

# **GENERAL OPHTHALMIC SERVICES: FINANCIAL SUPPORT SCHEME**

(V1.1 – 22 APRIL 2020)

## **Introduction**

1. This document sets out the Financial Support Scheme (FSS) arrangements in respect of the provision of support payments to Ophthalmic Contractors (OCs), undertaking General Ophthalmic Services (GOS), affected by the downturn in Health & Social Care (HSC) activity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Background**

2. The Department of Health (DOH) recognises the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on OCs, their staff and of course on their patients. Although the scale and duration of the impact of COVID-19 remains highly uncertain, it is clear that it is already having a significant short term effect on the supply and demand for ophthalmic services which in turn is having cash flow implications for OCs.
3. In respect of financial sustainability, a letter from DOH was issued to all Ophthalmic Contractors on 25 March 2020 outlining the approach to a GOS Financial Support Scheme. The key purpose of the scheme is to stabilise the cash flow position for OCs over the duration of the outbreak by making payments based on last year's income. This is in the context that it is expected that there will be a substantial impact on cash flows with the intention being to maintain incomes at a reasonable level. It is not intended that the scheme would provide a guarantee against any financial loss for Ophthalmic Contractors.
4. The GOS FSS has been designed to:
  - a. protect the availability of staff to provide essential services during the response period to COVID-19;
  - b. reduce the risk to ongoing GOS stability to allow a return to pre-pandemic levels of service; and
  - c. fairly compensate practices for costs incurred.

## **Details of Scheme**

### Eligibility

5. All OCs who would have undertaken GOS activity in the absence of the COVID-19 pandemic are eligible for the scheme.

### Payments

6. The majority of OCs, with stable activity levels who apply for the support will receive a payment worth an average of their monthly GOS payment in 2019-20, minus the amount claimed for any GOS activity each month in 2020. This will not include payments in respect of NIPEARS as set out below, but does

include all activity relating to Sight Test Fees, Vouchers, Repairs and Domiciliary Visits.

7. For those OCs who have less than 12 months data, a monthly average may be calculated from the available data, but with the lowest month's data excluded. This is to address concerns that an initial month may not reflect the anticipated income in future months.
8. If a practice has significantly expanded or reduced activity during the 2019/20 financial year, the average will be based on a stable number of months.
9. In light of the short period of time available it is not possible to design a scheme which covers all the particular circumstances of Ophthalmic Contractors. However, individual circumstances will be taken into account as much as possible, particularly for those who have recently returned to normal working hours from long periods of maternity or sick leave in 2019-20.
10. It may not be possible to reflect individual circumstances in the payment for the first month. If this is the case and specific circumstances are identified, then the first month's payment to the respective OC may be based on 70% of the 2019-20 average GOS payment for an OC in NI. The amount of over or under payment in the first month's payment will be reconciled in the level of payments received in subsequent months.

#### Enhanced Services / Urgent Care

11. All elements of GOS payments in 2019-20, will continue to be made on the same basis during the COVID-19 outbreak as last year. The one exception are the payments in respect of Enhanced Services / Urgent Care (including NIPEARS type activity) where some Ophthalmic Contractors may be expected to undertake more activity during the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, payment for Urgent Care activity will not be included as part of the support payment calculations, but rather calculated separately. Where data is available, they will be subject to an upper limit of 150% of the 2019-20 monthly average payment for each contractor.

#### Conditions

12. The conditions of the GOS FSS are outlined below:
  - OCs and practices must continue to operate in line with the advice from the Health & Social Care Board (HSCB) in respect of the provision of minimum levels of service and make alternative arrangements where this is not possible;
  - OCs and other staff must assist the wider HSC, when asked by the HSCB where possible (further details on redeployment will be made available in due course);
  - OCs must make the monitoring returns as directed by the HSCB;
  - Practices must retain and pay staff costs associated with the normal delivery of HSC eyecare where possible;

- Additional support payments will be calculated on the basis of the conditions set out in this document which may be subject to change;
- Conditional on there being a significant increase in the level of activity following the pandemic then it may be necessary to recover support payments made in 2020 over the period 2021-22 to 2023-24.
- Applicants to the FSS should provide copies of applications and awards of grants / loans from other government sources over the past month including:
  - Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (HMT)
  - NI COVID Small Business Grant (Department of Finance)
  - Self-employment Income Support Scheme (HMT)
  - Statutory Sick Pay relief
  - Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (HMT)
  - Other sources
- Applicants should provide confirmation that they are currently operating as an OC and would have been providing the same level of services as in 2019-20, in the absence of COVID-19 outbreak.
- Applicants should submit a completed electronic application form by 19 April at 5pm 2020 in order to receive first payment and submit claims on 21st of each month thereafter. PAPER SUBMISSIONS ARE NOT PERMITTED.

13. If the conditions are not met then it may be necessary to amend the support arrangements in place.
14. It should be stressed that it is not expected that OCs and their staff will be expected to undertake activity which puts them at unnecessary risk. In addition, OCs and their staff will not be expected to provide minimum levels of service or support to the wider HSC if they would not normally be at work and/or are at a high risk from COVID-19.

#### Application Process

15. The nature of the scheme means that it will be necessary for OCs to apply for the support payment rather than being automatically enrolled. In addition, there is expected to be a need to refine and amend the approach as more information becomes available which means that this approach should be repeated each month.
16. OCs should submit their first application by 5PM 19 April 2020 in order to receive a first payment and submit claims by 21st of each month thereafter. PAPER SUBMISSIONS ARE NOT PERMITTED.
17. Once it has been decided that the additional support payments are no longer required the monthly email will indicate that this is the final time that applications will be invited from OCs.

#### Other Government Schemes

18. The GOS FSS is to support HSC Service activity only and no further government support should be applied for in respect of an OCs HSC activity. Duplication of support is not permitted.
19. The eligibility criteria and conditions for wider business support schemes are not the responsibility of the Department of Health in Northern Ireland. However, OCs also wishing to claim for support from such schemes should ensure that this is in relation to private activity only.
20. To ensure that this is the case, each monthly application must include details of all applications and awards in respect of other sources government funding. Failure to do so may lead to a loss of eligibility to the GOS FSS and recovery of funding already provided.

### **Monitoring and Review**

21. It should be noted that the applications for additional funding support are voluntary.
22. In light of the ongoing uncertainty in respect of the financial impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, the scope of all the provisions set out above will be kept under close review and are subject to change each month. OCs will be informed of any changes as part of the application process.
23. Further details in relation to recovery will be developed by the DOH in due course.

### **Recovery**

24. There is the potential for a spike in activity following the outbreak which would result in a boost in payments for 2020-21 compared to what they would have been in the absence of the pandemic. If this is found to be the case there may be a need for some of the support to be recovered if there is a significant increase in activity compared with previous years. This would be subject to an upper limit and would take into account additional activity undertaken on behalf of the HSC that had not already been remunerated.
25. This remains uncertain, will be monitored and further details will be developed by the DoH in due course.

**General Healthcare Policy Directorate  
Department of Health NI**

