

Association of
Optometrists

MAY 2026

AOP strategy 2026–2030

Our five-year mission to deliver visionary
change – in optometry, eye care and health

Foreword



We are delighted to introduce our strategy for 2026–2030, setting out our commitment to visionary change over the next five years. This strategy’s foundational principle is simple: to ensure the organisation and our members are ready for the future, and to advocate for the expanding role optometry should play delivering healthcare to everyone in every part of the UK. With these aims front and centre, we have identified four bold strategic objectives, and a roadmap which outlines how we will achieve these objectives in the next five years.

Our highly skilled profession has so much to offer, and so much to be proud of. Our optometrist and dispensing optician members continue to deliver outstanding care to the public across the UK – in community-based High Street practices, at home, and in hospitals. And the services that optometry professionals deliver have been recognised as an essential way to take pressure off GPs, A&E departments and hospital eye clinics. We know that the pressure on the NHS will only build with a growing ageing population. Too many people in the UK are at risk of avoidable sight loss, with the most common eye conditions estimated to increase by 25% between now and 2032. It is time to ensure the true potential of optometry is realised.

In our last strategy we said the future of the profession had never been more exciting, but that the urgency to act and shape the future could not be more profound. This remains true. That’s why in this strategy we are advocating for fresh thinking and bold

ambition – including the need to further optimise the role that our profession plays to support the NHS in the big shifts from hospital to community, analogue to digital, and sickness to prevention. We recognise the need to address and respond to the impact of changes to the way health and social care is commissioned and delivered, to new technologies, and to regulatory and legislative reform. It is crucial that we make sure that, on this journey, optometry across every part of the UK is optimised.

This strategy sets out the strategic factors that underpin our vision, our key priorities, and the projects we are prioritising in the next five years. It also describes the work we undertook for our previous strategy, and what we are proud to have achieved.

The success of our new strategy will be built on constructive and collaborative relationships with stakeholders across eye care – and beyond. And at the heart of everything we do is our members.

We remain committed to providing services that meet the highest standards; providing our members with the defence they need and support whatever their career path; ensuring our members are equipped to deliver safe and effective clinical care to the public; and help to ensure optical businesses can be sustainable, resilient and growing.

This strategy uses our strengths as an organisation – our bedrock of member support, our established services, our strong financial platform, our growing external influence – and sets out an ambitious programme of activity for the next few years. We look forward to working with everyone interested in the health of the nation’s eyes to deepen still further the role the optometry profession plays in the NHS and the wider UK economy.

**Emma-Jane Spofforth, Chairman
and Adam Sampson, Chief Executive**

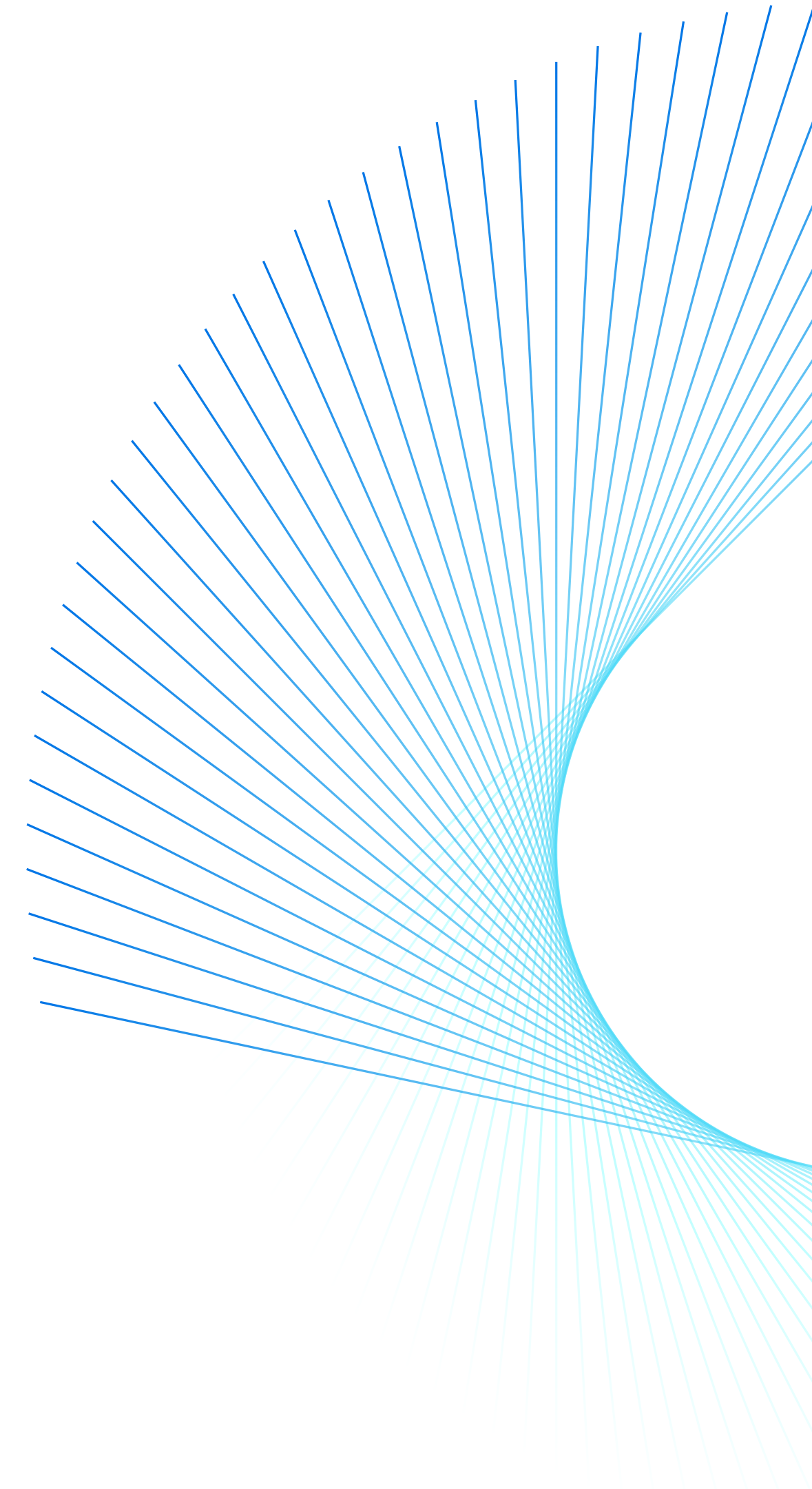
Executive summary

Our strategy comes at a time when the world in which the eye care profession operates is changing quickly. The UK economy, in common with much of the world, is under pressure and the financial future is uncertain. The speed at which new technologies are changing both the nature of work and of healthcare is ever-quickenening. And the current Labour Government has signalled its intention to reform the way the NHS operates, envisioning through its 10-Year Health Plan an expanded role for neighbourhood health and community healthcare providers.

In this world of risk and opportunities, it remains the AOP's duty and privilege to represent almost 20,000 eye care practitioners who are our members. It is our role to support them in their professional enterprises, to help them grow their skills and pursue their career goals, to protect them when they find themselves in conflict with their employers or the regulator, or have clinical claims against them.

And, at a more structural level, it is our role to seek to further the interests of the profession as a whole. This five-year strategy responds to the changes outlined: working to create conditions where businesses and careers can thrive; helping the profession navigate the challenges and opportunities represented by new technology (and making best use of that technology in our own internal business processes); and, above all, seeking to take advantage of the Government's commitment to making more use of community providers such as optometrists in the provision of healthcare.

We have 80 years of experience in supporting our members and advocating for the profession; this loyalty, affection and trust is a privilege – and one that must continue to be earned with current and future generations. As the world changes, we need to adapt the way we work, deepening and extending our services to support members facing new challenges and opportunities, and to update our policies to make an even more compelling case to those we are trying to influence. The work starts now.



The strategic drivers for change

Societal drivers

The UK's ageing population means that there is a growing need for eye care services. Over the next 10 years, the number of people in the UK with late age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is projected to increase by 24.4%, primary open-angle glaucoma by 15.9%, and vision-impairing cataracts by 16.7%.

The NHS is under increasing strain, with hospital waiting lists increasing and patient concerns about their ability to access GP appointments a growing issue. The Government has set out its intention to rebalance the healthcare system in its 10-Year Health Plan and is eager to demonstrate impact. However, with funding tight and conflicting concerns and pressures across the medical profession, progress is slow.

The UK economy – and that of the wider world – is beset by significant problems: weak growth, inflation, poor productivity and lack of consumer confidence. Despite the fact that UK taxation is at record levels, accumulated debt means that public spending is under pressure and consumer behaviour is cautious.

The speed of adoption of new technology, including AI, is transforming service delivery and consumer behaviour. Healthcare provision is being revolutionised by the arrival of new diagnostic and treatment mechanisms and the Government has put digital transformation at the heart of its NHS reform programme. At the same time, online retail is changing the face of our High Streets and virtual working is now standard employment practice.



The strategic drivers for change

Eye care sector drivers

Hospital ophthalmology services are under pressure from high demand and an endemic shortage of ophthalmologists, with [76% of eye care units](#) saying that they have too few ophthalmologists to meet demand. At the same time, some hospitals are seeking to increase the role of hospital ophthalmology and the provision of community eye care both by the use of new technological models and by establishing a wider hospital-run physical presence in the community.

Smaller optometry-run community providers are under pressure and there is increased consolidation in the optometry sector, with fewer practices owned outright by individual optometrists and more primary eye care providers also offering hospital care. More and more practitioners are working flexibly, with an increase in the number of locums.

There are increasing differences between the way that eye care is provided and paid for across the four nations of the UK. Wales has followed Scotland in offering a more comprehensive clinical eye care service in the community, leaving England and Northern Ireland with a less developed eye care offer, although there are now signs that the latter is preparing for an extension of community eye care services. Reforms to how optometric education is provided are also driving differences in optometric practice in the different nations.

New technology is gradually changing the way that eye care is provided. Patients can now be examined without the optometrist being physically present at the same location, and technology-led diagnosis is improving rapidly in accuracy, raising the possibility of significant increases in efficiency but also posing some very real ethical and patient-safety questions. In addition, the growing transfer of data between primary and secondary eye care – and the wider medical system – provides opportunities for more joined up patient care but also requires providers to consider their own role in data and information stewardship.

Changes to the way that the next generation of optometrists train and qualify are being introduced, which could lead to future questions about how to ensure professionals are best prepared for practice, and the profession has the workforce needed for a growing ageing population. At the same time, the demographic of students entering the optometry profession continues to evolve, which creates new considerations about how this cohort's career aspirations can be met. This in turn means employers and membership organisations such as the AOP must adapt to provide the support and opportunities that matter.

The regulator, the General Optical Council (GOC), is proposing significant reforms. Within its continuing professional development scheme, there is a proposal to move away from a points-based system to an outcomes-based approach that sets broad expectations for registrants. Alongside this, the GOC is seeking to leverage the role of business registrants, with employers playing a greater role in identifying and progressing the learning and development needs of optometrists and dispensing opticians. The GOC is also considering the effects of separating the sight test by time, place and/or person. This looks at two areas of practice: delegation of pre-screening or triage checks within the sight test, and emerging sight test models that incorporate teleoptometry.

Our achievements in the last five years

Our achievements in the last five years

In 2022 we launched our five-year strategy. We set five objectives. This is what we achieved.

#1

We said in 2022

We would ensure the future of our members in the profession is defended and secured.

And what we achieved

We produced [consultation responses](#) based on member insight and experience, working alongside external stakeholders. Our guidance helped to inform discussions about the development of proposed regulatory changes.

Our [co-commissioned health and economic data](#) demonstrated the value of General Ophthalmic Services (GOS), and the benefit of rolling out four clinical interventions nationally.

Our relationships with national employers have enabled us to engage them in addressing key workplace and employment issues, standards, and best practice.

We closely reviewed and responded to [government policy and plans](#) for healthcare regulatory reform, and produced regular policy briefings to explain what the proposal meant for members.

We undertook work to understand the longer-term impact of technology disruptors, including AI, for our profession and healthcare.

Our highly skilled and experienced legal and regulatory team responded to over 3000 member queries each year, including highly valued legal support and providing defence to members.

#2

We said in 2022

We would be recognised externally as the most influential voice in optometry, shaping the message we take to external audiences for the biggest impact including awareness and promotion of the sector in terms of what it can deliver.

And what we achieved

We completed [in-depth research](#) with over 3000 members to analyse their views of the future of the profession and how they expect their career to evolve; and carried out research with the public to explore their experiences of eye care and understand their wider health concerns.

We created high impact [media campaigns](#) to position optical professionals as primary care experts, securing broadcast coverage with the BBC, ITV and Sky, and in nationals including *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express*, *i*, and *Mirror*.

Our [opinion leadership](#) on the future of optics and healthcare has appeared in national titles including *Health Service Journal*.

We extended our [health policy work](#), focusing on the importance of providing access for lifelong eye care support for the public, including developing a specific older person’s strategy.

We built an external affairs team to steer [our lobbying work](#) and ensure cut-through with the Government of the day and opposition political parties – running successful events at party conferences and in Westminster.

Our achievements in the last five years

#3

We said in 2022

We would support members and the sector across the UK to deliver optometric services within the new integrated care commissioning and delivery model in a way that is financially sustainable, clinically safe and provides further opportunities and growth for the profession.

And what we achieved

We advocated the opportunities in the optometry healthcare space, including how to maintain a blended clinical and retail model that is sustainable for the profession’s future, and fought to defend against the threats.

We argued an evidence-based case for the best possible fee increases to GOS and CPD grants, and sought to influence optical voucher values.

We championed optometry as the first port of call for eye care, and made the policy case for more services to move into optometry.

We supported Optometry Wales throughout its negotiations with the Welsh Government, who agreed an ambitious eye care and eye health settlement that increased significantly the role of community optometry.

We maintained our support to Optometry Scotland and Optometry Northern Ireland on negotiations with their respective governments.

#4

We said in 2022

We would establish financial and workforce modelling and projections that will enable us to develop the ambitions and direction of travel set out across the strategic pillars.

And what we achieved

We produced modelling to understand the future size of the optometric workforce, based on growth projections related to university programme intakes year on year, and what is needed to provide care for a growing ageing population, as both currently delivered and with advancement in technology.

We undertook a review of what future optometric practice looks like including location, mode of practice and who pays to access those services (NHS versus private).

We engaged with optical businesses to start to build an understanding of how revenue streams can be increased to offset the pressures within the current model, and wider economic factors.

Our co-commissioned report, produced by PA Consulting, provided modelling showing the GOS contract delivers at least £2.1bn of benefits at a cost of £525m to the NHS.

We produced policy to show how potential national commissioning models can release capacity in GPs, A&E and eye hospital departments.

Our achievements in the last five years

#5

We said in 2022

We would use detailed workforce and economic modelling to ensure we have a business model that is future-fit.

And what we achieved

We deepened our [student engagement programme](#), ensuring growing year-on-year membership sign-ups across all UK universities offering an optometry degree, while also tailoring our support as the CLiP programme beds in.

We increased [franchisees' and practice owners'](#) understanding of how our membership package can support their needs and those of their practices.

We continued to enhance our [education offering](#) for members at every stage in their career, while remaining the single largest provider of CPD to the profession – via our in-person and virtual events programme including [100% Optical](#), and [Optometry Today](#).

Our partnerships with industry have enabled us to enhance our member offer, including [Optometry Today guides](#) for locums, and the practice team, as well as on myopia, contact lenses and glaucoma, plus online webinar days across similar topics.

Our [health and wellbeing support](#) has grown, through our Peer Support Line, and our mentoring programmes.

We created new [resources designed for the practice team](#), helping to develop and enhance our relationship with every member of the optical practice and the support we offer on their individual career paths.



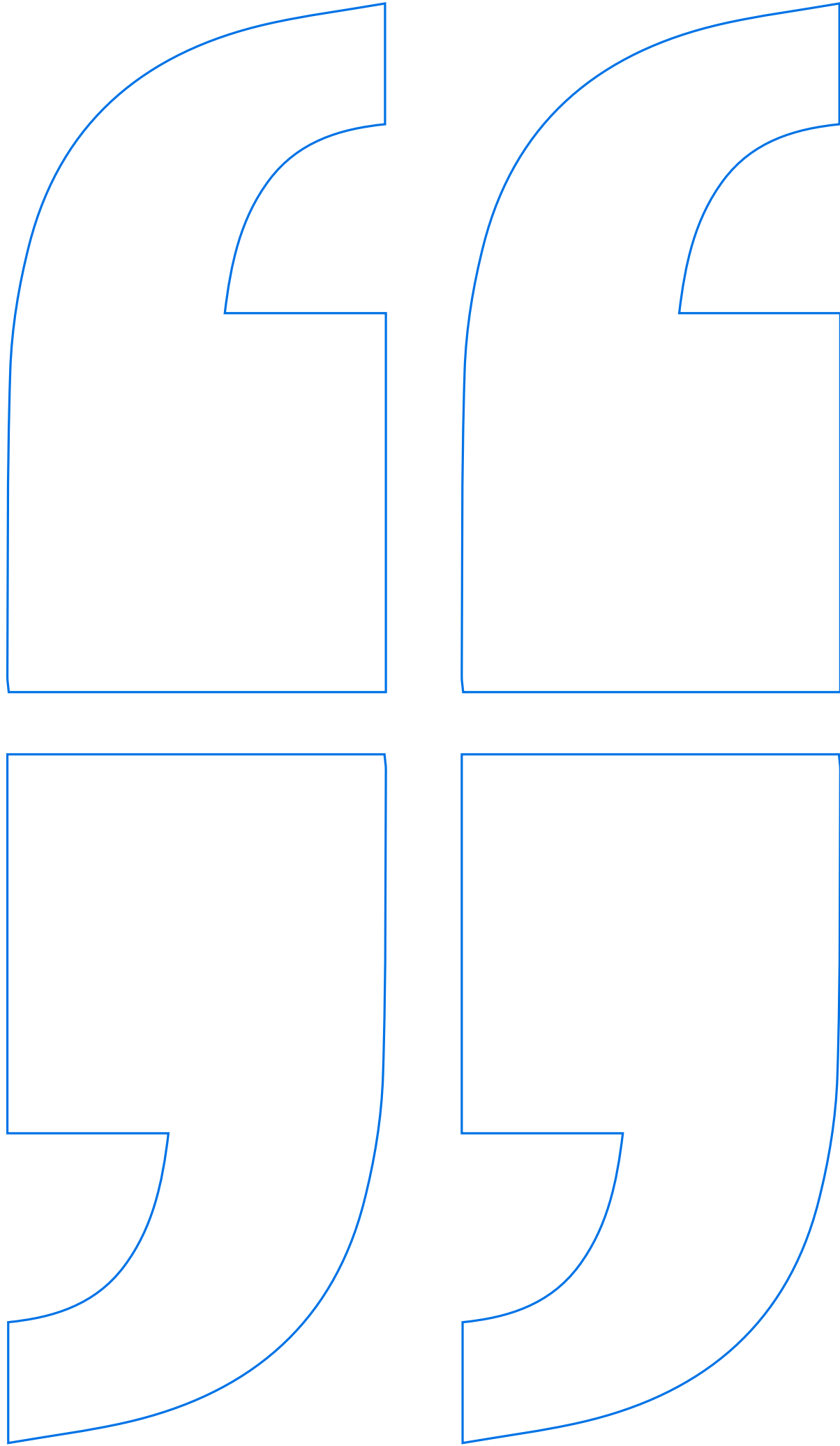
Our purpose and values



Association of
Optometrists

Our purpose and values

We have a clear purpose that guides everything we do:



We are the voice of the optical profession: elevating the work of our members, safeguarding their interests, and championing eye health across the UK.

We work for our members: promoting the profession and protecting current and future qualified professionals. To that end, we focus our work on three key areas:

- Representing and protecting our members and the work they do
- Providing support and educational resources for members whatever their career path
- Shaping the future of eye health for patients with our policy work and advocating for optometry-led care

Our purpose and values

The AOP is a mission-led, values-based organisation. Everything we do is defined by this commitment. We achieve our purpose by being:

Caring

We care enormously about our members, the profession, and the health of the public. We show this **care** and consideration through our welcoming and inclusive language, and our commitment to visionary change. We are a people-focused and values-led organisation. Our empathy helps us to see and understand the world through other people's eyes and brings the changes that are needed into greater focus. Our **caring** approach ensures the community our profession is built on stays strong, dynamic and resilient.

Bold

To make an impact for the profession and the UK's eye health, we are **bold** in our ambition, in the way we express our vision for the future, and our actions. We need to stand out to make a difference in a changing world. Our **boldness** comes from the deep-rooted support of our members, and the confidence we have in our expertise and our people. Being **bold** means we can successfully communicate our vision to those who can make change happen. And it means our members and the profession know we will always be **bold** enough to do and say what's right – no matter how difficult.

Resourceful

Our profession is complex and the world our members live and work in is changing. To meet members' needs, we need to be continually **resourceful** in all that we do. This means we use our deep understanding of the profession to find ways through challenges and create new opportunities for everyone in our sector. This **resourcefulness** enables us to constantly develop and enhance our services for members – reflecting the needs of today and tomorrow.

Influential

To achieve change, we need to influence. We need to inspire, to convince, to persuade. That means bringing our profession, as well as politicians, policy makers and the public along with us. That ability to **influence** starts with our knowledge and ideas and is built through our communications. When we put forward our policies, we understand what the challenges are and why we need to act; we work hard to identify smart solutions, with the evidence to back them up, and we measure our success. Our **influence** is based on our honesty and our commitment to building a better future.

Meticulous

Our vision is broad, aspirational, and built on strong foundations. This demands that we are **meticulous** about the details, as it's this attention to detail that gets us the results we need. People trust us because of the wealth of experience we can draw on, our outstanding level of service, and our determination to never leave a stone unturned. To be **meticulous**, it means we are always realistic. And through our communications, we seek laser-like clarity and simplicity in what we say.

Our five-year strategic ambitions



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Our five-year strategic ambitions

Our new five-year strategy is ambitious – but rooted in realism. It builds on our experience, knowledge and achievements, responding pragmatically and creatively to the sector-wide impact of new technologies, regulatory and legislative reform, and changes in how health and social care are commissioned and delivered.

We have four core strategic objectives that are built on our core values and our purpose. They will help ensure members not only have a say on how their profession develops, but are well equipped, supported and ready for the future of optometric care.

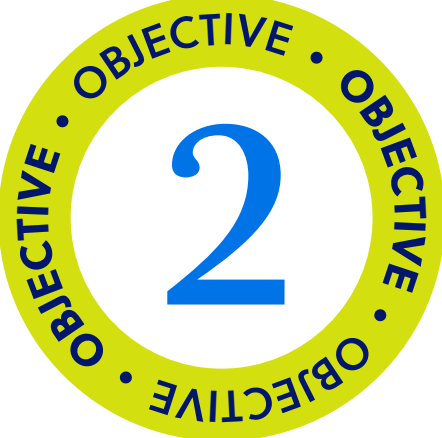
The five-year strategy focusses on four themes:



Support the clinical future of the profession



Deepen our member offer



Extend our external engagement and influence



Continue to build an organisation fit for the future

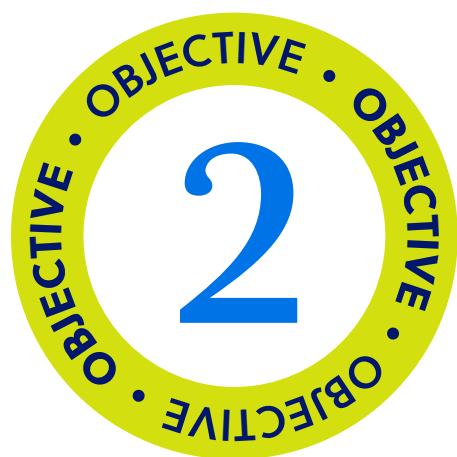
Our five-year strategic ambitions



Support the clinical future of the profession

What we will do

While the retail aspects of eye care underpin the economics of the optometry sector, the profession has clinical excellence at its heart and our members' aspirations are to extend the clinical reach of their work. Working with others in the sector, we will champion the clinical role the optometry profession plays across the four nations, supporting the clinical skills of optometrists and dispensing opticians and the delivery of services to meet patient needs and aspirations. We will take into account the fast-developing world of technological innovation, which will both support and challenge the traditional role of optometrists and dispensing opticians.



Extend our external engagement and influence

What we will do

Our mission is to support and defend our members as individuals and to promote the interests and the future of the profession as a whole. Over the past few years, we have established ourselves as the most influential sector body in optometry. We will now use that influence – both on our own and with sector partners – to secure a greater role for optometry in the reformed NHS which the Government is seeking to build in England. At the same time, we intend to deepen our influence in the other nations of the UK, working as appropriate with the sector bodies in those nations too.



Deepen our member offer

What we will do

Above all, we are a membership organisation, and members remain at the heart of everything we do. Building on our highly rated membership service and benefits package, we will extend our offer to meet evolving member needs. This includes providing appropriate educational services in a changing professional development landscape and strengthening our support for members facing employment issues.



Continue to build an organisation fit for the future

What we will do

Like any successful organisation, we are constantly looking to adapt to the latest challenges and opportunities, be they the changing nature of the eye care profession or the rapid pace of technological change. We will therefore continue to update and modernise our IT infrastructure to build efficiencies and improve our service to members. We will also continue to examine ways of growing our member base and giving maximum benefit to our existing members.

Our high-level strategic roadmap



Our high-level strategic roadmap

Key activities for 2026–2030 in support of our objectives



Support the clinical future of the profession

- Refining and enhancing our national enhanced services policy proposals – moving more services into optometry and delivering care closer to home across the four nations
- Understanding and influencing the impact of AI and digital services enablement and supporting clinical practice
- Understanding and influencing regulatory reform by the optical regulator in the best interests of members and the AOP



Extend our external engagement and influence

- Utilising our political influence and engagement to further the interests of optometry and build support for our national enhanced services policy asks
- Broadening recognition of AOP as a trusted and expert opinion leader in healthcare policy – across four nations – with our campaigning and advocacy
- Building support through partnerships and collaborations with stakeholders



Deepen our member offer

- Developing appropriate education services in an evolving professional development landscape
- Deepening our health and wellbeing programme to members and the wider profession
- Growing our engagement with dispensing opticians to achieve member growth
- Enhancing our engagement with optometrists – in training and qualified – focusing on supporting members’ career aspirations
- Delivering enhanced legal representation



Continue to build an organisation fit for the future

- Continuing of the business-wide transformation project
- Improving data management and analysis capability to inform business decision-making
- Making digital-first enhancements to member and non-member communications
- Increasing focus on income generation outside of membership subscriptions
- Continuing the office refurbishment programme

2026–2030

2026–2030

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Our high-level strategic roadmap

How we will measure the success of our key activities

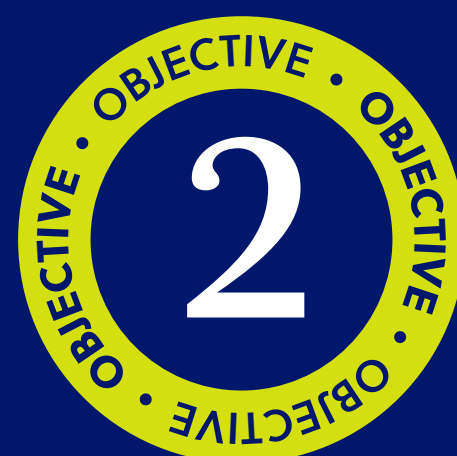


Support the clinical future of the profession

Engagement on campaign aims from Ministers and officials within DHSC/NHSE

Achieved realistic NHS funding into the sector for enhanced primary eye care services

Evidence that our work has influenced rollout of AI/digital clinical services, and GOC's reforms



Extend our external engagement and influence

Sentiment benchmarking with target audiences shows growing and visible support for our asks

Recognition of campaign aims from Ministers and officials within DHSC/NHSE, cross-party parliamentary support secured, and evidence of our impact on government policy and party manifestos

Maintain and increased share of voice and national/broadcast coverage achieved

Increase in support for AOP campaigns from partners including supportive statements/activity from sector bodies and external stakeholders



Deepen our member offer

Member retention and satisfaction shows growth, and cost/benefit analysis is positive

Services delivered are informed by member and non-member insight, leading to acquisition and retention improvement and KPI usage targets met



Continue to build an organisation fit for the future

Improved member service, efficiency savings, and better business intelligence

Improved member services/new channels in use

Greater proportion of income derived from non-member subscriptions

Refurbishment completed and achieving requirements/potential identified

2026-2030

2026-2030

2026-2030

2026-2030



We are
the voice of
optometry