

GENERAL OPHTHALMIC SERVICES: FINANCIAL SUPPORT SCHEME (GOS FSS): FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

(V1.0 – 15 APRIL 2020)

1. Who is eligible for the scheme?

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

2. How will Items of Service (IoS) payments be calculated?

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.

For those OCs who have less than 12 months data, a monthly average will 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.

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.

These rules are subject to change.

3. How will Enhanced Services and Urgent Care be addressed?

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.

4. How long will the scheme payments continue?

The duration of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ophthalmic activity levels remains uncertain. Therefore it is not possible to indicate how long the financial support arrangements will be in place.

The intention is that OCs will be informed one month in advance of the arrangements ending.

5. How do I apply?

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.

OCs should submit their first application by 5PM on 19 April 2020 electronically to the BSO in order to receive a first payment and submit claims by 21st of each month thereafter. PAPER SUBMISSIONS ARE NOT PERMITTED.

6. Can I apply to other government support schemes in addition to the GOS FSS?

The GOS FSS is to support HSC activity only and if you are in receipt of it no further government support should be applied for in respect of your HSC activity. Duplication of support is not permitted, however there are clearly issues related to private income.

The eligibility criteria and conditions for the wider business support schemes that have been established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are not the responsibility of the Department of Health (DoH) in Northern Ireland. However, OCs wishing to claim for support from such schemes should ensure that this is in relation to private activity only.

To ensure that this is the case your monthly application must include details of all applications and awards from other sources of business support from government. Failure to do so may lead to a loss of eligibility to the GOS FSS and recovery of funding already provided.

If it is evident that payment has been received from a wider business support scheme in respect of both private and HSC activity then it may be necessary to make an adjustment to the OC support payments.

7. Can I furlough staff?

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) is administered by HMRC and is not the responsibility of the DoH in Northern Ireland.

However, additional support should not be sought from the CJRS in respect of staff whose costs are being covered by the support payments to OCs.

8. Are there conditions attached to the scheme?

Yes, these are outlined on the e-application form and are listed on the HSCB website.

9. Is there an appeals process?

In light of the short period of time available it is not possible to design a scheme which covers the particular circumstances of all individual OCs.

In the context that the scheme is voluntary with a need to have the minimum amount of administration possible, it is intended that there will no appeal process available in respect of the level of monthly support payments.

However ongoing engagement with the industry will be key to ensure we have a scheme that is as fair as possible.

10. What if I am on maternity leave or sick leave?

If you are on maternity, paternity or sick leave, you are not eligible for the scheme, but your payment arrangements will continue. You should continue your maternity leave as planned.

11. Will payments be recovered?

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. This remains uncertain, will be monitored and further details will be developed by the DoH in due course.

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Version	Date	Author	Changes
1.0	15 April 2020	Michael O'Neill	