



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

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Secretary: Tony Stafford

OFNC STATEMENT: FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR GOS CONTRACTORS IN ENGLAND

12 June 2020

The OFNC is today sending an urgent open letter to Ministers at DHSC about recent messaging from NHS England which suggests financial support to help optical practices deal with COVID-19 may stop at the end of June.

The letter points out that:

- The optical sector has cared for patients throughout the pandemic, and is now preparing to resume care on a wider scale but will face reduced capacity because of social distancing
- A cliff-edge end to financial support will make it impossible for practices to prioritise remote consultations, and will leave primary eyecare entirely unsupported in the event of any second wave of COVID-19
- It will also raise an immediate threat that practices will have to prioritise private rather than NHS work in order to survive, however much this goes against their professional ethos
- Without further delaying the resumption of regular care as patient need and demand continues to build, officials must now engage further with the sector to find an appropriate way of funding remote service delivery beyond the end of June.

The letter also notes that in the coming week many optical practices in England will start to expand the care they offer to patients as far as they can, to meet growing patient need and demand, and that the sector hopes for early confirmation from NHS England that this can include providing sight tests to NHS patients.

The full text of the open letter is attached to this statement.

ENDS

The Optometric Fees Negotiating Committee (OFNC) is the national negotiating body for eye care in 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.

**TEXT OF LETTER FROM OFNC CHAIR PAUL CARROLL TO MATT HANCOCK MP, SECRETARY OF STATE,
AND JO CHURCHILL MP, PARLIAMENTARY UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE, DHSC**

By email

12 June 2020

Dear Secretary of State and Minister,

We are writing to you urgently to express our deep concern that NHS England apparently intends to cut off COVID-19 funding for primary care optical practices from the end of this month. This would cause serious and lasting damage to primary eye healthcare services in this country, at a critical moment.

The optical sector has been caring for patients and supporting the wider NHS throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Most practices have been open to meet the needs of patients with essential or urgent eye or vision problems, using new protocols to provide care remotely where possible. This has kept pressure off GPs, A&E and hospital ophthalmology departments. The NHS has maintained monthly payments to enable us to keep this vital service going.

Optical practices are now preparing to resume eye healthcare on a wider scale, while observing social distancing and infection control. NHS England accepts that these measures will reduce the capacity of optical practices by at least 50% for the foreseeable future. We have therefore been alarmed to see statements from NHS England regional optical teams in recent days that the current support payments “will continue until the end of June this year”, and will then end altogether – in just two weeks’ time.

A cliff-edge end to the current financial support will create a perverse incentive for practices to minimise remote consultations, which are not funded under the current GOS contract. It will also leave the primary eye healthcare system entirely unprepared for any second wave of widespread COVID-19 infection and future lockdowns.

This approach will also raise an immediate threat that in the next few months, practices with a significantly reduced capacity to provide care, and facing PPE costs without NHS support, will have to prioritise private rather than NHS work in order to cover their costs and survive, however much this goes against the sector’s professional ethos.

We have made the case to NHS England that practices will need to be funded to meet new COVID-19 demands for some time to come. We note that temporary contract arrangements for dentists have been maintained, for comparable reasons. We now ask that officials are permitted similar flexibility to engage with the sector to determine an appropriate mechanism for the funding of enhanced infection control measures, including PPE and remote service delivery, beyond the end of June. This will ensure the sector can continue to meet patient needs through the difficult times that still lie ahead.

We hope you will be able to assure us that this key issue will be fully resolved before the current funding arrangement is brought to a close.

In the meantime, as you know, in the coming week many optical practices in England will start to expand the care they offer to patients as far as they can, to meet growing patient need and demand. We look forward to early confirmation from NHS England that this can include providing sight tests to NHS patients.

Owing to the risks to public health and NHS service viability, we are making this letter public and also sending a copy to the Finance Director of NHS England-Improvement.

We hope to hear from you urgently.

Yours sincerely

Paul Carroll

Chair, OFNC