

GOC/COVID/10

Date of statement: 12 June 2020 (updated 24 June 2020)

General Optical Council (GOC) statement on re-opening optical practices during COVID-19 emergency

1. This statement considers the opening of optical practices and the provision of eye care services as lockdown is eased. Whilst patients have had access to urgent/emergency and essential eye care throughout the crisis, there is growing demand for optical services to re-open to meet the backlog of need. It is important that the public has access to the full range of eye care services, as soon as and while ever it is safe to do so.
2. Opticians¹ in the **UK** were exempt from closure as they were designated as healthcare providers rather than retail outlets. The guidance entitled *Closing certain businesses and venues in **England***² included the following text 'Services which involve healthcare need to take into account any advice or guidance issued by regulators, the relevant professional body, Chief Professional Officers, or the NHS, as appropriate'. Similar guidance was issued by the **Northern Ireland Executive**³, **Scottish Government**⁴ and **Welsh Government**⁵.
3. This means that throughout the pandemic, registrants have been able to deliver NHS and privately funded eye care (including essential sight tests / eye examinations, spectacle dispensing and contact lens care) but only in line with guidance from Government, the professional bodies and the NHS. This guidance restricted provision to urgent/emergency and essential care only as defined in guidance in each of the four nations but as we enter this new phase of the pandemic this guidance has begun to change, leading to an opening up of service delivery.

England

4. NHS England published a letter on 17 June 2020⁶ setting out the next steps for delivery of optical services and the resumption of routine General Ophthalmic Services (GOS) in England. This is subject to guidance set out in a new

¹ This was the terminology used in the Government guidance (see next footnote for link)

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-businesses-and-premises-to-close/further-businesses-and-premises-to-close-guidance>

³ <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/coronavirus-covid-19/advice-businesses-and-workers>

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-1-business-and-physical-distancing-guidance/pages/businesses-and-premises-which-must-close/>

⁵ <https://gov.wales/coronavirus-covid-19-closure-businesses-and-premises-0>

⁶ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/publication/updates-and-guidance-for-optical-settings/>

standard operating procedure⁷ for optometry, which in turn refers to guidance from the professional bodies.

5. The standard operating procedure includes:
 - a requirement for practices to have the necessary infection prevention and control and personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements in place;
 - a requirement for practices to carry out risk assessments of the workforce; and
 - processes for risk management of care such as appropriate prioritisation and remote triaging of patients in line with guidance from the professional bodies.
6. Current guidance from The College of Optometrists⁸ is that in England we are now in the 'amber' phase of the pandemic when eye care should be needs and symptoms led, as determined by a clinician.

Northern Ireland

7. Northern Ireland remains in the 'red' phase of the pandemic as at the date of this statement. On 17 June 2020, the Health and Social Care Board in Northern Ireland issued a letter confirming the commencement of phase 1 of the re-establishment of ophthalmic services on 29 June 2020. This includes the main elements of routine eye care (based on prioritisation of those GOS patients most in need) but does not include domiciliary eye care provision. It has issued supporting guidance⁹ which focuses on the implementation of social distancing within optometry practices, preparation of staff, and the implementation of enhanced infection control procedures.

Scotland

8. Scotland remains in the 'red' phase of the pandemic as at the date of this statement. The Scottish Government's Optometric Advisor wrote to all community optometry practices and practitioners on 12 June 2020¹⁰ setting out the Scottish Government's plans to remobilise community eye care services in Scotland. On 18 June 2020 the Scottish Government announced that the criteria for entering phase 2 of its COVID-19 recovery route map¹¹ had been met and that community optometry practice premises could resume providing face-to-face emergency and essential eye care from 29 June 2020, subject to certain conditions being met. The Scottish Government subsequently issued a

⁷ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/publication/guidance-and-standard-operating-procedure-primary-care-optical-settings-in-the-context-of-coronavirus-covid-19/>

⁸ <https://www.college-optometrists.org/the-college/media-hub/news-listing/england-can-move-to-the-amber-phase-from-15-june.html>; link to RAG table

⁹ http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/pdf/PrimaryCare_OPHServices_OperationalGuidance_170620.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.sehd.scot.nhs.uk/publications/DC20200615OPHTHALMIC.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-framework-decision-making-scotlands-route-map-through-out-crisis-phase-2-update/pages/1/>

letter¹² on 19 June 2020 setting out in more detail the arrangements for resumption of face-to-face emergency and essential care from practice premises. Optometry Scotland issued a supporting letter¹³ on 19 June 2020.

Wales

9. On 21 May 2020, the NHS in Wales issued a letter outlining the Welsh Government's plans for a phased return to normal services across primary care. The Welsh Government subsequently published guidance¹⁴ on the restoration of optometry services on 31 May 2020. On 19 June 2020 the Welsh Government confirmed the move to 'amber' for optometry services in Wales from 22 June 2020 and have issued a clinical prioritisation tool for practices to use as services for patients resume¹⁵.

All nations

10. Practices must also follow Government guidance¹⁶ for businesses during the COVID-19 emergency period to ensure that patients, staff and the public are kept safe. This should ensure appropriate COVID-19 screening checks and all applicable infection prevention and control measures are in place, including but not limited to cleaning and decontamination, social distancing and appropriate use of PPE. The professional bodies (The College of Optometrists¹⁷ and the Association of British Dispensing Opticians¹⁸ (ABDO)) have also issued specific guidance for the sector, most recently around returning to practice and any adaptations that might be required.

11. Registrants should continue to comply with their obligations under the **Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians** and **Standards for Optical Businesses** subject to the easements in the statements available on the [COVID-19 page](#) of our website which remain in force.

¹²

<https://www.sehd.scot.nhs.uk/index.asp?name=&org=&keyword=PCA%28O%29&category=7&number=10&sort=tDate&order=DESC&Submit=Go&offset=0>

¹³ <https://www.optometryscotland.org.uk/2020/06/19/optometry-scotland-message-following-issued-of-pcao202010/>

¹⁴ <https://gov.wales/optometry-recovery-plan-covid-19>

¹⁵ www.optometrywales.org.uk

¹⁶ England: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

Northern Ireland: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-workplace-safety-guidance-and-priority-sector-list-published>

Scotland: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-1-business-and-physical-distancing-guidance/>

Wales: <https://gov.wales/taking-all-reasonable-measures-maintain-physical-distancing-workplace>

¹⁷ <https://www.college-optometrists.org/the-college/media-hub/news-listing/primary-eyecare-covid-19-guidance-amber-phase.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.abdo.org.uk/coronavirus/>

12. This statement is up to date as at the time of release but registrants should check for relevant updates from Government, the GOC, professional bodies and the NHS, as the lockdown continues to ease.