



June 2025



OPHTHALMIC SERVICES NEWSLETTER

Welcome to the Summer 2025 edition of HSC Ophthalmic Services Newsletter. As always Ophthalmic Services in Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) of Department of Health would like express thanks for the vital and valuable work all staff working in primary care optometry practices, do every day.

In this newsletter you are reminded of the implementation of the new health and social care record (encompass) and its relevance and importance for primary care optometry and recent enhancements to the information accessible via EpicCare Link.

[A new era in Northern Ireland's health service as all Trusts 'Go-Live' on encompass | Department of Health](#)

Some of you may have accessed and used the associated My Care app (I have myself, and found it informative and almost “real-time”) and can see the value and potential in involving patients more in their care. I would encourage you to mention the availability and functionality to your patients. I think most would find it a great resource.

Also highlighted is recent MOS guidance in respect of fee uplifts for enhanced services and GOS Sight Tests, guidance on patient referral pathways, and information on the recent waiting list reimbursement scheme for patients on waiting lists.

The reimbursement scheme is one of a number of Waiting List Initiative Schemes aimed at reducing both lists and waiting times. It concentrates on reducing Red Flag and time-critical waits, building capacity, and clearing backlogs and ophthalmology, and your patients, can expect to benefit from these strategies.

A big thank you to all who participated in the annual Quality Assurance (QA) return process. SPPG appreciates that this is not mandated in contract, and so completion is valued, and gives sound governance assurances that demonstrate community optometry to be a safe, effective, and accessible service. The practice allowance scheme which facilitates the QA process is now being administered for payment.

In this newsletter you will find details of new requirements for complaints management. This is a statutory requirement for every contractor practice, and a NI Public Services Ombudsman prerequisite, which introduces a common set of complaints handling standards.

Raymond Curran, Head of Ophthalmic Services, SPPG

encompass – Full Regional Implementation

8th May 2025 marked the date for ‘go-live’ for the remaining two HSC Trusts to commence use of [encompass](#), the new health and social care record for N. Ireland. Over the past 18 months a phased implementation of **encompass** has taken place with the Southern and Western HSC Trusts commencing use on 8th May. [encompass](#) is the single source record for patients accessing health and social care services from HSC Trusts in N. Ireland and the completion of the roll-out of encompass marks a new era in access to a digital fully integrated care record system for the first time in N. Ireland.



[EpicCare Link](#), the primary care view of encompass, has been enabled for primary care optometrists, GPs and certain other identified health and social care professionals since November 2023. It is important that optometrists use EpicCare Link to ensure that they have the most up-to-date information on their patients as it provides detail on; attendances at hospital eye services, a patient’s current medication and health status and other information relevant to the patient. Information held in NIECR will become increasingly historical as patients access a service for the first time when encompass is used to record their attendance and appointment details. In recent weeks access to patient ‘images’ has been enabled, this is valuable clinical information which will help optometrists manage their patient better.

Any optometrist who does not have an EpicCare Link user account is encouraged to apply for one, application forms are hosted on the HSC Optometry Portal on the page titled “**Optometry eForms**”. Optometrists are asked to ensure that they adhere to relevant guidance in their use of EpicCare Link, and in particular, the need to ensure that they only view information directly related to the care they are providing for a patient. Optometrists using EpicCare Link must maintain an account status of ‘active’ by logging in regularly and must **NEVER** share their account details or password with anyone. Optometrists are encouraged to watch the recording of a webinar available on the BSO website at the following page: [Optometry CPD and Training: Webinars and Events - Business Services Organisation \(BSO\) Website](#)

Practice staff, clinical and other, are encouraged to highlight the patient App, which is called “**My Care**”. Through the App a patient can view information about their appointments and the services they access. The [My Care](#) App was highlighted in previous SPPG communications and optometrists are asked to encourage patients to sign up to and utilise [My Care](#). The South Eastern HSC Trust have engaged with Julie Power, a service user with a rare health condition. In this, Julie highlights how ‘My Care’ has transformed how she manages her condition and encourages others to sign up. [Click here to view the video](#) or, scan the QR code. For patients who are hearing impaired, or deaf, please note that there are BSL and ISL videos on the website which you should direct them to.



Referrals - Important Information/Reminders

PLEASE NOTE: At this time, the CCG system is still the method of HSC electronic referral to secondary care services for patients. Referrals sent via CCG will be populated into the patient's healthcare record and are visible therefore in EpicCare Link. If you wish to view the status of a referral (i.e. what triage has been applied to it) you must check the patient's EpicCare Link chart. Information on waiting times is not held in EpicCare Link, if you or a patient wish to see current HSC Trust patient waiting time information this is held on the [MyWaitingTimesNI](#) website (previously notified) and use the sidebar/menu guide to access information from the relevant HSC Trust. A patient should contact the relevant HSC Trust if they have a query about their referral and waiting time.


CCG Referrals – Requirement to consider the Patient Residence Postcode when choosing a referral pathway

In January 2025 Ophthalmic Services issued [guidance](#) on behalf of the Western Health and Social Care Trust Ophthalmology Service, the information was issued to practice contractor HSC email accounts. This [guidance](#) related to the consideration of patient residence postcode when deciding to refer a patient to **Ophthalmology services**. It is essential that an optometrist adheres to this guidance when generating an ophthalmology referral following discussion with the patient. In Northern Ireland there are two HSC Trusts providing **Ophthalmology** services and each HSC Trust has an agreed 'catchment' area based on patient postcode. If you refer a patient incorrectly based on the patient postcode a delay will arise for your patient and your referral may be returned to you. Please ensure that you read this guidance which can be found at the following link on the BSO website: [OPHTHALMOLOGY REFERRAL PATHWAYS \(PATIENT POSTCODE\)](#)

NOTE (for non-CCG enabled practices): For practices that are not connected to the HSC portal (currently 4 practices) and therefore do not use CCG as the referral method, please ensure optometrists process the referral via the patient's GP clearly indicating on the note to the GP practice which HSC Trust the patient should be referred to. GPs must process this referral via CCG and will require clear instructions as to which CCG referral destination (i.e. which HSC Trust) they need to select.

**** Please note that this guidance does not apply to Orthoptic Services which are delivered by all five HSC Trusts and referrals for a patient resident within a specific HSC Trust boundary are managed by the Orthoptic service in that HSC Trust. Therefore, when referring to Orthoptic Services you should always choose the CCG destination for the HSC Trust in which the patient resides ****

CCG Referrals and the “Viewed icon”

You are reminded that CCG referrals will not have the viewed ‘eye’ icon [] highlighted on the CCG system in your practice. This is because referral receipt and triage are now managed entirely through the encompass system, and, if an optometrist wishes to check the status of a new /first referral sent to the Trust they must log into the patient chart in EpicCare Link to view the status. Please refer to the guidance and tip-sheet titled “ECL – Reviewing Referrals” issued to practices via their HSCNI email accounts previously.

Optometrists **MUST** ensure that all referrals have the status of “submitted” noted against the referral on the CCG Worklist – if a referral does not state “submitted” it has not been sent by the Optometrist. Please ensure that all optometrists working in your practice have been trained in the use of the CCG system – guidance notes are available to review on the BSO website: [Electronic Referral & CCG Information - Business Services Organisation \(BSO\) Website \(hscni.net\)](http://hscni.net)

Glaucoma Service – Referrals Guidance

All Optometrists will be aware of [NICE Guidance](#) (NG81 – glaucoma and OHT) in relation to the requirements for managing patients with suspect glaucoma or OHT and, for secondary care, those with a diagnosis of glaucoma or OHT. For primary care optometrists the assessment of patients who are suspected of having glaucoma or OHT, the NICE guideline ([NG81](#)) provides clear information what is expected and required in terms of clinical diagnostic tests which should be performed on a patient as part of case finding and **prior to referral**. An increase in referrals, increased demand for review appointments combined with increased life expectancy has placed more demand on hospital eye services, including the glaucoma service. Services such as the primary care OHT review & monitoring service have helped manage demand but there are opportunities to do things better in respect of referrals and primary care optometry are a critical player in this.

NG81 intends that referrals for suspect glaucoma or OHT should:

1. Have IOP measured twice, (i.e. undertake Level I enhanced service – IOP Repeat Measures), referral must not be based on a non-contact tonometry
2. Have a demonstratable **and REPEATABLE** visual field defect
3. Have assessment of the optic nerve head/disc and fundus by slit lamp indirect examination
4. Have disc/fundus imaging, where available, by photography or OCT
5. Provide an assessment of the anterior chamber and angle – **specifying clearly which method of assessment was used and the findings**

For all of the above a referral MUST include this minimum dataset of clinical information INLCUDING attachments of the visual field tests and, where taken, disc/fundus imaging also attached.

Follow-up / Second Referrals for patients already on a waiting list

Optometrists sending follow-up updated CCG referrals about a patient who is **already on a Trust waiting list** (i.e. where a clinical change has been found) should note that their second referral may have a status of “rejected” when viewed in EpicCare Link. This status does not mean that the second referral has been rejected in terms of its clinical content or relevance, it is simply because the patient is already known to the Trust that this status is recorded. This is a technical setting which in encompass and is common across all specialities when dealing with follow-up referrals for patients already on a waiting list. Patients can contact the HSC Trust to enquire about their referral triage status and their anticipated waiting time.

All referral information is hosted on the BSO website at the following link: [Optometry Referral Information - Business Services Organisation \(BSO\) Website](#)

Waiting List Reimbursement Scheme

On 6th May 2025 the Minister of Health announced a [HSC Waiting List Reimbursement Scheme](#). The scheme aims to help patients who are on an HSC treatment waiting list for over 2 years by offering the patient reimbursement if they choose to source their treatment in Ireland and, in the near future it is hoped that options to access treatment in other countries within Europe will also be included as part of this scheme. The value of the reimbursement is the *HSC* cost of the required treatment, travel and any other associated costs are not part of the reimbursement scheme. It has been [confirmed](#) that the scheme will commence on [2nd June 2025](#).

In addition, the Minister announced other initiatives aimed at managing waiting lists for out-patient assessments, and in respect of Ophthalmology, the announcement cited “*partnership arrangements with independent sector providers to clear outpatient waits of four years plus*” (other specialities were also included), Ophthalmic Services in SPPG will work with commissioning colleagues, HSC Trust service colleagues in both planning and ophthalmology and the independent sector providers, to discuss and examine the options for utilisation of the funding investment announced. It is hoped that further detail on the initiatives will be outlined in the Department’s Elective Care Framework Implementation Plan in the incoming weeks.

It is acknowledged that patient waiting times for secondary care eye services are a concern and worry for patients and their optometrists. You are reminded that patients can access information on wait times for services through the “[MyWaitingTimesNI](#)” website. Where a patient wait time has exceeded the anticipated wait time (with the calculation being based on the stated **average time** on the website), patients and their families are asked to direct their queries to the relevant HSC Trust to enquire as to their position on the waiting list based on the publicly available figures. [My Waiting Times NI - DOH/HSCNI Strategic Planning and Performance Group \(SPPG\)](#)

Care Opinion – For you and your Patients

You are reminded of the accessibility of Care Opinion as a means of capturing patient feedback which is an important element of providing health care services.



Optometry services are accessible and essential helping patients daily; you are encouraged tell your patients about Care Opinion and ask that they share their experience. 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](#)

vFire online portal for user account password resets

Practices are reminded of the process for requesting password resets for CCG, NIECR, EpicCare Link and HSCNI email accounts. All contractor practices connected to the HSC Optometry Portal (262/266 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.**



Optometry Enhanced Services – Updates

Fees Uplift

A 6% uplift to the fees for the following enhanced services has been agreed by Department of Health, for services provided from 1st April 2024. [MOS/355](#) provides details of the new levels of remuneration for each of the following services:

- i. [Level I enhanced service](#) (IOP Repeat Measures)
- ii. [Level II enhanced service](#) (Enhanced Case Finding for Glaucoma and OHT)
- iii. Ocular Hypertension Review and Monitoring
- iv. NI PEARS

A communication outlining the arrangements for the payments due to contractors was issued to all practices on 28th April 2025 and arrears will be paid as soon as possible.

Post-Operative Cataract Review and Assessment

Ophthalmic Services in SPPG have been recently advised that the first patients deemed suitable to have their post-operative cataract review provided in primary care optometry practices have been discharged. This is a very welcome development after many years of planning and contractors are asked to ensure that they are in a position within their practices to receipt and manage these patients for their review appointments. To this end practice owners/contractors and the optometrists working in practices are asked to:

1. Review **all service information** hosted on the BSO Website in the relevant section of the enhanced services information page:
[Enhanced Services \(ES\) - Business Services Organisation \(BSO\) Website](#)
2. Review the **information webinar** held in June 2024 which outlined the details of the service including; the patient eligibility criteria, the process for reporting the outcomes (via CCG) and the claiming process.
[Optometry CPD and Training: Webinars and Events - Business Services Organisation \(BSO\) Website \(hscni.net\)](#)
3. Ensure that the practice has **submitted the contractor agreement** for the service, and that any optometrists intending to provide the service, have completed their own **individual optometrist agreement** for the service (with submission of certificate evidence of completion of the required training/learning). Links to both of these service agreements are hosted on the [enhanced services information page](#).

Practice owners and optometrists must read carefully the service specification to ensure **only eligible patients are assessed** under this service and that all elements of the assessment noted in the service specification are provided. Please note that any post-operative reports and claims for service submitted for ineligible patients will not be accepted by HSC Trust(s) and BSO.

Northern Ireland Formulary – A Reminder for Optometrists

Optometrists are reminded if they are requesting dry eye preparations to be made available via an HSC prescription that they should have consulted the NI Formulary and can provide sufficient detail to the GP as to why a specific treatment is being requested. Please visit the NI Formulary website (**Chapter 11**) to view the dry eye preparations guidance:

Click on image, or visit
[Formulary | NI Formulary](#)
[\(hscni.net\)](#)



Governance in Optometry

Annual Quality Assurance Returns 2024/25 – Thank You!

Thank you to all practices for your completed the 24/25 annual QA returns, once again optometry practices have demonstrated a valuable commitment to good governance. Your support in fulfilling this governance requirement is appreciated. Practices that have completed their annual QA return for 24/25 will receive their practice allowance in the incoming weeks.

New Requirements for Complaints Management

Contractor practices have been recently advised of new requirements in the management of Complaints. The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) is leading on a programme to create a **common set of complaints handling standards** for public bodies in Northern Ireland. The establishment and implementation of a **Health and Social Care Model Complaints Handling Procedure (HSC MCHP)** aims to create an efficient, compassionate, and accessible complaints handling process with a focus on early resolution, learning and improvement.

The HSC MCHP will cover **all health and social care** organisations involved in the provision of health and social care funded services in Northern Ireland, including Family Practitioner Services (FPS) optometry contractors. **Optometry contractorss and practice owners are asked to ensure that they read the recent communication (issued to all practices on 28th April 2025) and fully implement all aspects of the revised process managing complaints.**

College of Optometrists – Clinical Governance Resource

The College of Optometrists have recently announced a new clinical governance toolkit and resource for members. Clinical governance is a key component of high-quality healthcare and incorporates elements of good governance such as; quality improvement, patient safety, team reflection, professional leadership and, workplace behaviours and culture. The new guidance aims to support optometrists in adopting and embedding clinical governance through an outcome-based approach, focussing on the practical elements of 'doing' and 'living' good governance in the everyday work.

“Every day may not be good, but there is good in every day”

For more information on how you and your staff can adopt a good governance culture in your practice please visit the College of Optometrists website:

<https://www.college-optometrists.org/clinical-guidance/supplementary-guidance/clinical-governance-in-optometric-practice>

If you have a keen interest in clinical audit you may also wish to visit [Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership](#) (HQIP) which promotes improvements in healthcare through learning and audit. From **2-6th June 2025**, HQIP host [Clinical Audit Awareness Week](#) which encourages those involved in health and social care to become involved in clinical audit. Each year HQIP seek applications for Clinical Audit Heroes Awards in areas such as patient safety; reducing inequalities and patient and public involvement. If you wish to read more about the chosen Heroes for 2025 please visit the following webpage: [Clinical Audit Heroes Awards 2025 – HQIP](#)

A Warm Welcome to New Staff – Optometric Clinical Adviser

SPPG Ophthalmic Services are delighted to welcome Ms Rosa McCanney as a new part-time optometric clinical adviser. Rosa is an optometrist with extensive experience of work in primary care and in the diabetic eye screening programme. Rosa took up her post joining the Head of Service, existing advisers, Eyecare Network staff, ophthalmic services business operations staff and the wider primary care team in SPPG in mid-May 2025. Over the incoming weeks and months, you will hopefully have an opportunity to meet and engage with Rosa in the course of her work for SPPG.



CPD

Please remember CPD is a requirement of GOC registration. It is no longer the responsibility of the provider to log points and points gained should be uploaded as soon as possible after the session to ensure reflection and feedback is as relevant as possible when the learning is “fresh” in your mind. You are also reminded to ensure your scope of practice, professional development plan and learning objectives are updated for this new cycle. These are “living documents” and should be reviewed and updated during the CPD cycle as learning needs are completed and change. The recent CET/CPD grant funding is designed to facilitate time out of practice to help you gain the necessary points so hopefully you have claimed and received this.

SPPG require each practitioner who provides Level II Enhanced Service and NIPEARS to complete an SPPG approved CPD session for the service. This assures continued provision of the service and governance around the schemes. A number of sessions have already been run this year so if you have not already completed one ensure you keep a check on practice emails for more CPD session information.

The sessions provided by SPPG are normally uploaded to the BSO website to allow watching again as required. CPD points are not available via this route but useful learning can be gained by reviewing sessions or for those who could not attend the interactive live event. They are also useful sessions for those in training on the SfR, so please draw their attention to the sessions and recordings.

[Optometry CPD and Training: Webinars and Events - Business Services Organisation \(BSO\) Website \(hscni.net\)](#)

UK Self-Care Awards – could you be a winner?

The [Self Care Forum](#) was established in 2011 and is recognised, both nationally and internationally, for commitment and advocacy of self-care. The Self Care Forum's vision is to improve the health of the UK population by establishing self-care as the starting point for a person's health, supporting people and embedding self-care in care pathways.

Optometry practices and their staff who are supporting their patient to improve their self-care practices — whether through education, social prescribing, personalised care, peer support, or other initiatives are encouraged to apply for the Self-Care Forum 'Self-Care Awards 2025'. For further information please visit the Self Care Forum website: [Self-Care Awards 2025 - Self Care Forum](#), noting the deadline for submissions of 30th July 2025.

Ophthalmic Information and Support

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



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