

Ophthalmic Services**General Ophthalmic Services Memorandum**

25 September 2017

**To all Optometrists and
Ophthalmic Medical Practitioners
providing General Ophthalmic Services**

Dear Practitioner

Universal Credit and Help with Health Costs

This memorandum gives details regarding interim arrangements for providing help under the Department's Help with Health Costs Scheme (HC1 form) following the introduction of Universal Credit in Northern Ireland on 27 September 2017.

Universal credit is the new single payment system which is being introduced in Northern Ireland from 27 September 2017 on a phased geographical basis. Universal Credit will replace the old income related benefits and will be a new payment for those people aged 18 or over and under State Pension age who are looking for work or are on low incomes. The aim is for Universal Credit to be offered in all Social Security/Jobs and Benefits offices in Northern Ireland by the end of September 2018.

Those individuals who will be in receipt of Universal Credit when it is first rolled out will have to rely on an application under the Health Service Low Income Scheme (HC1 Form) to receive any help with HS costs. The Low Income Scheme is means tested and successful applicants will then receive a certificate that entitles them to either full (HC2 certificate) or partial (HC3 certificate) remission from health costs for a 12 month period.

If the Universal Credit recipient cannot produce evidence of entitlement in the form of either a HC2 or HC3 certificate when presenting for HS care/treatment, the practitioner should still provide the HS care the patient needs and, as with other entitlements, should put a cross in the "Evidence Not Seen" option on the respective treatment form. As previously and with other entitlements, the responsibility will then be on the patient to declare that they are in receipt of a HS Low Income Scheme certificate (HC2/HC3), by ticking and signing the appropriate treatment/claim forms. Patients should be made aware of their responsibility to determine the accuracy of the declaration they make.

Providing Support to Health and Social Care

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As the new system is being rolled out in phased geographical stages, the old benefit entitlements will continue to be valid for HC where UC has not yet been introduced. No patient should have both however and, if they do, in-date Universal Credit takes precedence and the requirement for the patient to have Low Income Scheme certificate (HC2/HC3) to claim exemption or remission from costs then exists.

The Department has recently consulted on proposals to introduce an additional criterion in the form of earning thresholds for UC recipients as a means of passporting individuals to automatic help under the Department's Help with Health Costs Scheme. Full details of any changes that are likely to be introduced as a consequence of the consultation will be provided in further Memorandums.

However, in the interim, and until there is legislation for any new eligibility criteria for UC recipients, the Department will use the Health Service Low Income Scheme to offer the necessary protection to those very small numbers who will be in receipt of UC when it is first rolled out.

Any enquiries arising from this memorandum should be directed to the Business Services Organisation.

