



Ophthalmic Services

General Ophthalmic Services Memorandum

1st April 2026

**To all Optometrists,
Ophthalmic Medical Practitioners and Dispensing Opticians
providing General Ophthalmic Services**

Dear Practitioner

Changes to Help with Health Costs Scheme – Universal Credit Entitlement/Tax Credit exemption

From 1 December 2025, patients in receipt of Universal Credit may qualify for help with their health charges in respect of ophthalmic treatment, subject to their own specific circumstances.

Eligibility is based on the patient's earnings in their most recent Universal Credit assessment period. For further details, please refer to the letter from Leanne Thompson, Head of General Dental and Ophthalmic Services, Department of Health, issued on 2 December 2025, available at the following BSO website link - [Letter-to-all-NI-Dental-and-Ophthalmic-Contractors-re.-Help-with-Health-Costs-Reissued-2-Dec-25.pdf](#).

A *Help with Health Costs* guide has also been developed to further assist practitioners identify if patients are entitled to claim free health service treatment, with details available at: [HWHC_OPTHALMIC_EXEMPTION-MATERIALS.pdf](#).

You may also be aware that Universal Credit has already replaced **Tax Credit**, **Working Tax Credit** and **Child Tax Credit** and as a result you should ***no longer*** be selecting Tax Credit as an exemption category when submitting an Ophthalmic claim for payment. ***Any claims received, which indicate Tax Credit as the relevant exemption, will be rejected for payment and details returned to the relevant practice.*** BSO are currently working to remove this exemption category from the Ophthalmic Claim System, to ensure this option cannot be selected in error in the future.

Over the coming months all benefit claimants in receipt of Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance and Income-related Employment Support Allowance will also be migrated to Universal Credit. BSO await confirmation from the Department for Communities as to when these specific benefits will cease and practitioners will be advised of this change when details are provided to BSO.