

GOC/COVID/10

Date of statement: 12 June 2020

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

1. We are aware that there is currently some uncertainty about when optical practices might be able to offer more eye care services, as more businesses are opening as lockdown is eased. We understand that there is growing demand for optical services to re-open to meet the backlog of need and that it is very important that the public has access to the full range of eye care services.
2. NHS eye care services are suspended for all but urgent, essential or emergency care, pending further announcements by the NHS in the four UK nations.

Re-opening of optical practices

3. Opticians in the UK have always been exempted from closure. Opticians were listed as an exemption in the guidance entitled *Closing certain businesses and venues in England*ⁱ which included the 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 also issued by the Northern Ireland Executiveⁱⁱ, Scottish Governmentⁱⁱⁱ and Welsh Government^{iv}.
4. In our view this means that registrants are able to deliver private eye care including private sight tests / eye examinations and aftercare appointments.
5. Practices must follow Government guidance^v for businesses to work safely during the COVID-19 emergency period to ensure that patients and staff are 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 personal protective equipment (PPE). The professional bodies (the College of Optometrists and the Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO)) have also issued specific guidance for the sector, most recently around returning to practice^{vi vii}.
6. We note that, at the time of writing, it has not yet been determined by the NHS when NHS services will resume, and therefore those practices working under GOS contracts will not be able to provide NHS services beyond essential, urgent or emergency care until such time as the position is clarified. It should be noted that there is also specific guidance^{viii} from the NHS in each of the four

UK nations for primary care settings, which will be updated as we progress through the COVID-19 recovery phases.

7. We also note that the Government has advised that non-essential retail may re-open from 12 June in Northern Ireland and from 15 June in England, and that the supply of spectacles and contact lenses and associated aftercare forms a part of the services our registrants offer to patients. To date, announcements about the re-opening date for non-essential retail have yet to be made in Scotland and Wales.
8. Practices which are open (or are looking to re-open following closure) must ensure that they conduct a full risk assessment before doing so, assess each patient's situation on a case-by-case basis before offering care, and strictly comply with their obligations under the *Standards of Practice* and *Standards for Optical Businesses* in relation to infection control and patient safety.

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

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

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

^{iv} <https://gov.wales/coronavirus-covid-19-closure-businesses-and-premises-0>

^v 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>

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

^{vii} <https://www.abdo.org.uk/coronavirus/>

^{viii} England: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/primary-care/optical-setting/>

Northern Ireland: <http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/3120.htm>

Scotland: <https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/web-resources-container/covid-19-guidance-for-primary-care/>; <https://nhsnss.org/services/practitioner/ophthalmic/ophthalmic-covid-19-update/>

Wales: <https://phw.nhs.wales/topics/latest-information-on-novel-coronavirus-covid-19/information-for-healthcare-workers-in-wales/180320-interim-primary-care-guidance-covid19/>