



# OPHTHALMIC SERVICES NEWSLETTER

**December 2023**

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Welcome to the Autumn/Winter 2023 edition of HSC Ophthalmic Services Newsletter.

As another year draws to a close Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) of Department of Health would like to express thanks and appreciation for continued delivery of high quality, safe, effective and accessible eyecare services to the population of Northern Ireland. This work is both valued and much appreciated.

In spite of a continued challenging operating environment, there is much to celebrate, within ophthalmic service provision and at system level this year, and in this newsletter, you will read of the roll out of encompass, the single digital care record for every citizen in Northern Ireland. This will build on and enhance the capabilities of the NI Electronic Care Record (NIECR) and create better experiences for patients, service users, and providers.

We also highlight the introduction of My Waiting Times NI, which can help patients to find out the average waiting time information by HSC Trust and by specialty across Northern Ireland. This will help you have an informed conversation with patients for whom referral is indicated and those awaiting treatment, and help manage expectations, anxieties and options.

The newsletter also carries commentary on the primary eyecare services Annual Quality Assurance return. The 95.6% return rate is much appreciated, and the QA return offers system-level assurance around important service delivery metrics such as complaints, adverse incidents, and business continuity planning.

Finally, strategic planning to move Northern Ireland towards a single Integrated Care System continues. Test Area Integrated Partnership Boards are being established, and SPPG will keep you up to speed with developments in the coming year.

Merry Christmas, and Happy Holidays.

Raymond Curran, Head of Ophthalmic Services, SPPG



## Acute Eyecare Provision during Christmas and New Year holidays

As patients increasingly use their local optometry practice as their first point of contact if they have an acute, sudden onset, eye problem it is very important that the patients know what to do if the practice is closed. All practices should ensure that they have clear, straightforward information for patients on the practice opening times during the holiday period and how the patients may access emergency care if they have an urgent eye problem that cannot wait. You are advised to have a message on your practice telephone and on your practice website, Facebook® page or other social media platform that your practice may use.

The message should be clear giving information on the practice opening hours and state that **if the practice is closed and the patient has a very urgent problem that cannot wait, they should contact their nearest hospital Emergency Department.**

If your practice is to be closed for longer than the public holiday period you may wish to consider a “buddy” arrangement with another practice for managing your patients with acute eye problems

## Access to Eye Casualty Services during the holiday period.

Belfast Eye Casualty Service (RVH)	
Day	Opening hours
Sat 23 <sup>rd</sup> Dec	Closes 1pm
Christmas Eve	Closes 1pm
Christmas Day	Closed all day
Boxing Day	Closes 1pm
Weds 28 <sup>th</sup> – Fri 30 <sup>th</sup>	Normal opening hours
Sat 30 <sup>th</sup> Dec	Closes 1pm
Sun 31 <sup>st</sup> Dec	Closes 1pm
Mon 1st Jan	Closes 1pm
Tues 2nd onwards	Normal hours resumed

When BHSCT Eye Casualty is closed, as usual, telephone the RVH switchboard tel: 02890240450 and ask for the ophthalmologist on call.

Western Eye Casualty Services (Altnagelvin)
For all urgent/emergency referrals phone the Altnagelvin Hospital switchboard as usual tel 028 71345171 and ask for the ophthalmologist on call.

## !! REMINDER - Updated CCG Referral Pathway for Paediatrics Ophthalmology and Orthoptics

At the end of July 2023 all contractor practices were notified of the [updated eReferral pathway for paediatric ophthalmology and orthoptics](#). The Paediatric Ophthalmology service is now managed on a regional level by Belfast HSC Trust, with clinic provisions in various sites across Northern Ireland. You are asked to read the information and supporting guidance in relation to the revised pathway and ensure that ALL optometrists working in your practice are familiar with the process for referrals, including knowing which service is appropriate for the condition your patient is suspected of having, or is presenting with.

Practitioners will note that within the CCG system there are options for eReferral to both paediatric ophthalmology **and** orthoptics.

1. Please read the referral advice banner carefully for both of these referral destinations to ensure that the correct destination is selected and used.
2. Please ensure that optometrists working in your practice do **NOT** refer any child under 16yrs who requires ophthalmological assessment to the General Ophthalmology service, the Ophthalmology – Paediatric Ophthalmology destination should be used.
3. Where a child requires Orthoptic assessment please select this destination, CCG referrals to Orthoptic services are now in place for ALL five HSC Trusts.

Paediatric Eyecare information is hosted on the following page of the BSO website, please share this link with all clinicians working in your practice: [Paediatric Eyecare Information - Business Services Organisation \(BSO\) Website \(hscni.net\)](#)

**NOTE:** For practices that are not connected to the HSC portal and therefore are not enabled for CCG eReferral, please ensure that when an optometrist in your practice is processing a referral to paediatric ophthalmology via the patient's GP, that you make it clear via instruction to the GP/GP practice that they **must use** the paediatric ophthalmology destination on CCG. The GP / GP Practice must be given clear advice on the correct destination to avoid a referral being sent to the incorrect sub-speciality.



Helpful Resource /Information Webinar – all optometrists are encouraged to watch a recording of the information webinar held on 2<sup>nd</sup> October. A link to the recording is hosted on the following webpage: [Optometry CPD and Training: Webinars and Events - Business Services Organisation \(BSO\) Website \(hscni.net\)](#)

## HSC Optometry Portal

If your practice does not currently access the Portal and is still using paper-based processes for submitting claims, referrals etc.... and you wish to discuss connection to the Optometry portal, please contact the eBusiness team using the email noted below in the first instance.

 FPS Optometry Secure Web Portal

If an optometry contractor practice is experiencing issues with their connection to the Optometry Portal, the staff in the eBusiness team will be happy to take a call from you to discuss the problems or issues you are facing. Please remember that the eBusiness team cannot deal with queries about *the specific applications* which are hosted on the portal (e.g. NIECR, CCG, Interpreting Service, vFire etc...) but they will be able to help with **portal connection** problems. The eBusiness team can be contacted on [eBusiness@hscni.net](mailto:eBusiness@hscni.net).

## ‘encompass’ & the new primary care link – ‘EpicCare Link’

In [previous newsletters](#) you have been advised of the introduction of the new health and care record for Northern Ireland, known as ‘**encompass**’. encompass was launched in the South Eastern HSC Trust area on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2023 and will be implemented on a phased basis in the other HSC Trusts over the next two years. In tandem with this timeline, the new primary care clinician link to encompass, known as ‘**EpicCare Link**’ has been launched. **EpicCare Link is the record which primary care health care professionals including GPs, Optometrists, Pharmacists and some other defined groups will now use.** Until the full implementation of encompass is complete across all of Northern Ireland, it is also the record which staff in other HSC Trusts awaiting encompass implementation will use to review and manage patients who have received any service in the South Eastern HSC Trust (and those Trusts coming on board subsequently).



Until the full implementation of encompass is complete, primary care optometrists will still use NIECR to check information, but, will also need to refer to EpicCare Link to check also for information on patients accessing care in the South Eastern HSC Trust area.

**Therefore, throughout the rollout period of encompass, both NIECR and EpicCare Link will need to be used side-by-side to ensure you have a complete picture of your patients’ health and social care interactions and journeys.**

**Q: Is EpicCare Link much different to NIECR?**

**Yes**, most definitely, EpicCare Link will have a different ‘look and feel’ to NIECR and will also bring additional functionality including; access to a significantly wider information base, a messaging function, a referrals function, and an ability to request imaging tests. However **not all** of this additional functionality should be used by optometrists, for example, **CCG is being retained** as the referral platform for GPs and Optometrists at this time so the referrals function in EpicCare Link will not be used. In order to help guide optometrists in how they should use EpicCare Link a webinar took place on 14<sup>th</sup> November and a recording of this is available at the following link: [Optometry CPD and Training: Webinars and Events - Business Services Organisation \(BSO\) Website \(hscni.net\)](#)

In addition, online ‘Q&A sessions’ are planned – please refer to the guidance and information at the links below to check the dates of these sessions and how to book. **Note:** Training resources, including FAQs are hosted on the EpicCare Link site and are available to an optometrist when they log-in using their account details.

Although EpicCare Link will allow optometrists to view significantly more information than the current optometry-view NIECR, optometrists using EpicCare Link are reminded that they should only view patient information which is relevant to the care they are providing to a patient. As with NIECR, the ethos of sharing of information is that access to information is treated with respect and only viewed for direct patient benefit.

**Q: How will I apply for an EpicCare Link account?**

1. **Existing NIECR** account holders (n ~ 498, accounts held at 1<sup>st</sup> October) have been assigned a new EpicCare Link account and log in details. **The details of user accounts have been sent to the optometrist’s individual personal email accounts.**
2. Because NIECR will still be required as an important resource for quite some time, all new NIECR applications will also include an EpicCare Link application. The updated application form is hosted on the HSC Optometry Portal on the “Optometry eForms page” (Form No 2, Section A of this page).

**Q: Where will I find and access EpicCare Link?**

As with all the HSC applications for optometry, a link to the new EpicCare Link is hosted on the Optometry portal, however EpicCare Link is also accessible from the public internet. Full detailed guidance on how to access EpicCare Link and how to log in is hosted at the following link: [EpicCare Link for Optometry - Business Services Organisation \(BSO\) Website \(hscni.net\)](#) **N.B** The full URL of this page is: <https://bso.hscni.net/directorates/operations/family-practitioner-services/ophthalmic-services/ophthalmic-contractors/epiccare-link-for-optometry/>

## CCG eReferral System and Browser Settings

Contractor practices have been previously advised of current problems in relation to CCG and internet browser compatibility. BSO colleagues have advised that regrettably there is currently no timeline set for the reconfiguration of CCG to be completed (involving Scottish partners) and therefore the manual workaround applied by practices will be required for the foreseeable months. Please continue to use the guide for optometry contractor practices to undertake the reconfiguration of the settings on Microsoft Edge browser.



Unfortunately, as there can be a frequent release of updates for the PC operating systems, it can mean that the change to the settings needs to be actioned on a regular basis. Please read the guidance at the following page of the BSO website: [BSO Optometry Portal \(hscni.net\)](https://hscni.net). SPPG ophthalmic staff fully appreciate the frustrations many are experiencing because of this CCG/browser issue and your patience is greatly appreciated whilst work is progressed by IT colleagues in BSO to help fix and resolve this issue.

## vFire online portal for user account password resets

Practices are reminded of the process for requesting password resets for CCG, NIECR and HSCNI email accounts. All contractor practices connected to the HSC Optometry Portal (= 258/264 practices) have access to the online portal (known as “vFire”) for submitting requests for password resets for accounts. The guidance outlines in detail how to log in using your practice HSCNI email credentials, and you are advised to **please read the information hosted on the HSC Optometry Portal at the link “vFire Customer Portal” prior to using vFire. It is essential that you follow the guidance to ensure your request is directed to the correct team in BSO IT services.**



## REMINDER !!– GOS and Other Service Approval Requests

All contractors are reminded that if they are submitting a request to BSO claims team for an approval they should use their HSCNI email account and **not** a business or other email address. As with all email communications care should be taken in the provision of patient-identifiable information using the minimum required detail (e.g. HCN plus initials). For the 6 practices that do not have HSCNI email accounts (i.e. not using the portal for GOS claims) please ensure that you do not put patient identifiable information in an email coming from outside the HSC network and follow up directly with BSO staff by telephone with the patient details.

## Patient Health and Care Numbers: Reminder: No HCN = no claim!

Practices are reminded that patients must have a valid NI Health and Care Number (HCN) to access health service funded eyecare i.e. GOS eye examinations including domiciliary visits, vouchers if they are eligible and any of the Enhanced Services. Please see [MOS 280](#) for more information. This advice also applies where a Voucher has been issued by the Hospital Eye Service (HES) and practices cannot assume because a patient has a Voucher issued from the HES that the patient has a valid HCN.

Patients from outside NI, even if from other parts of the UK, who do not have a NI HCN may not access GOS or Enhanced Services and will have to be seen in a private capacity or directed to a GP or hospital ED if they require emergency treatment.

Also, be aware that some patients may have a temporary HCN and claims cannot be submitted, and therefore cannot be paid, if the HCN is only temporary. If you decide to provide GOS/Enhanced Services to a patient with a temporary number you must withhold the claim form until they can provide a permanent HCN, with the recognised risk that the number may not be made permanent. Alternatively, the patient should be seen in a private capacity.

## Universal Credit

An increasing number of people are being moved from existing benefits, which included access to help with dental and ophthalmic costs, onto Universal Credit. Those on Universal Credit are not necessarily automatically eligible for help with health costs, under current legislation. It is recognised that the need to apply for assistance using an HC1 form can be challenging for both patients and practices. Work is ongoing with Department for Communities to try to improve this situation.

In the meantime, the following points should be noted:

1. Posters are being issued to practices alerting patients on Universal Credit to the need to apply for help using a HC1 form
2. Patients may access and print of the HC1 form from the NI Direct website or practices may order the form on the eform
3. Practices are reminded that if a patient has an HC3 form the claim cannot be processed on OCS, it must be submitted on paper using a GOS (NI) STC form. Supplies of HC1 and STC forms may be obtained using the order form on the Optometry e forms tab on the ophthalmic portal.

## Optometrist CPD Grant

The application period for claiming the 2023 CPD grant will open on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2024 and will close on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2024. No late applications can be accepted. Please check your contractor HSC email account in the first week of January '24 for information and access to the CET application form. Please ensure all optometrists in your practice are aware that they need to apply to receive the grant.

## 'My Waiting Times NI' New website for patients and optometrists



### Contents

How we're reducing waiting lists  
My Waiting Times NI FAQs & Guidance  
HSC Trust Contacts

Earlier this year all practices were advised of the introduction of a new website, "[My Waiting Times NI](#)" providing information on [median waiting times](#) for urgent and routine outpatient appointments at Trust level, including those for ophthalmology. From mid-September the range of information hosted

has been extended to inpatients and day case waiting times.

You will note that reporting of inpatients and day-cases is at sub-specialty level for the largest ophthalmology patient surgical treatment cohort, cataract. I hope that you and your patients find this information helpful. You are reminded that ophthalmology is provided by **two Trusts** regionally so information for ophthalmology services is available under the **Belfast and Western Trust locations** on the new website allowing you to have a more informed discussion with your patients. FAQs have also been developed and linked on the webpage to improve the users' experience and understanding of the information provided.

The webpage will provide GPs, healthcare professionals and patients in Northern Ireland access to the current average waiting times for both outpatient assessments and treatments for elective care services within each Trust. The site will be updated every month to ensure that users have access to timely standardised waiting time information. It is envisaged that the webpage will be further developed to include waiting time information for other *elective services* in due course.

### Please note:

- Any queries relating to the waiting time data should be **directed to the relevant HSC Trust** via their contact details on the webpage.
- Any queries regarding the operation of the webpages (including access to the site) should be directed to the SPPG Communication Teams via [SPPGCommunications@hscni.net](mailto:SPPGCommunications@hscni.net)

**Please take some time to familiarise yourself with the website and share with your patients: [My Waiting Times NI](#)**

<https://online.hscni.net/my-waiting-times-ni/>

## Launch of the New 'Yellow Card Centre' for Northern Ireland

Have you, your patient or a friend/family member experienced an adverse drug reaction? If so, you can now report it to the new 'Yellow Card Centre' in Northern Ireland which was officially launched on Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> September 2023 coordinating with World Patient Safety day which took place on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2023. Please see the links below for information on the new centre.

- [Launch of new centre to promote patient safety in NI | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/launch-of-new-centre-to-promote-patient-safety-in-ni)
- [Yellow Card centre launched in Northern Ireland to strengthen patient safety - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/news/health/yellow-card-centre-launched-in-northern-ireland-to-strengthen-patient-safety)
- Contact details can be found [here](#)

Optometrists and other Health Care Professionals are reminded to report adverse drug reactions to the MHRA; in addition, please advise your patients that they can also submit a Yellow Card report.

## Thank You.....Annual Quality Assurance Returns

Thank you to all practices for your completed annual QA returns, once again optometry demonstrated a high return rate of 95.6%. Your support in fulfilling this governance requirement is appreciated.

The returns include declarations in the areas of MOS & Guidance, complaints and adverse incident reporting. This year the returns evidenced an increase in the number of complaints across all the categories note:

- Treatment and Care (n=22)
- Clinical/Professional Diagnosis (n=15)
- Staff Attitude & Behaviour (n=47)
- Waiting Time (n=86)
- Communication (n=45)
- Practice/Surgery Charges (n=44)

The Optical Complaints Consumer Service (OCCS) is a service which aims to help patients resolve a complaint and, is also there to assist the profession. It is hoped that in the near future the Optical Complaints Consumer Service will be able to join HSC Ophthalmic Services for an information webinar on complaints, including those that involve the General Optical Council. For further information please visit the OCCS website: [Home - Optical Complaints - Optical Consumer Complaints Service](#)

## The i-GAIN Study – Can you and your patients help with a new study on Macular Degeneration?



The NI Clinical Research Facility has recently started recruiting for another exciting study, i-GAIN led by principal investigator Professor Tunde Peto; which some of your **patients with geographic atrophy secondary to AMD** may be interested in.

Feedback from our participants is that they really enjoy taking part in our studies so if you know of any of your patients who may be suitable and interested in participating, we would be grateful if you could share the details of the study with them along with our contact details. As a thank you for your time discussing the study with your patients, there is a £100 referral payment available to the practice for each patient who attends, and, is successfully recruited onto the trial.

**Aim:** At present there are no approved treatments for dry AMD/geographic atrophy. Previous studies have shown that genetic variants in the complement pathway have a role in the pathogenesis of AMD. **This study aims to assess the correlation between complement proteins levels in the blood and geographic atrophy secondary to AMD.** It is a non-interventional, observation-only study, the results of which will be used to create a database of patients who may be suitable for a gene therapy treatment trial to halt the progression of GA secondary to AMD.

### ***Patients are suitable if they:***

- Have geographic atrophy in one or both eyes secondary to AMD

### ***Patients are NOT suitable if they:***

- Have Wet AMD in either eye
- Have media opacities affecting view of the macula
- Have macular changes from causes other than AMD
- Have diabetic retinopathy
- Are unable to comply with imaging

### ***Commitment involved for patients***

Patients who are suitable will be required to attend the NICRF located in the City Hospital for three visits at 6-monthly intervals for 1 year. Each visit lasts approximately 1.5 to 2 hours. At these visits we will take blood samples and image the eyes using OCT and Optos.

***As part of the research studies they do not take over patient's routine care and will always advise them to continue with their regular appointments with their optometrist.*** If you would like more information about this or any other research studies, please do not hesitate to get in touch with the NI CFR via email at [nicrfoptoms@qub.ac.uk](mailto:nicrfoptoms@qub.ac.uk) or telephone on 07768 858583.

## Capturing your patient's experience of optometry services

Optometrists, Dispensing Opticians and practice support staff of all types are at the fore in providing essential and accessible care for patients. Helping people to see better, assisting people live independently by optimising their vision, helping detect sight threatening eye conditions, providing advice, help, reassurance and comfort to people with sight loss are all beyond any numeric measure of worth.

All this work will undoubtedly bring thanks from many patients and Care Opinion is a platform used across health and social care in Northern Ireland to capture these words of thanks and compliments. The aim in adopting Care Opinion in Northern Ireland is *“to enable impactful engagement with patients and the public in a fully open and transparent way that supports meaningful engagement and drive sustainable, measurable service improvement”*.

Just as in secondary care ophthalmology, Optometry practices and their staff are encouraged to share information about Care Opinion with patients to show them how they can provide feedback on the service they have received. For more information on Care Opinion please visit: [Northern Ireland | Care Opinion](#) to see how the service works for you and your patients.



If you, your staff or your patients wish to provide feedback on a service you have received please use the following link: [Write Story | Care Opinion](#)

## CPD

Many of you will have already been audited by the GOC CPD audit team. The GOC audit all registrants “MyCPD” during the 3 three cycle. The audits take place several times a year, so be prepared. You will be informed by email when you are under audit and asked to supply additional information as required.

All registrants should hopefully now also have engaged and be familiar with new CPD system as the process is now more than half way the cycle. Remember CPD points are no longer uploaded by the provider and you must upload them yourself. It is encouraged that you do this in a timely way and that means any reflection is more meaningful. Reflection is mandatory for peer review/discussion and any self-directed learning but strongly encouraged for all CPD.

Your personal development plan (PDP) and scope of practice (SOP) should be reviewed regularly to ensure they are up to date and reflect your current learning needs, goals and experiences which as we all know change throughout the 3-year cycle.

Remember also, as part of the 3 year cycle every registrant must complete a reflective exercise with a peer, based on your personal development plan by the end of the CPD cycle. It is advised to do this when you have met all or most of your CPD requirements, generally towards the end of the cycle so the discussion will be more meaningful. This exercise must involve a discussion with a peer and will allow you to document reflections on your progress against your PDP, CPD requirements, and reflections about your professional practice more generally across the cycle. This discussion should be documented and recorded as completed on "MyCPD" within the GOC website.

It might therefore be useful to identify someone for your peer discussion. More information on this peer discussion and reflective exercise and CPD in general is available on the GOC website.

Remember, previous webinars are available to view on the SPPG intranet, although these are not eligible for any CPD points if re-watched. Sessions that have a C number cannot be used for self-directed learning but they can be useful to remind yourself or indeed if you couldn't make the webinar you can watch it at your leisure.

Please do continue to send suggestions for CPD sessions to SPPG Ophthalmic Services, and all feedback is very much appreciated.

## Ophthalmic Information and Support

If you have a query you can obtain information and guidance from the following:



1. SPPG, DoH Ophthalmic Services: [ophthalmic.services@hscni.net](mailto:ophthalmic.services@hscni.net)
2. General Optical Council: [News | GeneralOpticalCouncil](#)
3. College of Optometrists: [Home - College of Optometrists \(college-optometrists.org\)](http://www.college-optometrists.org)
4. For **Optometry Portal Connectivity** Issues: [eBusiness@hscni.net](mailto:eBusiness@hscni.net)
5. For Access to **vFire Customer Portal**: Please connect via the link on the Optometry Portal home page.