

OFNC

Association of British Dispensing Opticians
Association of Optometrists
British Medical Association
Federation of Ophthalmic and Dispensing Opticians

Optometric Fees Negotiating Committee

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Chair: Paul Carroll

Secretary: Tony Stafford

Carol Reece
Head of Dental and Optical Services Commissioning
NHS England and NHS Improvement

By email

25 March 2020

Dear Carol

Very urgent – Coronavirus/COVID-19 crisis – GOS financial support to optical practices

Following our teleconference meeting yesterday we feel we now have to write as a matter of urgency to NHS England, the Department of Health and Social Care and Ministers about essential funding support for optical practices during this crisis.

Other UK countries have moved to provide average GOS funding to all optical practices, to enable them to survive the crisis and also to help those still open to continue to meet urgent eye care needs during the crisis. Only England has been dragging its feet.

This is causing increasing alarm and uncertainty on the health care front line among practices and practitioners, who continue to provide urgent and essential health care to frail elderly people who are self-isolating, key workers, and others with eye care conditions - all of whom would have to access other forms of NHS care if practices were not accessible.

The current situation has become untenable and many optical practices in England are now in complete despair.

In some of the poorest and most deprived areas, GOS income represents a significant proportion of practice income and should these practices fail, it is unlikely they will be replaced. This will negatively impact the eye health of patients in these areas, ultimately leading to increased strain on the health and social care system due to avoidable sight loss.

Although some elements of retail will be supported through measures which the government has put in place, starved of GOS income and the now non-existent cross-subsidy from dispensing, these will not permit the service to survive to meet the needs of the crisis (or indeed to support the NHS in meeting the demand that will inevitably occur once this crisis is over).

In line with the guidance of the General Optical Council and College of Ophthalmologists, even very small practices in community locations can stay open with one or two people to provide urgent eye care via remote consultation to their patients and communities, whilst being closed for routine care and 'walk ins'. This is not only an essential NHS service, but it diverts patients from other more highly stretched NHS access points such as GP practices, A&E and eye casualties. However, optical practices of all sizes do desperately need GOS funding to survive.

As we said again yesterday, GOS funding relief in England (as in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) will provide an essential blood transfusion to keep as many practices as possible functioning throughout the crisis, delivering urgent and essential eye care to communities.

We would urge you as a matter of priority to consider an interim funding support package to optical practices on the lines agreed by other UK Governments.

In view of the urgency of this request we are copying this letter to our Minister Jo Churchill and to Helen Miscampbell and Claire Osborne in DHSC.

We stand ready at any time to discuss with you, the DHSC or the Minister direct.

We are committed to playing our part in keeping essential NHS eye care flowing to vulnerable people and key workers whilst preventing the spread of the virus during this national crisis.

Please help.

Yours sincerely

Paul Carroll
Chair

Tony Stafford
Secretary