



Running an 'Open Session' at an Optical Practice:

GUIDE FOR OPTOMETRISTS

(England Version)



Central (Local Optical Committee) Fund

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(LOCSU)
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1. Introduction

This guide provides you with information and guidance to raise the profile of local eye health care issues with politicians, local eye health stakeholders and the media through an open session held at your practice.

2. Objectives of an open session

Primary

- To brief key local opinion formers (i.e. MPs, eye health stakeholders etc.) on the health benefits of regular sight tests and to highlight the high levels of avoidable sight loss which can be prevented through regular sight tests and screening services,
- To achieve far greater recognition of the importance of eye health and the need for regular sight testing amongst the wider healthcare community (e.g. GPs, community nurses & PCT representatives).
- To inform local MPs, PCT commissioners and GPs about the current range of services on offer, and also about the significant opportunity to increase the number of locally commissioned services, particularly glaucoma management services to improve access and relieve pressure on hospitals and GPs.

Secondary

- To demonstrate the value of local community optician practices.
- To raise the profile of eye health in the local media, which can be further utilised by the LOC in the future.

3. Key messages

To help ensure that the local practice and the LOC gains as much advantage from the open session as possible, it will be important to have three or four clear points to communicate to the politicians and other invited stakeholders. Having three or four structured points which you keep reiterating during the course of the visit will help the MP to recall the essential facts more easily in the future. Ahead of any open session it will therefore be crucial to work out with your LOC what the 'key messages' will be for the visit, and ensure you have some key facts to support them. These should then be used when talking to the MP and other guests, as well as the media. Some overarching key messages include:

- *There are currently two million people in the UK who are at risk of losing their sight and half of this is avoidable; we therefore need to make the general public aware of the need to look after their eye health and go for regular sight tests.*
- *Optical practices are convenient and highly accessible offering a growing range and choice of eye health care services to patients.*
- *Local community opticians are ideally placed to provide NHS patients with wider services (beyond the sight test) and are willing and able to play an enhanced role in eye healthcare, especially following the recent contract negotiations.*

LOCs should adapt and add locally relevant key messages, dependent on the status of the relationship between the LOC and the PCT and other health professionals. However, remember that your MP is unlikely to be a specialist in eye healthcare and we recommend that you keep your points at a level which a layman would understand so be careful not to go into too much detail as you will lose your MP!

The 'tone' for the open session should be a positive one highlighting the professionalism of opticians/ optometrists, the positive work done, but that there is significant under-utilisation of the eye health professional on England's high streets. It should not be an opportunity to complain about the local PCT or other healthcare professionals.

4. Target invitees

The following stakeholders should be encouraged to attend the open days:

- **Relevant local media** – this will allow journalists to get to know local opticians and their concerns. MPs are also more likely to attend if their visit will be reported in their constituency's local press.
- **Local MPs and councillors** – the open session provides LOCs and opticians/ optometrists with the opportunity to engage with local politicians directly, but it will provide an additional reason for local journalists to write about the open session. Remember that your MP represents you, regardless of whether you have voted for them, so you should not feel there is anything wrong with about letting them know about your concerns as a constituent; that is what they are there for!
- **Local PCT representatives** (and the Local Optometric Advisor) – the open session will provide opticians/ optometrists and the LOC with a great

opportunity to raise awareness of the service provision opportunity available to the PCT.

- **Other local healthcare professionals (i.e. GPs and community nurses)** – inviting local GPs and other healthcare practitioners is a good way of building positive professional relationships with them and to show MPs and the PCT that positive relationships do exist and can be built on in the future. It will also help present the local optician/ optometrist in a more professional standing.
- **Relevant eye health charities and patient groups** – if there are any local eye health charities in your area it is worth inviting them along so that they can join in the discussion.

5. How to go about setting up an open day

Your LOC will have selected your practice as an example of best practice in optometry. They will help you to prepare for the day and be present at the open session itself.

Outlined below is a *suggested* process for setting up the open session. At the end of this guide, you will find additional material and templates which will significantly reduce the amount of time needed to plan a session; materials and templates include:

- Core messaging for opticians/ optometrists and patients with FAQ
- Template invitation to local MPs (and councillors)
- Template invitation to patients
- Press packs for media attendees on the day
- Template thank you letters to MPs

Setting up an open session

1. Draft a letter inviting your MP to visit your practice (a template letter is provided at the end of this guide). Friday or Saturday afternoons, or Monday mornings are when MPs are most likely to be free as they are generally in Westminster at other times and host drop-in surgeries on Saturday mornings. Suggest a variety of dates and also give the MP an option to choose a date at their convenience. MPs receive many invitations so be prepared to chase up your invitation with a phone call(s) to get a response. You can call their office in either their constituency or at the House of Commons – the contact numbers will be on the MP's website.

2. Once a date has been agreed with your MP, ask some of your regular patients with whom you have a good rapport if they would be willing to also attend the open session and talk about their experiences. When thinking about which patients to ask, think about whether they have a good story to tell, for example, patients who have been visiting the practice for years and have watched it develop its service provision, or patients who have had an eye disease detected during a routine appointment and you have effectively saved their sight or even diagnosed a life threatening condition such as a tumour and you have saved their life!
3. Your LOC will send invitations to your Local Optometric Advisor, any other PCT representatives, GPs and local eye health organisations who should be interested in attending. Your LOC will also let the local media know about the event – you can help by liaising with your LOC chair to discuss potential newspapers and radio stations to target.

Preparation ahead of the open session:

4. Before the day, do some research into the MP's background so that you are able to establish a rapport with them before moving on to talk about eye healthcare. The MP's biography on their website is a good place to start to find out their interests and recent activities and a template is provided at the end of this guide to show you the types of things you should be looking out for. You can also contact the AOP and ask them to provide you with further information on the MP's background.
5. Prepare a short press pack for media attendees on the day – this should include an overview of the practice, a list of those attending the open session, supplementary information on services offered and a couple of paragraphs about the patients present. It is also useful to include contact details of the practice manager in case the journalist has any follow-up questions. A template has been provided to help you prepare this.
6. Revise the key messages for eye healthcare (see above and also the FAQ document provided for how to answer questions effectively). Remember that these should not be learnt word for word, but used to give you an overview of the issues you should be raising during the open session.
7. Rehearse what you want to say to ensure you feel confident.

8. Make sure you can provide refreshments on the day – it is likely you won't have enough cups to offer all visitors tea so bring some in from home if you need to.
9. Make sure all your staff are aware when the event is taking place, who is attending and what the key messages are.
10. Organise for one of your staff to be ready to take photos on the day. It is likely that the local press will turn up with their own photographer, but it is useful to have your own photos just in case, and you can also send them on to the MP's office to publish on his or her website. Some shots you should consider taking are:
 - a. the MP getting his or her eyes tested by the optometrist.
 - b. the MP speaking to the optician and patients – either together or at the same time. Also try to make it obvious from the background that they are at an optical store/ practice by including optical equipment in the shot.

On the day of the open session:

11. Below is a suggested timetable for the day of the open session.

XYZ opticians, DATE

PM	
	Practice/ store prepared for a visit.
13.30	LOC representative arrives.
13.35	Catch up with practice/ store manager and staff.
13.45	Case study patients arrive
14.00	Guests arrive
14.15	MP arrives
14.20	Introductions
14.25	Briefing of MP and other VIPs using the case study of patients as a way of introducing key messages into the conversation.
14.35	Photo opportunities
14.40	Media interviews
14.50	MP leaves
14.55	Media follow up with patients/ optometrist where required.
15.00	Media leave
15.05	De-brief with practice/ store manager.
15.15	End of session.

12. During introductions, introduce the session as an LOC event; this is important so that the MP and PCT representatives in particular do not feel that they are favouring your practice over others in the area.
13. If during the session you are asked a difficult question - don't try and answer it if you are unsure of the answer. Always offer to follow up with the answer at a later date.
14. Remember to include time during the session to take a photo of the MP visiting your practice. Check that they are happy with the photo you have taken.

Following the event:

15. Don't forget to send your MP and other VIPs a thank you letter for attending the open session. This should come jointly from you and the LOC chair and will allow the LOC to continue to build its relationship with the MP and hopefully the PCT, providing a further opportunity to talk about the work and potential of the optical sector. Attach to the letter a couple of good photos of the MP so that they may be uploaded to their website (if relevant).
16. Read the newspapers to see if the event makes the news!
17. Send a copy of the thank you letter to LOCSU, plus any coverage on the event which has appeared in the local press.

6. For Further Information

If you have any further general questions, please go to the LOCSU website www.loc-net.org.uk or contact Georgina Gordon on GeorginaGordon@locsus.co.uk.

For press or political support, please contact Heather Marshall or Sarah Lapham at AOP on heathermarshall@aop.org.uk or SarahLapham@aop.org.uk.

Research sites:

www.theyworkforyou.com

www.parliament.uk

www.eyehhealthalliance.co.uk

7. Glossary

Ministerial portfolio – an MP who has taken on extra responsibilities in government. Examples of ministerial titles are Secretary of State, Minister of State and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State. Parliamentary Private Secretaries are not ministerial appointments but as the role involves tracking backbench opinion, an MP with this role would have influence.

Prospective Parliamentary Candidate (PPC) – a candidate who is not currently representing the constituency in Parliament i.e. is not the current MP, but someone who is hoping to take over as the local MP after the next General Election.

Select Committee – a committee comprising a small number of MPs which have been appointed to explore a particular area or issue.

All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) – groupings of politicians from all political parties who meet to discuss a particular issue.

8. Key Messages and FAQ

This document is designed to provide clarity of the key points you will want to make to the MPs and media that will be visiting your practice during the open session.

Eye Health Key Messages

- There are currently two million people in the UK who are at risk of losing their sight and half of this is avoidable; we therefore need to make the general public aware of the need to look after their eye health and go for regular sight tests.
- Optical practices are highly accessible and conveniently located, offering a growing range and choice of eye health care services to patients.
- Local community opticians are ideally placed to provide NHS patients with routine appointments (beyond the sight test) and are willing and able to play an enhanced role in eye healthcare, especially following the recent contract negotiations.

FAQ

The following FAQ is to provide you with an idea of the kind of questions the media or your visiting MP may ask. Some of the questions you will be able to answer from your own knowledge; some have sample answers provided. These answers are suggested as a guide and it is not recommended that you learn them word for word. Wherever possible, include examples of your experiences of delivering services in your local community.

1. What services do you currently offer?

Indicate which services you provide then reiterate the key message that most opticians are well-located in the high street and are open at times that are convenient for patients, with virtually no waiting times.

If you are involved in any enhanced services such as a diabetic retinopathy screening programme or a glaucoma management scheme, these are good examples to talk about. If you provide a smoking cessation service this is another good example to demonstrate the range of services which can be provided in an optical practice.

2. How long have you been offering these services?

Indicate how long you have been offering these services then reiterate the key message that most practices are well-located in the high street/shopping centre/supermarket and are open at times that are convenient for patients.

3. Do other opticians locally offer these services?

Indicate whether other local practices offer these services. You can also mention other services such as the domiciliary eye care service and glaucoma management services, if you don't provide these services. You can also mention the role of the Local Optical Committee in bringing together local opticians.

4. What's the difference between an optometrist and a dispensing optician?

Explain the roles of the optometrist and the dispensing optician.

5. What experience do you have in delivering these services?

Optometrists undertake three years training at degree level, followed by one year supervised work in practice. In addition to that, we attend regular courses to ensure that our professional skills remain up-to-date.

We are ideally placed to help NHS patients with their eye healthcare – and given that half of all sight loss in the UK is avoidable, we are keen to play a greater role in the NHS. We are also able to offer advice on health living such as smoking cessation.

6. Who is paying for these clinical services? Are they free?

Outline who is entitled to the NHS sight test and what other eye care services are available on the NHS, i.e. diabetic retinopathy screening for people with diabetes. Explain that the NHS Sight Test fee is negotiated and funded centrally (i.e. at a national level with the Department of Health) and that other services such as diabetic retinopathy screening, glaucoma management schemes etc are negotiated and funded locally by the PCT.

With an ageing population there will inevitably be a growing demand for eye care services. With already overstretched hospital eye clinics and GPs, we are keen that greater use is made of our expertise to take the pressure off hospitals and GPs.

7. Why is your local MP here today?

Our local MP recognises the importance of good eye health care and is interested in learning first-hand about the current provision in his/ her constituency. We are delighted to be able to show him/ her, the range of services which we currently provide here.

8. Why is there a GP here today?

If you have a good relationship with local GPs it is useful to invite them along to the event as well. If they have been involved in a local referral scheme this is a good example to mention.

A sight test can pick up a number of potential health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol and the optometrist would then refer the patient to the GP for further tests. It's important that GPs and other healthcare professionals have an understanding of the importance of eye health and the range of services available in an optical practice, so they can inform their patients of need for regular sight tests and refer appropriately to other eye care services.

9. Template Invitation to Local MP

[Address of practice]

House of Commons,
London,
SW1A 0AA

[Date]

Dear Mr./ Mrs./ Ms./ Dr. *[NAME]*,

I would like to invite you to an open session at your local optical practice to see for yourself the eye health care available in your constituency. This event is one of a number organised by my Local Optical Committee at a range of practices across *[INSERT TOWN/ CITY]* involving independent practices as well as some of the more well known brands.

I will be inviting patients to the event so this is an ideal opportunity for you to meet your constituents and listen to their concerns about their eye health care and treatment. I have also been speaking to the local media who are very keen to cover the event and report on the work that is being done in *[INSERT TOWN/CITY]*.

I will further be inviting representatives from the Primary Care Trust, eye care charities, as well as a local GP to talk about the impact eye care services have had on the medical profession in the region. I hope this will be the start of a constructive debate about eye health and how to improve NHS care.

The event will take place at *[INSERT NAME AND ADDRESS OF PRACTICE]* and I would initially propose the following dates:

[SUGGEST DATES ON FRIDAY OR SATURDAY AFTERNOONS, OR MONDAY MORNINGS – SEE GUIDE]

Please let me know which of these dates is most suitable for you to come and visit us; alternatively, please could you suggest another date when it would be more convenient for you?

Two million people in the UK are currently at risk of losing their sight. Your support can help change that.

I look forward to receiving your reply.

Yours sincerely,

[NAME OF OPTICIAN HOSTING OPEN SESSION]

[ADD YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS]

10. Template Invitation to Patients

[Address of practice]

[Address of who you are writing to]

[Date]

Dear Mr./ Mrs./ Ms./ Dr. *[NAME]*,

I am holding an open session at my practice to show our local MP our work in looking after the community's eye health. I would very much like you to attend and talk about your experiences.

The event will take place on *[INSERT DATE OF OPEN SESSION]* at *[INSERT NAME AND ADDRESS OF PRACTICE]* and in addition to *[INSERT NAME OF MP]*, Primary Care Trust representatives, GPs and other organisations working in the field will also be attending. I hope that this will be the start of a constructive debate about eye health and how to improve NHS care – your comments and views are therefore vital to making this a success.

I have also been speaking to the local media who are very keen to cover the event and report on the work that is being done in *[INSERT NAME OF REGION/ CITY]*. As a result there might also be a couple of journalists present, who may want to talk to you about your experiences.

If you would like to attend, please could you arrive by *[INSERT TIME – SEE TIMETABLE IN GUIDANCE NOTES]* to give you time to meet the other guests ahead of *[INSERT NAME OF MP]*'s arrival. The session should finish by *[INSERT TIME – SEE TIMETABLE IN GUIDANCE NOTES]*.

If you have any questions about any of this, please do give me a call.

I look forward to receiving your reply.

Yours sincerely,

[NAME OF OPTICIAN HOSTING OPEN SESSION]

11. Press Pack Template

Practice Name:

Background: *[How long has the practice has been at this site?
How long has the staff have been working at the practice?
plus any other useful information e.g. awards received]*

Opening Hours:

Manager:

Telephone:

Email:

Address:

Website:

Overview of services available at this practice

- Xxx
- Xxx
- Xxx

Healthcare professionals attending open session

- MP
- PCT commissioners
- PCT Local Optometric Advisor
- Local eye health organisations e.g. Birmingham Action for Blind People, RNIB
- GPs

Case studies

Mr. A from xyz...

Mrs. B from zyx...

*If you have any further questions following the open session,
please do not hesitate to get in touch.*

12. MP Biography Template

These are the sorts of questions which you should look to answer in your research:

- **Which constituency and party does this MP represent? What is this MP's majority i.e. does this MP hold a safe seat?**
If the MP's seat is not safe then this makes it an even better opportunity for you, as a constituent, to make your views known.
- **Do they hold any positions within the party e.g. Secretary of State, Minister of State, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Parliamentary Private Secretary? How long has the MP held these positions?**
An MP who holds a specific position will have more influence within their party, even if their own area of interest is not health.
- **Overview of parliamentary career – has this MP shown an interest in healthcare in the past? Is this MP a member of any Select Committees or All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) of relevance?**
If MP is a member of the Health Select Committee or a health-related APPG, it shows that they have a clear interest in health and are likely to be more receptive to the idea of visiting their local optometrist.
- **Has this MP recently asked any questions in Parliament on health and in particular eye health? (You can find this information on www.theyworkforyou.com).**
Again, if an MP has asked questions in Parliament on health related topics, it indicates that they will have an interest in meeting with their local optometrist.
- **Overview of non-parliamentary career – has this MP done anything outside of politics which is of particular relevance to eye healthcare?**
MP who have worked in the health sector, or even better, the optical sector, should have a basic knowledge of the issues at hand.
- **Anything else of interest e.g. other half, children, hobbies**
This is useful for small talk and establishing a rapport during the initial minutes of the visit.

Example biography:



Nick Harvey MP: Background

- Nick is a Lib Dem MP and has represented North Devon with a majority of 4,972 since the 1992 General Election.
- He is currently the Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary of State for Defence, a post which he has held since 2006. He is also currently a member of the Select Committee for Standards and Privileges.
- Nick has held various roles throughout his Commons Career, including two years as Principal Spokesperson for Health during 1999-2001.
- He is active in asking questions in Parliament and in the latter half of 2008 tabled a number of questions on eye healthcare provision for the armed forces.
- Outside of Parliament, Nick's non-political career has been in communications. Since leaving consultancy Dewe Rogerson (now Citigate Dewe Rogerson) in 1991, he has been working as a freelance consultant.

- Married with two children, Nick has been the Vice-chair of the All-Party Beer Group since 2005 and his other hobbies include travel and football.

13. MP Thank You Letter Template

[to be sent jointly by optom and LOC chair]

[Address of practice]

[Address of who you are writing to]

[Date]

Dear Mr./ Mrs./ Ms./ Dr. *[NAME]*,

Many thanks for visiting *[NAME OF PRACTICE]* on *[INSERT DATE]*. We are sure you will agree that it was a very productive session for all concerned, and our patients particularly appreciated having the opportunity to meet you and let you know of their concerns.

From our perspective, it was also useful to be able to show you our work as optometrists, and to make you aware of why the general public need to look after their eye health and go for regular sight tests. As we explained on the day, opticians' practices are very conveniently located and so can be easily accessed by the community – optometrists are therefore ideally placed to provide NHS patients with routine services beyond sight testing. Furthermore, as a professional community, we are willing and able to play an enhanced role in an NHS fit for the needs of the twenty-first century.

Attached to this letter are a couple of photos which we took on the day; you may like to post these on your website. *[REMEMBER TO ATTACH THE PHOTOS]*. The event was also covered in the local press – we have also attached some of the coverage we received in *[INSERT NAMES OF PAPERS – REMEMBER TO ATTACH THE ARTICLES]*

Our colleague Heather Marshall at the Association of Optometrists (AOP) may be in contact with your office to follow up with further information. We hope this will be useful for you.

Thank you once again for your time. If you have any further questions, or if we can assist you in any way, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

We hope this will be the beginning of a constructive and fruitful debate on eye healthcare.

Yours sincerely,

[NAME OF OPTICIAN HOSTING OPEN SESSION + NAME OF LOC CHAIR]

[ADD YOUR EMAIL ADDRESSES]