

Guidance on Universal Credit and Access to GOS

Introduction

Universal Credit is a new monthly single payment system for people who are looking for work, or on a low income. The Government's aim is to simplify the benefits system by bringing together a range of working-age benefits into a single payment.¹ Those who qualify for Universal Credit will be provided with a Universal Credit award letter from the Department of Work and Pensions bearing their name.

Universal Credit was introduced by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) on 29 April 2013. It is initially being trialled in Ashton-under-Lyne, Tameside in the Greater Manchester area. This will extend to three additional pathfinder areas (all within North-West England) in July 2013 – Oldham, Warrington and Wigan.

This pathfinder stage aims to ensure that Universal Credit is ready to go live across the rest of the UK from October 2013. The transition from the current system will be gradual and is expected to be completed by the end of 2017.

NHS GOS Sight Tests and Voucher entitlement

Claimants of Universal Credit (and their partners) will qualify for help with their health costs including NHS sight tests and optical vouchers.² As with other patients who qualify for NHS sight tests through benefit entitlement, the Department of Health has confirmed that claimants should provide proof of receipt of Universal Credit in order to receive NHS funded GOS sight tests and vouchers.

Completing GOS forms

Due to the gradual introduction of Universal Credit and the fact that it is only being trialled in four pathfinder areas, the Department of Health has not yet reissued revised GOS forms. Therefore GOS forms 1, 3, 4 and 6 have not yet been updated to include a 'Universal Credit' option. The Department of Health has issued advice that patients in receipt of Universal Credit should tick the Income-based Jobseekers Allowance box on the relevant GOS form for the duration of the pilot. As above, to demonstrate eligibility, patients should produce their Universal Credit award letter bearing their name (whether the recipient, partner or child of recipient) and should include their National Insurance number and sign the GOS form.

¹ Universal Credit will replace: income—based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Child Tax Credits, Working Tax Credits, Housing Benefits

² <http://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/opt-voucher-letter.pdf>

As contractors will appreciate, practices must in all cases ask the patient evidence of their eligibility for GOS. However should this not be provided by the patient, this should not prevent a sight test being provided. As with other entitlements, you should enter a cross in the *Evidence Not Seen* option (below the boxes for the claimant's N.I. number).

Practice Management Systems and e-GOS

A number of practices will submit their GOS claims through the Exeter system (via their practice management system). The Exeter system's input screen has been updated to include Universal Credit as an option, however is unlikely to be available on practice management software (PMS) until Universal Credit is rolled out nationally. At practice level, PMS users should select the Income based Jobseekers Allowance option for the duration of the pilot.

The paper versions of the GOS forms should be completed as above and submitted in the usual way.

Universal Credit and access to GOS services outside the pilot areas

The Department of Health has also confirmed that individuals in receipt of Universal Credit in pathfinder areas will be eligible to have NHS sight tests and access to GOS optical vouchers in other areas. Although receipt of Universal Credit is limited to pathfinder areas, entitlement to NHS services is not. NHS England Area Teams have been briefed about the implementation of Universal Credit and will accept it as an entitlement for an NHS sight test or optical voucher.

Ongoing updates

The Optical Confederation will continue to provide updated guidance on Universal Credit as and when further information becomes available.

Further Details

If you have any queries on this guidance, please contact your Optical Confederation representative body as below:

- ABDO – Katie Docker, kdocker@abdo.org.uk
- AOP – Geoff Roberson, geoffroberson@aop.org.uk
- FODO – Rebecca Sinclair, Rebecca@fodo.com