

**GENERAL HEALTHCARE POLICY
DIRECTORATE**



To: All NI Ophthalmic Contractors
BY EMAIL

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

Email: gdocorrespondence@health-ni.gov.uk

Date: 25 March 2020

COVID-19: FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO OPHTHALMIC CONTRACTORS

As referred to in the Health & Social Care Board (HSCB) Head of Ophthalmic Services letter to you of 23 March 2020, I am writing to set out the financial support arrangements for Ophthalmic Contractors operating in Northern Ireland (NI) in respect of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Although the position is rapidly evolving and highly uncertain, the pandemic is already having a significant short term impact on the supply and demand for ophthalmic services which in turn is having cash flow implications for you.

In the first instance, it is expected that Ophthalmic Contractors in NI will be eligible for support from the UK wide measures recently announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer as well as the additional support provided for local business by the NI Executive. However, it is recognised that there is a need for further short term assistance to contractors in NI to support their ongoing sustainability. In this context, financial assistance is to be provided based on stabilising the cash flow position for contractors, in respect of NHS income, over the duration of the outbreak. The support measures will be in place from March 2020

In particular, it is proposed that individual contractors would have the option of applying for support payments to stabilise their General Ophthalmic Service (GOS) payment in March 2020 and throughout 2020-21. In broad terms, this would involve additional support payments being made each month to cover the shortfall in GOS payment in 2020-21 compared with the same month in 2019-20. If this approach is not possible or appropriate for individual practices, a reasonable proxy will be used as an estimate of what monthly GOS income would have been expected to be, as the comparator. The support payments would be made as soon as possible after the end of each month.

It is a condition of financial support, that contractors and other staff should assist the wider NHS, when asked by the HSCB, wherever possible and practical. It is also expected that practices will adhere to government advice and use their best judgement in respect of access by the public to urgent advice and care including repairs. At a minimum, each practice would be expected to provide a telephone/email advice service as well as a drop-off or postal service for repairs. If a practice is no longer able to provide any form of service, it should make arrangements to redirect those requiring urgent care to a neighbouring practice.

Following the pandemic there is expected to be an increase in activity and in payments in respect of treatment and items that would have otherwise occurred during the time that support arrangements were in place. However, the scale and duration of this temporary rise in activity is highly uncertain. In response, activity levels for individual contractors will be monitored in the months after the end of the outbreak and compared with previous years. If there is a significant increase in the level of activity then it may be necessary to recover the support payments made in 2020 over the period 2021-22 to 2023-24. This would not apply to the contractors who provided significant support to the wider NHS during the COVID-19 outbreak as set out above. In addition, the amount of payments recovered would be subject to a limit per annum based on the amount of additional GOS income following the end of the outbreak.

Further details will shortly be available in respect of the process for applying for the additional support payments and in due course, in relation to support payment recovery.

It is recognised that the situation is fluid and will be kept under close review, for example to assess the impact of other government support. There may be a need to make amendments to the approach set out above and/or to consider further measures.

While the Department and HSCB will endeavour to email all updates to practitioners as soon as possible, it is incumbent upon you to frequently check the COVID-19 webpage on the ophthalmic section of the BSO website (<http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/3120.htm>) and within HSC Board PC Intranet: <http://primarycare.hscni.net/>.

Yours Sincerely

Paul Montgomery

**PAUL MONTGOMERY
DIRECTOR OF GENERAL HEALTHCARE POLICY**