

**URGENT COMMUNICATION
TO: OPHTHALMIC CONTRACTORS**

Dear Colleagues

RE: COVID-19: Advice for Ophthalmic Contractors

On 12 March 2020, the UK moved from the 'containment phase' to the 'delay phase' of the response to COVID-19. At this time, the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) are not aware of any primary care optometrists, or dispensing opticians who have tested positive for COVID-19 in Northern Ireland. The HSCB are aware of the concerns which the COVID-19 Pandemic is generating and wish to give some guidance and advice to Ophthalmic Contractors and their staff, working in primary care.

The COVID-19 pandemic poses immense challenges across entire society and it is acknowledged that as independent contractors and providers of eyecare services you will have specific considerations, from a clinical perspective and from the business perspective. This letter aims to provide you with an update on the ongoing work and efforts which HSCB are making to ensure Ophthalmic Services are maintained **and** sustained during the pandemic. It is also intended to provide some further optometry-focussed information beyond what has previously been disseminated in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Please take some time to read the enclosed information and if you have further queries, please contact one of the HSCB clinical advisers in the first instance using the contact details provided.

On behalf of the Health and Social Care Board and the wider Health and Social Care System, which you are an integral and valuable part of, I would like to thank you for your commitment to ophthalmic service provision and dedication to the care of your patients.

Kind regards

Mr Raymond Curran

Head of Ophthalmic Services

Information for Ophthalmic Contractors

It is acknowledged that the 'normal operational' provision of **routine** optometric services within primary care is becoming increasingly challenging, and for certain patient groups, is now contra-indicated in line with current Governmental policy and guidance. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly evolving and changing with multiple information sources, the HSCB would like to provide you with guidance which is relevant currently and which may help you in practice. You should check your practice HSCNI email account **DAILY** for new COVID-19 communications. **If you require a password reset for your account please email supportteam@hscni.net or call 028 9536 2400.** Please refer to item 3 in the following guidance for further information on channels of communication.

The following information provides you with:

1. An update in relation to financial sustainability considerations
2. Advice in relation to **scope** of service provision (including clinical considerations)
3. FAQ Advice on 'operational' aspects of eyecare provision including
 - Communications – method and format
 - Business Continuity Plans
 - Notifying of changes in Ophthalmic Service provision
4. Supporting resources

1. Financial Easement and Sustainment

The HSCB have made representations to the Department of Health in regard to potential measures which can be put in place to support for Ophthalmic Contractors in the financial challenges due to any reduction in service activity during the designated period of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is hoped that DoH will consider the proposals and convey their decision in the very near future. The aim of the proposal is to reduce the immediate financial impact of any reduction in ophthalmic service activity and put in place a plan to support Contractor practices by facilitating support payments which would be recovered through a managed process in the longer term. **When a decision is made by DoH, all Contractors will be advised as soon as is possible thereafter.**

Routine post-payment verification visits and premises inspections will be stood down for the foreseeable future, although desktop monitoring of service and activity will continue.

2. Scope of Service Provision

Whilst it is acknowledged that Contractors will make their own decisions on the nature and scope of service provision, you are advised to ensure that you check for all relevant COVID-19 information and updates from; Government, PHA, HSCB and other public and professional sources. Links to resources are provided in the last section of this guidance.

a) Scope of Service: Patients - Who, What & How?

Current advice is that people should distance themselves (social and work distancing measures) and in particular persons over 70yrs are encouraged to stay at home; in addition people in other categories of vulnerable groups (e.g. those with underlying health conditions) also need to reduce their inter person and close personal contact. This is something which you should consider in your practice and the approach you take to service provision.

Management:

Optometrists should consider several measures in order to effectively manage compliance with this advice and reduce the risk of, and opportunities for COVID-19 transmission; these measures include:

- ✓ **Deferring** all routine eyecare provision to those in the identified vulnerable groupings
- ✓ **Triage/Risk Management** thorough implementation of a process to manage the risk and reduce the likelihood of someone with symptoms of COVID-19 infection attending your practice. The triage should consider all the current known risk factors and ensure patients are made aware of the importance of identifying risk
- ✓ Proactively put processes in place to **manage the number of people** in your practice at any one time by staggering appointment times to ensure minimum overlap between patients who are attending your practice
- ✓ Make arrangements to ensure the **recommended physical space** between people is in place

- ✓ Consider the methods used for **contact with your patients** to ensure that they will allow timely communications should service provision be impacted further.
- ✓ Use of HSC/PHA COVID-19 **information resources**, including posters
- ✓ Ensure that all staff are regularly briefed and that your business continuity plan and arrangements are known to all staff. Contractors have been funded to develop and maintain this plan (item 1, [click here](#))

Optometry - Scope of Service Provision	Normal optometric services are affected and some/ all routine care is no longer possible	1. Emergency treatment for infected patients at designated sites 2. Emergency treatment for non-infected patients at multiple sites. 3. Potential for some care usually provided in HES to be undertaken in primary care 4. Referral protocols are reviewed and advice provided for specific referral pathways	'Normal/Regular' Optometric service activity levels are reduced and measures planned for financial sustainability and easement
---	--	---	--

Summary of Scope of Optometric Service Provision (at 19.3.20)

Patient Referrals during COVID-19 Pandemic:

1. Urgent Referrals including Acute Eye conditions

- ✓ Urgent Ophthalmology referrals should continue to be made in line with the current Ophthalmology Referral Guidance* ([click here](#)) other than Urgent Glaucoma Service referrals as detailed below. In all cases patients should not be referred without prior telephone contact with the casualty service for triage and attendance advice.
- ✓ Urgent Glaucoma Service referrals – for patients with suspect angle-closure glaucoma or, IOP greater than or equal to 38mmHg – these patients should **not** now be referred to Eye Casualty but instead to the Glaucoma Service in the Shankill Glaucoma Clinic by telephoning to arrange for the patient to be seen. Telephone number: 028 9504 0042

Further guidance will be issued very shortly on managing patients with acute eye problems who would normally be seen under NIPEARS but who have symptoms, or a diagnosis of COVID-19 and may therefore not be able to attend the practice. Currently if, using through telephone triage, you feel that the patient's eye condition requires urgent

ophthalmology assessment please contact Eye Casualty in either RVH or Altnagelvin for advice.

2. Routine Referrals:

Specific Guidance in relation to referrals will be sent in the incoming days in a separate communication. There is a pressing need to consider the impact of a reduction in Ophthalmology and other Hospital Eye Service clinics and the impact that this will have on waiting times. Optometry have a key and important role to play in this and it is vital that if your practice is enabled that you use CCG to generate referrals. **Paper referrals should not be sent from a practice that is CCG enabled.** There is a pressing need for all Optometry practices to be using CCG if not already using it.

b) Scope of Service: Workforce and Workplace Clinical Considerations

Many Optometrists have very real concerns about the close proximity to people in the clinical setting and the implications of this including potential for spread of COVID-19.

- Workforce
- ✓ The majority of Optometrists in primary care do not currently perform aerosol generating procedures and as such, current guidance is that fluid repellent masks are not necessary for Optometrists. However it is acknowledged that concerns exist and Ophthalmic Services in HSCB have made urgent representations to secure provision of elements of personal protection for primary care Ophthalmic Contractors (face masks and clinical equipment wipes). **This request will be dealt with as a matter of urgency and the outcome communicated to you immediately.**
- ✓ Consider generating a **slit lamp guard** to provide additional protection (view [here](#) and [read here, page 5](#))
- ✓ Healthcare workers should follow the guidance for the general public and stay at home for 14 days if they develop the current defined symptoms. All household members must also comply.
- ✓ Current guidance is that healthcare workers do not need to be tested for COVID-19, prior to returning to work when symptom free
- ✓ If possible, for 'at risk' members of your workforce consider how they can still contribute to work whilst reducing direct contact e.g. telephone discussions re: telcon or video consultations in relation to

clinical symptoms etc... (regulatory advice on remote consultations https://www.optical.org/filemanager/root/site_assets/publications/covid_19/High-level-principles-for-remote-prescribing_.pdf)

- Workplace
- ✓ Adhere to robust infection control measures
- ✓ Ensure that all surfaces are cleaned in between examinations/consultations
- ✓ Ensuring thorough hand washing techniques are adhered

Please note: the HSCB are currently investigating the potential for wavering of patient signatures for claims for service provision – further advice will be provided in the incoming days in regard to this

3. FAQ and Advice: Operational Elements of Service Provision

Q1: Should I wear PPE for every patient whom I examine and come into contact with?

A: Currently advice is that use of full PPE is not necessary unless you performing aerosol generating procedures.

Q2: Am I required to inform the HSCB of any changes to the scope of services which I provide?

A: **Yes**, all contractors who wish to change their scope of service provision (i.e. the service types and/or level of availability) should advise the HSCB as soon as possible by email to ophthalmic.services@hscni.net

Q3: How will I be informed of any updates on the COVID-19 pandemic?

A: HSCB will communicate **all** updates to contractor HSCNI email accounts (for all practices accessing the FPS Optometry Portal for use of the OCS online system). For practices that are not accessing the FPS Optometry Portal, HSCB will use the email address currently on file.

Please note: HSCB will only communicate with contractors using another email address in the eventuality of a practice closure and the contractor is unable to access the FPS Optometry Portal.

Q4: Business Continuity:

i) Am I permitted to close my practice indefinitely until COVID-19 pandemic measures ease in the UK?

A: Current Regulations mandate Contractors to advise the HSCB of any changes to their Ophthalmic Listing within 14 days, this would include any changes to the days on which you provide services. You are asked to contact one of the HSCB clinical advisers prior to making any decision to close your practice so that your plans can be discussed. These plans need to consider patient communication and patient contact arrangements, continuity of care for all service types provided particularly NI PEARS, and for collection and repair of appliances.

ii) Do I have to close my practice if I, or a member of my staff, develop identified symptoms and/or test positive for COVID-19?

A: No, you do not need to close your practice indefinitely. You may need to close temporarily to clean the practice or if your staffing levels do not permit you to continue temporarily. You should also contact the HSCB to advise should this scenario manifest for your practice.

You should follow the Employer Guidance which includes advice on providing support to the member of staff, other staff and members of the public who may have been in contact with the person and managing sick leave. This is updated regularly.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19>

Q5: Who is available to help me if I have queries or worries about an element of Ophthalmic Services provision during the COVID-19 pandemic?

A: All Contractors, Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians can contact the HSCB with queries or concerns by email to Ophthalmic Services or directly to the HSCB clinical advisers:

- Ophthalmic Services: Ophthalmic.Services@hscni.net
- HSCB Clinical advisers: Janice.mccrudden@hscni.net | Fiona.North@hscni.net Margaret.McMullan@hscni.net
- Optometry Business Support: Scott.Drummond@hscni.net

Q6: What information is available to me and my staff?

A: The following online resources are available to use

- HSC Optometry COVID-19 Information page: <http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/3120.htm>
- UK Government Advice: <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response>
- Public Health England Advice for Primary Care: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wn-cov-guidance-for-primary-ca>
- Public Health Northern Ireland: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/advice-covid-19-coronavirus>
- College of Optometrists Advice: <https://www.college-optometrists.org/the-college/media-hub/news-listing/coronavirus-2019-advice-for-optometrists.html>
- General Optical Council: https://www.optical.org/en/news_publications/Publications/joint-statement-and-guidance-on-coronavirus-covid19.cfm

Q7: Can I post out glasses to patients?

A: Yes, if you assess that there is a risk for either a patient or staff in collecting glasses at the practice they may be posted. Where possible adjust the glasses at the time of dispensing or, if this is not possible e.g. replacing broken glasses ordered by telephone, advise the patients that they may need further adjustment. The College of Optometrists has provided useful guidance and suggest templates for recording telephone consultations, related to glasses and contact lenses.

Q8: Will my practice be subject to routine Probity Service Post Verification (PPV) Visits during the COVID-19 pandemic?

A: No, PPV Visits have been suspended during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. HSCB will review the arrangements and will undertake alternative probity and financial monitoring and assurance checks.

Q9: As an Optometrist and Health Care Professional, can I have access to COVID-19 testing if I develop identified symptoms?

A: Current guidance is that only patients admitted to hospital should be tested. However, the situation is fluid and evolving. Proposals for the testing of 'key-workers' remains policy in development.

Q10: What should I do if I need to refer a patient?

A: Further guidance on referrals during COVID-19 pandemic will be issued in the incoming days. Please contact your HSCB clinical adviser if you have a concern about a referral for a patient. ALL practices that use CCG must ensure that they generate their referrals via CCG. Practices not using CCG should contact the HSCB clinical advisers to make arrangements for training in and access to CCG.