

## Frequently asked questions (FAQs) about COVID-19

### 1. What is the GOC's role during the COVID-19 emergency?

The GOC has received a lot of queries during this period and there is some concern/anger that we are not doing enough to provide advice and guidance for our registrants. We understand that registrants are frustrated that we have not been able to quickly define areas, for example, whether they are key workers or whether routine appointments should continue.

The GOC as an independent regulator cannot set Government policy on how to deal with the COVID-19 emergency or define how clinical services will be delivered through the NHS or negotiate contracts on clinical services. Government, the NHS and health authorities of the four UK nations are best placed to advise in these areas. However, we have been engaging on a daily basis with the professional sector bodies, the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care in order to clarify the Government's guidance and how it applies to our registrants.

The GOC's role is to ensure that services are regulated in line with our standards and legislation. During this emergency we will also ensure that there are no unnecessary regulatory barriers to the provision of clinical care in line with COVID-19 emergency guidance from Government and clarify any ambiguity in our legislation or rules. Please refer to our dedicated [COVID-19 page](#) for further information on what we have said in this area.

### 2. What has the GOC done to remove any unnecessary regulatory barriers or to clarify our legislation?

The GOC has already released several emergency statements for use during the COVID-19 emergency which relax some of our legislation or clarify any areas which have caused registrants confusion in the past. These are available on our dedicated [COVID-19 page](#) and cover the following areas:

- education;
- supply of spectacles and contact lenses;
- contact lens aftercare;
- hearings;
- Continuing Education and Training (CET);
- registrants working in different settings;

- CET provision;
- verification of contact lens specifications; and
- re-opening of optical practices

### **3. Why have you published the statement on re-opening now?**

We decided to publish our statement on re-opening optical practices because of the Government's announcement to re-open non-essential shops in some parts of the UK due to the peak of the pandemic having passed. We thought it would be helpful to establish the position with regard to whether optical practices had been allowed to remain open to set out the difference between healthcare services provided by registrants and non-essential shops, particularly given the recent announcements about the re-opening of dental practices.

### **4. Why were optical practices closed up until now?**

Many practices remained open to provide urgent, essential or emergency care by prior appointment only. The vast majority chose to restrict practice to urgent, essential or emergency care only in line with NHS guidance and guidance from the optical professional bodies to ensure patient safety and protect staff at the height of the pandemic, supporting the public health endeavour of reducing unnecessary interaction. Although NHS guidance is contractually binding for NHS funded services, the broader sector guidance applies equally to NHS and privately delivered care.

### **5. Can I open to deliver NHS services in England?**

As at 15 June 2020, the NHS position has not changed and only urgent, essential or emergency care can be provided through contracts with the NHS.

### **6. Do the GOC's other statements on COVID-19 still apply?**

Yes, our statements all still apply at this time, particularly as professional judgement will be required to reduce risk to patients and some care will still be delivered remotely where patients do not need to attend practice. The College of Optometrists have issued guidance which provides advice and recommends remote triage: <https://www.college-optometrists.org/the-college/media-hub/news-listing/primary-eyecare-covid-19-guidance-amber-phase.html>

We are regularly reviewing our statements and are always happy to receive feedback outside of the formal review dates indicated on the statements.

## **7. What do I need to do to re-open my optical practice safely?**

You need to follow guidance from Government, the NHS and the optical professional bodies on when it is appropriate to re-open your optical practice, particularly in relation to infection control and prevention, social distancing, remote triaging, and seeing patients who are shielding. The College of Optometrists in particular have published guidance which indicates a move from 'red' to 'amber' phase and provides advice and guidance about how to proceed: <https://www.college-optometrists.org/the-college/media-hub/news-listing/primary-eyecare-covid-19-guidance-amber-phase.html>

## **8. What is an essential, urgent or emergency appointment?**

This is a term used by the NHS in its commissioning of services and defined in its guidance on the provision of services to each country in the UK. This term was defined early on for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in correspondence which can be accessed on our [COVID-19 page](#).

NHS England published its own guidance letter on 1 April. In the prior absence of NHS guidance for England, we have liaised with professional bodies in order to help fill the gap, which resulted in guidance issued by the [The College of Optometrists](#). As with many elements of practice, registrants will need to exercise judgement in order to decide whether seeing a patient is essential in the circumstances of each case.

Links to Government guidance can be found below:

- [Scotland](#)
- [Wales](#)
- [Northern Ireland](#)
- [England](#)

## **9. As an optometrist or dispensing optician, can I go to work?**

Different businesses are opening different levels of services. If you are an employee, speak to your employer about whether you can go to work. If you are a sole practitioner or partnership, please refer to our [statement on re-opening optical practices](#).

## **10. As an optometrist or dispensing optician, am I a key worker?**

The Government defines key workers as frontline health and social care staff including volunteers; the support and specialist staff required to maintain the UK's health and social care sector; those working as part of the health and social care supply chain, including producers and distributors of medicines and medical and personal protective equipment.

For further clarification on whether optometrists or dispensing opticians are key workers, the [College of Optometrists](#) or [ABDO](#) will be able to advise.

## **11. Can I dispense spectacles and/or contact lenses by post during the emergency period?**

We have produced a [statement](#) to deal with this question, which is a matter of professional judgement for registrants. The statement encourages registrants to consider posting spectacles and/or contact lenses to the patient if there is no need to see them. If spectacles prescriptions and/or contact lens specifications have expired, it is for the registrant to use their professional judgement to decide whether to continue to provide spectacles and/or contact lenses without seeing the patient. The statement gives guidance about how to apply that professional judgement.

We've also produced a [statement on the verification of contact lens specifications](#), which will help ensure prescription contact lenses can continue to be supplied to patients remotely during the emergency period. It also provides guidance on exercising professional judgement and recording decisions during this time.

## **12. Can I see patients remotely during the emergency period?**

As this time it may be that registrants need to practise differently in order to keep themselves and their patients safe. While most registrants would not normally provide advice to a patient remotely, they may need to do so in order to protect themselves or the patient from unnecessary risk. We have signed up to a [joint regulatory statement on remote consultations and prescribing](#) which registrants may find helpful and have also produced a [statement on contact lens aftercare](#) for sellers of contact lenses. It does not compel a registrant to provide remote care if they consider it cannot be justified and undertaken safely; as with any decision taken in practice, the registrant should be confident that they can justify it, so that if their decision is ever called into question, they can defend it robustly.

## **13. Why is the GOC working from home?**

In line with Government advice to minimise the spread of COVID-19, all GOC staff are now working remotely instead of in the office. The office is now closed to visitors and all our meetings will now be conducted remotely. The GOC continues to deliver all of its regulatory functions during this period but may do so in different ways in order to minimise the spread of COVID-19 or to make it easier for our registrants to deal with the emergency situation. Please refer to our dedicated [COVID-19 page](#) which contains some emergency statements which outline any changes we have made.

#### **14. How can I contact the GOC during the COVID-19 emergency?**

Where possible, please send your enquiries by email. For a full list of email addresses within the organisation visit our [Contact Us](#) page.

If you have not been able to find what you need on our website or in these FAQs, you can call us on 020 7307 9483 and leave us a message with your telephone number and we will get back to you as soon as possible.

**Please note** we will respond to messages 9am-5pm Monday to Friday.

#### **15. Will the GOC reduce/waive the registration fee?**

The GOC's regulatory function to protect patients and the public still exists during the COVID-19 emergency, so we will not reduce/waive the registration fee. We have signed a [joint statement](#) about how we will regulate and we have published some [emergency statements](#) to help the sector adapt to the changing situation.

#### **16. My salary has decreased or I have been made redundant as a result of the COVID-19 emergency – I can no longer afford my fees. What can I do?**

- **If you no longer need to practise** and didn't complete renewal of your registration then you do not need to proceed further. At the point you wish to return to the register you can make an application to apply for restoration.
- **If your salary has reduced below £12,000** and you are restoring to the register, then you may be able to apply for a low-income fee. For further details visit [our website](#).

#### **17. Should I re-register to support the wider healthcare system during the COVID-19 emergency?**

We would encourage all optometrists and dispensing opticians to retain their registration in case there is an urgent need for their services in the future. NHS England has published guidance on [deploying the clinical and non-clinical optical workforce to support the NHS clinical delivery plan for COVID-19](#). We have published a statement on [registrants working in different settings](#) which includes reference to NHS England's guidance.

### **18. Will I need to complete my CET?**

It is still important for our registrants to maintain and develop their knowledge, skills and professionalism, even during this emergency situation. The overall current cycle requirements for CET will remain in place to be completed by 31 December 2021. However, the GOC acknowledges the difficulty which registrants will experience in achieving the annual requirement of 6 points and will waive this requirement for 2020. To ensure that registrants do not put themselves at risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19, we will automatically allow all registrant-led peer reviews to be conducted using video-conferencing technologies. All other requirements for registrant-led peer review remain in place.

For further information, see our [statement on CET](#) during the COVID-19 emergency.

### **19. Where can I access PPE?**

We are aware of difficulties in accessing PPE. Public Health England has updated its PPE guidance on 21 April to deal with shortages in supply, with some hospitals due to run out of PPE in a matter of hours. This includes re-using some PPE equipment such as gowns: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-infection-prevention-and-control>

Whilst we cannot provide advice on the clinical necessity of PPE in optical settings, the professional bodies have guidance on this area.

**College of Optometrists:** <https://www.college-optometrists.org/the-college/media-hub/news-listing/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-optometrists.html>

**ABDO:** <https://www.abdo.org.uk/coronavirus/>

**AOP:** <https://www.aop.org.uk/advice-and-support/clinical/clinical-governance/novel-coronavirus-covid-19-advice/common-questions-about-coronavirus>