic neuropathies, which result in significant visual impairment in children and young adults. We need to attract more research funding and talents into rare genetic eye diseases. Success breeds success and the future certainly looks bright in this field."

Sight Research UK awarded a grant of

£9,798

Further funding leveraged of £10.9 million

Patrick was also elected as the next President of the European Association for Vision and Eye Research (EVER) from October 2025.

"It is a great honour to be the next President of European Association for Vision and Eye Research (EVER). I look forward to steering the organisation over the next two years."

Professor Saaeha Rauz

Project name: Sustained Delivery of Anti-fibrotic Agents for Ocular Mucous Membrane Pemphigoid

Project Type: Translational Award

Institute: The University of Birmingham

Saaeha was invited to speak at the 33rd Biennial Cornea Conference, sponsored by Harvard Ophthalmology in partnership with the Champalimaud Foundation, as a recognition of Professor Saaeha Rauz's contributions to advancing treatment strategies for Ocular Mucous Membrane Pemphigoid (OcMMP).

Her keynote presentation, titled Novel Treatment Targets in Ocular Mucous Membrane Pemphigoid, highlighted ongoing clinical research, including the MMP Oral-DSF Clinical Trial, and explored potential therapeutic targets for this rare blinding autoimmune disease.

As an invited speaker, Professor Rauz played a key role in leading research efforts, sharing insights on innovative treatment approaches, and fostering international collaboration among clinicians and researchers in the field of corneal and ocular surface diseases.

Professor Saaeha Rauz's keynote presentation at the 33rd Biennial Cornea Conference helped to raise international awareness of Ocular Mucous Membrane Pemphigoid (OcMMP) and the MMP Oral-DSF Clinical Trial, fostering interest in novel treatment strategies for this rare blinding autoimmune disease.

Saaeha was awarded a Translational grant of

£150,000

Further funding leveraged of £1.2 million

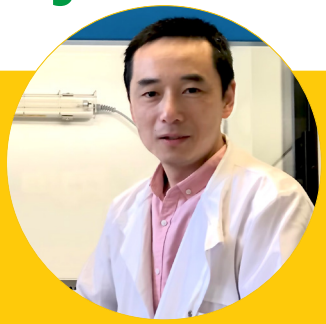
The recognition of Saaeha's work has strengthened international collaborations, leading to discussions on potential future research partnerships and funding opportunities. It has also contributed to increased engagement from the clinical and research community, further supporting efforts to repurpose existing drugs for rare ocular diseases. Additionally, the exposure has helped to enhance patient and public awareness, potentially aiding in recruitment and advocacy efforts for ongoing and future trials.

Beneficiary Impact Statements

"The fact that there might be a solution to directly target the eye scarring progression is incredibly exciting. OcMMP takes people's sight and does it with the maximum pain. A drop that could be used immediately to limit or even stop it? I can only imagine how radically different my own life would be if it had been around 20 years ago."

Mark

Collaborations Showcase Projects



Dr Jian Liu

Project name: Targeting autophagy to treat Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD)

Project Type: Strategic Award

Institute: The University of Bristol

Jian advised

"We, for the first time, observed the expression of an intracellular TLR/myddosome inhibitor in human eyes. To confirm this finding, we collaborated with Professors Fletcher and Guymer in Melbourne. Their labs have access to exenterated donor eyes fixed at the time of surgery, by which any post-mortem artifacts would be avoided or at least kept minimal. Independent IHC analysis in Melbourne demonstrated the expression, consistent with our observation. We further found this immune inhibitor expression declined with age."

Sight Research UK awarded Jian a grant

£75,268

Further funding leveraged of £25,000

Dr Evangeline Foster

Project name: The use of iPSC-macrophages to identify gene expression changes in ageing and age-related macular degeneration (AMD)

Project Type: Seed Award

Institute: Formerly at University College London

Evangeline advised

'We have developed a new project with Dervis Salih from the UCL Dementia Institute to examine genetic variation associated with ageing, Alzheimer's disease and AMD'.

The data from the RNAseq project generated by Dr Foster will be used to identify genes associated with ageing and disease. Dr Dervis Salih and his team at the DRI are contributing to this project with their expertise and data in the field of neurodegeneration and Alzheimer's disease (AD). Dr Carr is bringing her expertise on AMD to this project, while Dr Foster is generating novel data (RNAseq) using funding provided by Sight Research UK.

Dr Annegret Dahlmann-Noor

Project name: Developing a red-light-treatment to slow myopia progression in children and young people: a proof-of-concept and early dose-finding study exploring choroidal mechanisms

Project Type: Seed Award

Institute: Moorfields Eye Hospital

Annegret advised

"We are co-applying for an NIHR i4i connect grant, led by Lucid Innovation, to develop a wearable device for children for the technology which we are testing in the Sight Research UK grant. They will support the Public and Patient Involvement and Engagement aspect. We are also applying to same funder to develop a wearable device related to the Sight Research UK technology."

Sight Research UK contributed

£14,926

Beneficiary Impact Statements

"I was told that I'd got [age-related] macular degeneration... The Eye Unit doctors explained to me that they could give me injections to slow down or maybe cure the wet degeneration in my left eye. [I am] extremely grateful to the skilful surgeon and research that underpinned the procedure. Research and the funding of research is critical. It's got to happen."

Russell

Engagement Activities

21 instances of engagement

5

international talks/ engagements reaching audiences in total over

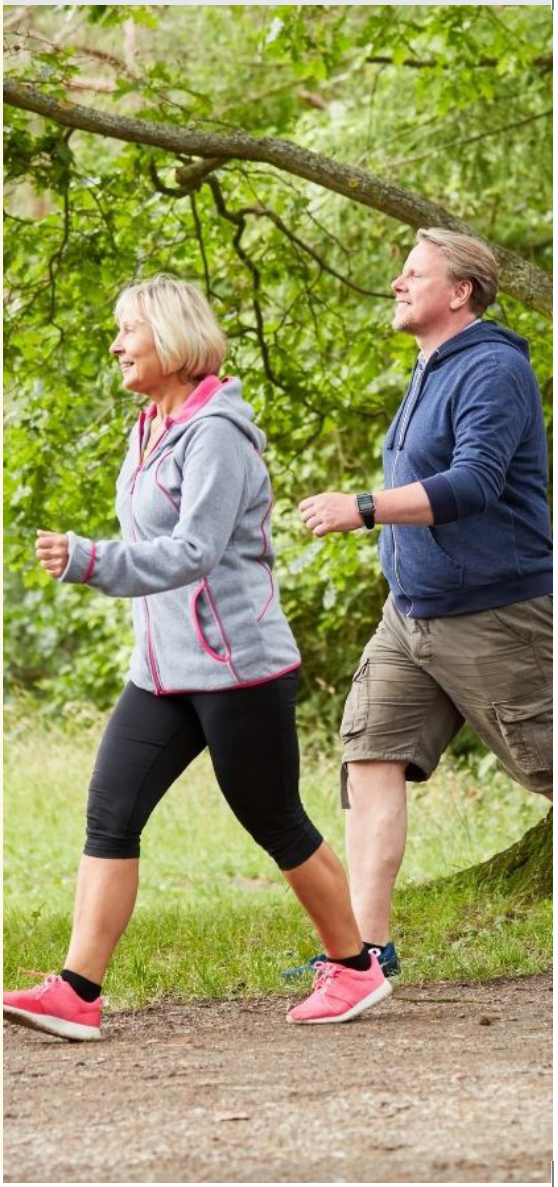
2,100 people

including schools, universities, policymakers, patients, third sector and industry

16

national/regional/local engagements reaching over

3,000 people



Further Funding

Counting projects starting in 2019 onwards...

29 recorded further funding

of which:

- **Capital grant** 1 instance
- **Research grant** 18 instances
- **Fellowship/ studentship** 9 instances
- **Travel** 1 instance

Examples:

Sight Research UK £9,798 grant

Levered £10,861,000

From public and charitable funding (£2,750,000 from NIHR/MRC and £8,111,000 from trusts)

Sight Research UK £9,788 grant

Levered £1,288,129

From trusts (fellowships) and $574,259 (approx. £418k) from public (NIH but in USD)

Sight Research UK £150,000 grant

Levered £1,247,762

In a two year grant from MRC (public funding)

Influence and Practice

Rauz

This project has received citation in clinical guidelines - The top 10 research priorities for the treatment of bullous pemphigoid, mucous membrane pemphigoid and pemphigus vulgaris in the UK: results of a James Lind Alliance Priority Setting Partnership. European guidelines (S3) on diagnosis and management of mucous membrane pemphigoid, initiated by the European Academy of Dermatology and Venereology - Part I. European Guidelines (S3) on diagnosis and management of mucous membrane pemphigoid, initiated by the European Academy of Dermatology and Venereology - Part II.

Spinouts

2 x spinout companies in development

Intellectual Property and Licensing

2 x patent applications pending

Publications

184 open access publications counting from 2019.

Next Destination

19 'next destinations' since 2019. 16 of whom are still in research.

Products or Intervention

Sajjad Ahmad

This trial was the early phase trial for allogeneic limbal stem cells. The current study is collating the long-term outcomes of this. First use of its kind in humans.

Research materials

6 examples from 2019

Foster

With the support of funding from Sight Research UK, this project has generated an optimised and robust protocol for generation macrophages from human iPSCs in vitro.

This includes the generation of

9 distinct cell lines

- **3** from AMD
- **3** from aged control donors
- **3** from young control donors

These cells are novel and highly characterised (to be published later this year) and can be used in future research of Dr Foster and others.

Impact

The development of these novel iPSC-macrophage lines will provide valuable RNAseq. Additionally, researchers have generated gene expression and protein data using these lines already. They have identified several genes and proteins that we suspect are altered by healthy ageing and by age-related macular degeneration (AMD) in the immune system.

Research using these cells is continuing and we anticipate several papers coming out of this work this year.

Looking to the Future:

Research Strategy 2026–2031

Our mission continues with renewed urgency

In shaping our 2026–2031 strategy, we undertook a comprehensive review of the political, economic and technological environment, benchmarked ourselves against peer organisations, and consulted widely with past and current grant holders, our Research Advisory Board and our Seed panels. This process enabled us to reflect on our role over the past five years and define where we can deliver the greatest value from 2026-2031.

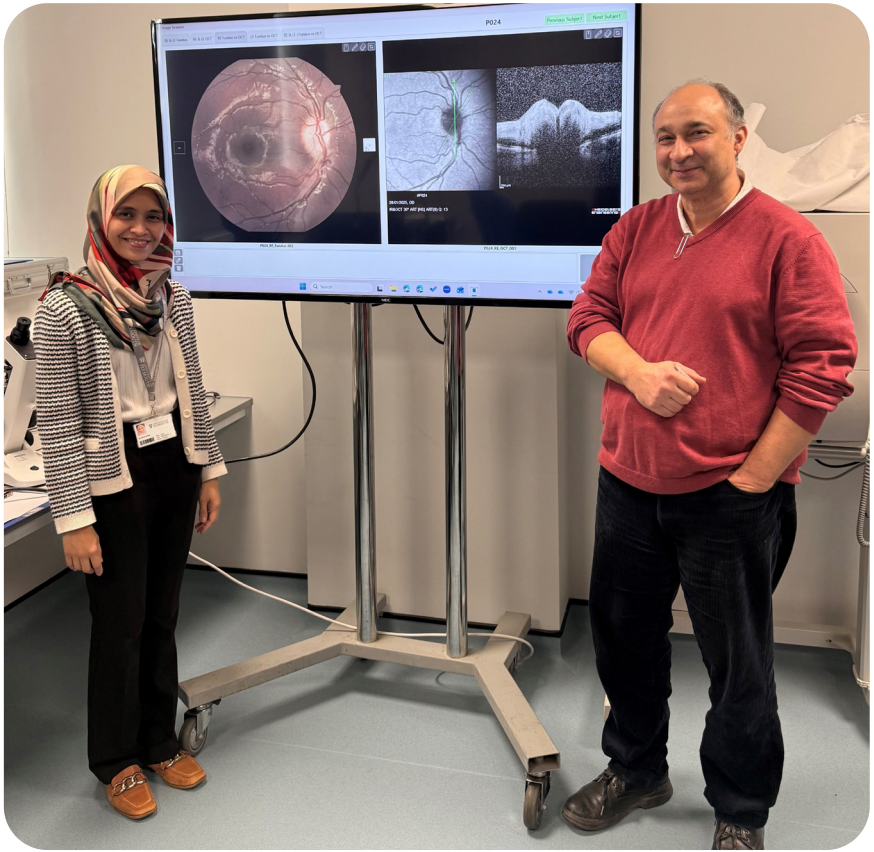
The evidence is clear

Sight Research UK's funding is most catalytic at the early stages of research. Seed grants help de-risk novel ideas, generate essential preliminary data and position researchers to secure larger government or industry backed translational awards. Our early and later stage translational grants bridge the gap between discovery and commercial readiness, supporting pathways toward enterprise fellowships, spin outs and Innovate UK programmes.

The landscape points us toward a clear direction

Sight Research UK should continue to prioritise and expand its seed and translational funding, enabling downstream investment and accelerating future patient impact. Larger partnership grants will allow us to support strategically significant projects with strong potential to progress into innovation.

Our next strategy will build on the strengths of the past five years while embracing a more ambitious, outward looking approach—one that ensures the most promising ideas in eye research receive the support they need to change lives.



Get in touch

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