

To: All NI GDPs
BY EMAIL

General Healthcare Policy
Directorate
Room C3.27
Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
Belfast
BT4 3SQ

Date: 30 April 2020

COVID-19: FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO GENERAL DENTAL SERVICES

I am writing to set out the changes that will be made to the calculation of payments under the General Dental Services (GDS) Financial Support Scheme (FSS) in respect of General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) who were on maternity leave and/or long-term sick leave during 2019-20.

You will be aware that the support payments under the scheme are based on the monthly average Item of Service (IoS) payment received by a GDP in 2019-20. The use of the 2019-20 monthly average to calculate FSS payments is appropriate for the majority of GDPs as a measure that can be calculated and applied quickly to allow payments to be made as soon as possible. However, it was recognised from the outset that some GDPs may have experienced reduced payments last year due to for example, long-term sick absence or maternity leave. In response, the initial approach was that the average monthly payment would only be calculated in respect of those months in which an IoS payment was received in 2019-20. In addition, the lowest payment for these months was also excluded to take account of the transition back to full activity.

However, following the processing of the initial payments under the FSS and engagement with the industry, it is evident that some GDPs received payments for IoS claims in the months that they were on maternity or long-term sick leave in 2019-20. Although the amount of IoS paid in these months was low, they were still included in the monthly average calculations as they were above zero. This has meant that some GDPs did not receive a level of monthly payment, following abatement, in line with what would have been expected in the absence of COVID-19.

In response, the approach will be amended so that the average payment calculation will exclude all months in which a GDP received a maternity or long-term sick leave payment, rather than just those months in which there were zero payments. This will avoid the FSS payment being reduced by low value IoS payments during these leave

periods. As before, the month with the lowest payment in the remaining months will also not be included in the payment calculations. Furthermore, where there are fewer than 3 month's data for the GDP in 2019-20, the case will be looked at on an individual basis. Although this revised approach will formally apply in respect of the May 2020 monthly payment under the FSS, I have asked Business Services Organisation (BSO) to make a supplementary payment as soon as possible to the GDPs affected in the April 2020 payment under the FSS.

As the FSS was established in a very short period of time, this inevitably meant that there were areas in which aspects of the scheme could be improved. In taking quick action in respect of those who were on maternity and long-term sick absence last year, I hope this will provide assurance to you that the Department will respond as necessary to ensure that our approach to support payments is fair and reasonable.

This is in the context that the total amount of GDS payments made to NI dentists in April 2020 was £7.9 million compared with £6.4 million in April 2019. This represents a 23% increase in the financial commitment by the Department, in the context of a significant reduction in dental activity. The GDS payments in April 2020 include £2.6 million from the FSS.

I understand that there has been some confusion in respect of the relationship between FSS and IoS payments. The intention of the FSS is to provide a supplement to any IoS payments received each month to ensure that the combined level of FSS and IoS payments in 2020-21 is broadly in line with that for 2019-20, with adjustment for costs that are not expected to be incurred. As many GDPs had submitted IoS claims this month in respect of activity undertaken before restrictions were put in place due to COVID-19, this reduced the level of FSS payment that were required.

The process of calculating the FSS payments is currently being reviewed in detail to consider whether further refinement is required to ensure that the approach is as closely aligned with the policy objectives as possible. Worked examples of the payment calculations for specific cases will be circulated as soon as possible.

There are other issues that have been raised in respect of the initial monthly payments under the FSS. Queries are being grouped together based on the core issue. A response to each group of similar questions will then be provided in the FAQs with a new version accompanying this letter. To maximise system efficiency GDPs should, in the first instance, check if their query is answered in the FAQs. Only if it is not, should they submit an email query to GDS.Correspondence@hscni.net.

Yours Sincerely

Paul Montgomery

PAUL MONTGOMERY
DIRECTOR OF GENERAL HEALTHCARE POLICY