

LOCSU News Flash 24th March 2020

Coronavirus/COVID-19: OFNC Guidance for Optical Practices – Essential Opening Arrangements

Joint statement from the Optometric Fees Negotiating Committee (OFNC), Optometry Scotland, Optometry Wales and Optometry Northern Ireland.

On 23 March the UK Government published a revised list of business and premises required to close. This included retail premises, with exceptions for a range of premises including pharmacies and health shops. The list does not mention optical practices.

Our understanding is that the four UK governments intend optical practices providing NHS services to continue to provide essential and urgent eye healthcare services during the COVID-19 crisis, subject to suitable risk management measures both to meet essential health needs, especially for isolating elderly people and key workers, and to keep pressure off GPs, A&E and hospital emergency eye departments.

The OFNC in consultation with the other UK optical bodies has confirmed that **optical practices in the UK providing urgent and essential eye healthcare are key health services and should continue to function where possible during the COVID-19 crisis.**

This means that NHS primary care premises are exempt from general closure requirements for retail premises.

The condition is that those which are able to open have in place appropriate measures to manage COVID-19 risk. These should include remote consultations wherever possible, closing for routine sight testing and only admitting patients on appointment for essential and urgent eye care which cannot be provided by phone, video or email.

The Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland governments have all issued advice on this as has OFNC for England. NHS England has yet to provide guidance on this but is expected to do so very soon.

On 23 March [The College of Optometrists](#), [OFNC](#) and the UK optical bodies all issued statements advising optical practices to stop providing routine sight tests and care in the current circumstances. Optical practices should only remain open to provide essential and urgent services.

Currently:

- **Essential eye care** would be instance where a key worker or elderly person needed a sight and new spectacle prescription, had broken their glasses, where a contact lens wearer needed more lenses, or where a visually impaired person or child needed eye care.
- **Urgent care** would include urgent clinical advice or intervention e.g. for red eye, contact lens discomfort, foreign object, sudden change in vision, flashes and floaters which might suggest detachment etc.

For information, Scottish Government guidance for practices in Scotland on these issues is: **Emergency care**

As is already the case, it is up to the professional judgement of an optometrist or ophthalmic medical practitioner to determine whether or not the circumstances in which a patient presents constitutes an emergency. Professional guidance already exists to help practitioners in this regard, such as [The College of Optometrists Guidance for Professional Practice](#).

Essential care

As these measures will likely be in place for some month, essential care is to be interpreted as meaning appointments for patients who would not normally be considered to be emergencies, but where, in the practitioner's professional judgement, a delay in an examination may be detrimental to a patient's sight or wellbeing.

The Optical Fees Negotiating Committee (OFNC) is the national negotiating body for eye care in the UK and England with the Westminster Parliament, the Department of Health and Social Care, and NHS England-NHS Improvement. It comprises the leaders of the UK representative bodies: ABDO, AOP, FODO and BMA (for OMPs) and works in partnerships with the College of Optometrists and the General Optical Council.