

Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer,
1 Horse Guards Road
London
SW1A 2HQ

3rd April 2020

Dear Mr Sunak,

Fairness in support for self-employed workers and employees

The Association of Optometrists (AOP) is the leading professional organisation for optometrists in the UK, representing over 17,000 members. These include employees, self-employed (locum) optometrists, and business owners. Our members play a key role in NHS healthcare provision, providing sight correction for the three-quarters of the population who need it, as well as identifying and treating eye disease and thus taking pressure off acute care and GP practices.

We appreciate the measures that have been announced to support workers and business owners during the COVID-19 outbreak and which have provided help and reassurance to many of our members. However, we want to bring to your attention the unfairness that arises from different provision for self-employed vs employed workers which is creating serious and entirely undeserved financial difficulty for many of our self employed members. We would urge you to take urgent action to address this unfairness and help those who need it.

Self-employed members

The issues our self-employed members have brought to our attention fall into three main categories:

First, optometrists who have not been self-employed for long enough to qualify for the scheme but now have no work because of COVID-19 will receive no support, whereas if they were employed doing the same work they would get 80% of their salary guaranteed up to £2,500 a month. This group will include newly qualified optometrists at the beginning of their careers and parents returning from parental leave. We recognise that the lack of sufficient evidence of income/profit makes the practical task of calculating the support for this group difficult. However, this should not mean that they are ineligible for any help. We would urge that something be established that takes into account previous earnings (for those returning to work) or, for the newly qualified, based on the living wage.

Second, self-employed people with incomes just above the £50K ceiling will receive no support whatever, whereas if they were a furloughed employee, they would get the maximum amount available under the employed scheme. This is leaving many of our members in a desperate situation. We recognise the need to avoid giving public money to the wealthy but our members in this

situation are hardworking people who often lack significant assets to see them through a completely unexpected long period without work, or for the most part insurance that covers this unprecedented situation. A solution that provided support capped at £50,000 for those workers who have been earning up to, say, £75,000 would provide a vital lifeline to our members in this situation.

Third, people who have taken a practical decision to route part of their income via dividends are being unfairly penalised for that choice, even if they can provide evidence that their dividend income is the result of work rather than unearned investments. Many have done this for years and have paid thousands in taxes during this time. They are now ineligible for assistance. Some form of compensation that works for this group is essential. This might be achievable through their providing evidence that their dividend income is derived from work.

Employed staff

While the Treasury provision has put our employed members in a better and more stable position than those that are self-employed, there is a group that has been greatly disadvantaged by the timing of the pandemic: those who have just changed jobs or were in the process of changing jobs. You have already heard from many people across the UK in a range of occupations who have had this experience: unable to take advantage of the furlough option from either their new or their previous employer. We have likewise received many messages from members in a similar position. It is essential that you announce support for people in this position who are able to demonstrate their previous earnings.

We do recognise that there will always be hard cases when a benefit cannot be applied universally. However, if the situation continues for a significant length of time the Treasury must look at the anomalies we have identified, to avoid decimating this part of the essential healthcare sector, which is an extremely cost-effective part of our NHS.

We understand this is a difficult time and Government is attempting to strike a balance between the competing needs that the outbreak has created. However, some of the people identified above are falling through the net and are unfairly disadvantaged by the measures currently in place. Now that the structures are in place to assist the majority of workers, the Treasury must urgently turn its attention to those who have been left out.

If you would like more information as well as the collection of evidence submitted by our members, please contact our Policy Adviser, Kathy Jones at kjones@aop.org.uk or 020 7549 2058.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Henrietta Alderman". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line that serves as a separator.

Henrietta Alderman
Chief Executive Officer