

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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David Roberts
Assistant Head of Primary Care Policy & Contracts (Dental, Pharmacy & Optical)
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25 May 2015

Dear David

Thank you for your email of 29 April, in response to mine of the same date, in which you explained that you were still in the process of deciding timescales for a decision on the OFNC's IT bid but that you were minded to await further evidence of benefits to patients and the NHS before funding any national bids and in particular were considering the extent to which a similar project in Greater Manchester would inform future decisions about funding such IT proposals.

While we understand the need for NHS England to ensure that any funding decisions represent good value for money, and that limited resources are allocated where they are most needed, we have a number of concerns arising from this ongoing delay to any potential investment in IT infrastructure for the optical sector.

Firstly, as our IT bid and our response last year to the Call to Action on Eye Health made clear, while our sector is keen to play its part in contributing to the Government's ambitions for the health service in England, in particular to the provision of more primary care in community optical practices, the shift of health services where possible from hospital to the community, and the desire to achieve a paperless NHS by 2020, none of these will be possible in optics without proper digital integration. That integration needs to be not only between practices and NHS England, but between optical practices and other parts of primary care, and optical practices and secondary care.

The lack of connectivity is already creating problems on a practical level. We are aware that, as part of the drive to achieve a paperless NHS, a number of NHS acute trusts have already removed fax machines. While on the face of it the removal of such outdated technology should be applauded, at present this is the only secure and timely means for optical practices to refer patients via the wet macular degeneration fast track pathway. The removal of fax machines without a suitable

replacement poses a real and present danger to patient safety and it would be remiss of us as a sector to not highlight this serious issue to you.

We also have serious concerns with the suggestion that Greater Manchester IT project may be treated as a pilot for wider investment in IT integration for optics. While the funding for the Greater Manchester IT project is timely, it is on a far smaller scale than envisaged in the national IT bid. Moreover, the Manchester project is highly dependent on a lot of pro bono work by the profession and its local leaders. This may work for Manchester where they have the incentive of being part of DevoManc but it is unlikely to work elsewhere or nationally in the same way.

There will undoubtedly be valuable learning from Manchester, but it is unlikely that we will be able to draw firm conclusions from this project for a national scheme (including the associated economies of scale that could be expected to be achieved on a larger scale) given the limited scope of project and funding available.

As you have appreciated, we are disappointed that to date our bid has not been successful, despite support from the whole eye health sector (not just optics), encouraging signs from NHS England and the support of the Minister. We know that resources are tight, but equally are aware that the funding we have requested is small compared to the return on investment NHS England could expect, and in comparison with that already invested in, or committed, to other parts of the NHS and primary care.

We remain hopeful that funding can be found for our bid this year, and if there is any further information we can provide to help support our case, please do let me know.

Copies of this letter go to Peter Howitt and Derek Busby at the Department of Health, and David Geddes, Andrew Laycock and David Brown 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