

OFNC

Association of British Dispensing Opticians
Association of Optometrists
British Medical Association
Federation of Ophthalmic and Dispensing Opticians

Optometric Fees Negotiating Committee

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Chairman: Mike George Secretary: Ann Blackmore

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23 March 2017

Dear Hamid

GOS Fees 2017/18

Thank you for your letter of 9 February 2017 setting out the Minister's decision to freeze NHS sight test fees in England for the second year in a row, leaving them at 2015-16 levels for 2017-18. We understand that the values of optical vouchers, which are of course a patient benefit providing help to those on low incomes and to children who need spectacles, have also been frozen.

As your letter anticipated, we are indeed deeply disappointed at this decision. We appreciate the financial challenges facing the NHS and we understand that all parts of the health sector need to play their part in addressing that challenge. However, year on year our members have faced increases in their costs – largely as a direct result of government policies and contract requirements – which the government refuses to recognise.

It is particularly frustrating that the NHS sight test – which is one of the most cost effective parts of the NHS – continues to be underfunded, while at the same time NHS England is failing to make greater and more effective use of community optical practices to deliver wider primary eye care, which could help significantly to address the pressures on GPs and hospital ophthalmology departments and would provide better, more convenient care to patients.

On top of this, optical practices and practitioners have had to cope over the past year with the administrative and financial chaos resulting from the incompetence of Capita and NHS England in delivering primary care support services. NHS England was specifically warned about the over-ambition of this programme, so the chaos was entirely foreseeable. Despite the problems they have faced, optical practices have kept essential NHS services running, often at their own cost. We know that contract penalties have been imposed on Capita and will be looking now to government to develop proposals for compensation to the sector for this fiasco as a matter of urgency.

We welcome the small increase in the continuing education & training (CET) grant and the grant to train pre-registration optometrists of 1%. However this does little to mitigate the effects of the fee freeze and increasing costs.

It is to our members' credit that they have continued to provide a full range of services to patients across the country despite these challenges – but this will become increasingly hard to do. The real terms cut in voucher values will be particularly hard on many patients.

There is therefore no way we can advise the profession to accept such an offer which is clearly not in their long term interests and more importantly is not in the best interests of patients.

Copies of this letter go Helen Miscampell and Claire Osbourne at the Department of Health and David Geddes and David Roberts at NHS England.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ann Blackmore', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ann Blackmore
Secretary, OFNC