



Association of
Optometrists

Annual report 2022

Promoting the profession, protecting the professional



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About the AOP

Our mission

Is to protect the individual professional, promote optometry and the interests of optometrists, and provide unrivalled support to all members

What we do

Assist our members to prosper, wherever they work

Promote eye health and the work of our members so they are recognised by the public

Provide unrivalled support for eye health practitioners

Defend, represent and protect our individual members

The **Association of Optometrists** is the leading representative membership organisation for optometrists in the UK.

We protect, support and represent our members throughout their careers.


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Highlights of 2021

Adam Sampson
AOP Chief Executive

When I started the role of Chief Executive in June 2021, it quickly became clear to me that the profession's response to the pandemic over the previous 15 months had been nothing short of exemplary, and I pay tribute to all of our members for their individual contributions to making sure the nation's eye health was protected.

2021 was another tumultuous and challenging year for optometry; a year on from the traumatic events of 2020, practice in the UK continued to be shaped by the pandemic. The AOP's priority was to support our members through ongoing COVID-19-related changes and concerns, particularly around safe practice and employment-related issues.

As the effects of the pandemic receded and members were able to see more patients, our legal and regulatory team saw enquiries about patient complaints, member concerns



about workplace risk assessments, and pre-registration contract queries return to more typical volumes.

Our innovative education offering was delivered almost entirely online, giving all our practising members the opportunity to access quality education and reach their CET point requirement as the GOC's three-year cycle came to a close. Over 8000 exams in OT's CET Survival Guide were taken by members.

We also launched a new Mentoring Programme, initially for newly-qualified members, offering them the opportunity to work with an experienced, qualified professional in the sector to set their development goals, grow skills and confidence and gain professional insights.

Lastly, I would like to express gratitude to Henrietta Alderman as the outgoing Chief Executive for her robust leadership of the AOP for the past eight years.

Dr Julie-Anne Little
AOP Chairman



In 2021, representation of our members remained a core area of focus for the AOP. Our policy team and Council sought out and listened to members' views, responding to 15 public consultations on their behalf.

This included the GOC's proposed extension of temporary changes to the *Optometry Handbook*, which set out our recommendations based on our student, pre-registration and academic members' feedback on how the learning experience during the pandemic could be improved, and how its knock-on impacts could be managed. We also surveyed our members for their views on the government's proposal for mandatory COVID-19 and flu vaccinations as a condition for participating in patient-facing care.

We worked with our optical and other primary care partners to influence consideration of the

Health and Care Bill, demanding that optical practices and other primary care providers have a voice at all levels of the NHS in England and our members' vital contribution to the population's health is recognised. Our work as a member of the Optometric Fees Negotiating Committee also included securing an increase in the GOS sight test fee in England, while continuing to push for more support.

With the aim of broadening the influence of the AOP, our Strategy for Optometry sets out our vision for the future of the profession across the UK. Launched in June, the strategy is aimed at elected representatives, NHS commissioners and other key decision makers, and highlights the key role optometry plays in the NHS, the scope for it to do even more in areas where optometrists are qualified and equipped, and how this can also relieve pressure on overstretched hospital eye and emergency departments. We will continue to develop our work in this important area in 2022.

Protecting our members



In 2021 the legal and regulatory department saw a return to pre-pandemic numbers of enquiries and a more typical mix of new matters, as the volume and pace of COVID-19-specific enquiries naturally slowed. We saw an increase in requests for support from our student members, especially those navigating pre-registration contract negotiations.

As the sector returned to a more normal way of working, the number of eye examinations increased. Inevitably the number of patient complaints and GOC investigations also rose, along with the need for advice and support for our members on common issues and in more traditional arenas.

However, the impact of COVID-19 was still being felt in the employment arena, in particular with an increased number of enquires related to workplace risks assessments during pregnancy, part-time or weekend working, and changes to individual contracts.

With public health guidance continuing to change frequently during the year, we maintained a strong focus on keeping our member guidance on issues such as self-isolation, vaccination and face covering as up-to-date as possible.



NEW
in 2021

PROFESSIONAL DISCIPLINE GUIDANCE

- We developed new step-by-step member guidance on GOC cases, investigations and hearings, explaining what happens and how we support our members
- We delivered a new online lecture covering Fitness to Practise, dishonesty and common mistakes, to students across the UK



EMPLOYMENT LAW GUIDANCE

- Support for pre-registration and newly-qualified members
- Advice for employers on varying employees' and workers' terms and conditions
- Guidance on menopause and work, and a template menopause policy
- Expanded suite of editable HR template policies and template letters to assist our employer members in drawing up suitable letters

EIGHT MEMBER CASE STUDIES

Eight new anonymous member case studies including:

- Advice for a pre-registration optometrist on contract changes after furlough
- A positive outcome for a member on maternity leave making a flexible working request
- An employer accused of unfair dismissal and disability discrimination supported to find an amicable resolution
- A locum defended after an allegation of dishonesty



High Court win against GOC

We were pleased to win a High Court case brought by our professional discipline team against the GOC, where a registrant was served notice of an interim order by email and this was found to be unlawful.

Family rights
employment
queries up by

↑ 177%

Pre-registration
employment
queries up by

↑ 121%

Disciplinary related
employment
queries up by

↑ 97%

GOS claim
queries
up by

↑ 21%



Education

“”

Our education programme delivered almost entirely online with 63 education sessions facilitating members to reach their CET points requirement for the 2019–2021 cycle.

63 education sessions delivered

12,661 CET points uploaded

19,927 sessions booked

HOAC virtual

A dedicated day of online education for those currently working in a hospital environment, or considering it. Supported by Menicon, No7 Contact Lenses and Optelec.

Attended by **1600** practitioners

Infection control and prevention certificate: a 2021 update

In association with *Optometry Today* (OT) and supported by Johnson & Johnson Vision. The CET-accredited lecture and certificate was designed by our clinical team to give members and their patients confidence and reassurance in practice.

1600 members passed this CET-accredited exam

Optometry Today

59,710 online CET exams taken

8156 took the CET Survival pack

36 CET articles published

8 CET videos released



Two free supplements sent to all members:



Practice Team Guide: Taking the next step

In partnership with Johnson & Johnson Vision



The Myopia Guide: Your future in focus

In partnership with CooperVision

Health and wellbeing

Mentoring Programme

Our mentoring programme launched in September 2021 to support newly-qualified optometrist members, and then extended to pre-registration optometrist members.

73 mentors registered

Health and wellbeing webinars

We ran four webinars designed to develop communication skills, confidence and resilience in the workplace.

Attended by **1269** members

Peer Support Line, for anyone in optics: 0800 870 8401

293 calls were received in 2021

The average call duration was **28** minutes

There was a **33%** increase in calls relating to mental health



Menopause support

New online resources to help members and their employers prepare for and navigate the challenges of the menopause.



Freshers activities

- All universities offering an optometry degree benefited from an online freshers' presentation

COVID-Generation series

- OT ran two special reports that investigated the effect the pandemic could have on students and pre-registration optometrists entering the profession. The [COVID-Generation series](#) can be found online

Disruption to OSCEs and pre-registration placements

- We listened to our pre-registration members' concerns over last-minute changes to the January OSCEs and pressed the College of Optometrists to take mitigating steps for the March OSCEs
- In September we asked students taking their final assessment or with a pre-registration placement to complete our survey to help us better understand the challenges facing students and pre-reg optometrists

Representing our members



COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to dominate our members' lives both personally and within clinical practice. We continued to advocate for members with the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England and Improvement through our membership of the Optometric Fees Negotiating Committee. We continued to listen to members and input into policy in this space, for example in the use of PPE and infection control.

Council elections and appointments

Over several years we've found that we get more applications for the appointed positions on Council and fewer members standing for the elected seats. Respecting this apparent preference, we reduced the number of elected positions on Council in 2021 and increased the number of appointed positions. This has resulted in a more diverse Council, with people who represent all the modes of practice and work settings of our members.

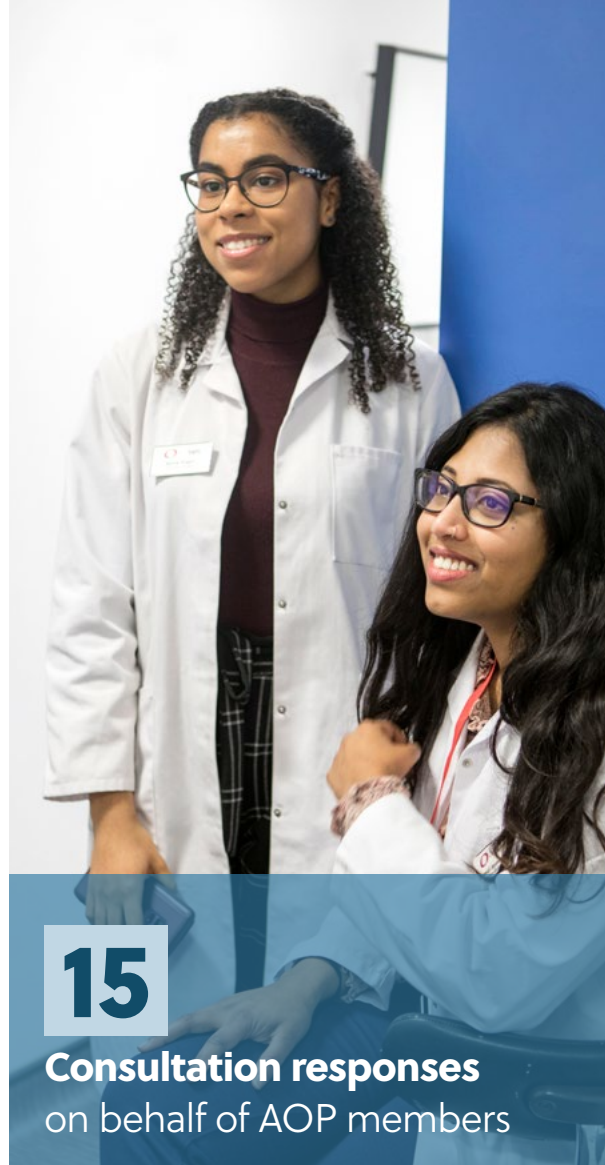
Representing your views

We responded to 15 consultations, from NHS England, the GOC, the government and others. Three of the most significant were:

The GOC's final consultations on its Education Strategic Review, in which we highlighted the significant risks attached to the GOC's policy approach, including funding uncertainties and potential disruption for universities and placement providers. We emphasised the need for trainees' clinical experience to be properly funded and supervised, drawing on the findings of a survey of AOP pre-registration optometrists and supervisors, which showed that many members felt the support they were given was not always adequate.

The government consultation on making vaccinations for COVID-19 and flu mandatory as a condition for participating in patient-facing care. We surveyed our members for their views on the topic before we responded to the consultation. The majority were in favour of mandatory vaccination, although the issue remained and remains controversial.

We welcomed the GOC's proposal to extend the modification of its education requirements through temporary changes to the Optometry Handbook and supervision policy, to allow optometry courses and pre-registration placements to be delivered in a safe and effective way during the pandemic. Extending the temporary changes would help to manage the ongoing impact of the pandemic on students, pre-reg trainees, education providers and placement providers and would be vital to providing as much certainty as possible to students.



15

Consultation responses
on behalf of AOP members

Council and Policy Committee

Throughout 2021 we continued to rely on members to inform what we said to government departments and the GOC. Council and Policy Committee continued to meet online via Zoom in 2021, which worked well, particularly for members who were shielding or who could not leave home for family reasons.

Policy statements

We issued a joint statement: [The Health and Care Bill must give primary care a seat at the table](#) on commissioning, with partners across primary care. The statement called on government to ensure wider primary care has a voice at all levels of the new NHS system,

starting with Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) set to be handed responsibility for commissioning hospital and community care and the primary care contract management functions.

We worked with other optical bodies to publish a set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on the [Electronic eye care Referral Service programme](#) (EeRS) and IT connectivity for the two-way transfer of patient and clinical data.

We also launched our [Strategy for Optometry](#) — a plan setting out a vision for the future of the profession across the UK. Aimed at MPs and other decision makers, it describes how optometrists are qualified and equipped to deliver more NHS work and how this can also relieve pressure on overstretched hospital eye and emergency departments.



PUTTING THE PROFESSION IN THE SPOTLIGHT...

300

Print and online articles
in national, regional
and trade press

15

Broadcast interviews
with our clinical experts

100,000+

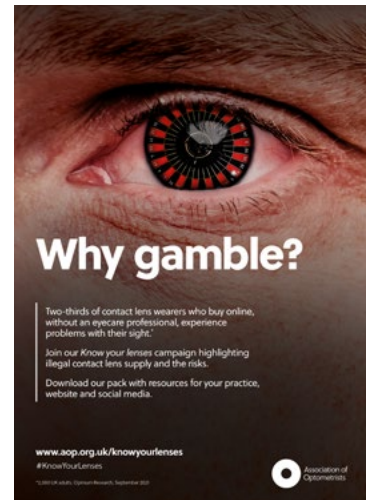
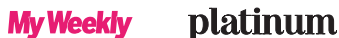
Audience reach on nearly
80 pieces of coverage

Representing our members in the media

We continued to support members with crucial COVID-19-related news and topical campaigns throughout the year.

We secured national coverage on *Radio 4* and in *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and *Yahoo!*, discussing how lockdown has impacted the UK's eye health; coverage from a range of UK news outlets surrounding the new DVLA proposals for drivers over 70, including the *Daily Mail*, *This is Money* and *MSN*, as well as eye care tips coverage in lifestyle publications like *My Weekly*, *Platinum* magazine and more.

Our summer consumer-facing campaign [SPF for your eyes](#) secured coverage across national and regional outlets including the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and *The Sun*. While additional activity included launching our [Know your lenses](#) campaign around the illegal supply of contact lenses online that was picked up by *Which?* magazine among others. Plus we launched our winter driving tips as part of our annual [Don't swerve a sight test](#) campaign.



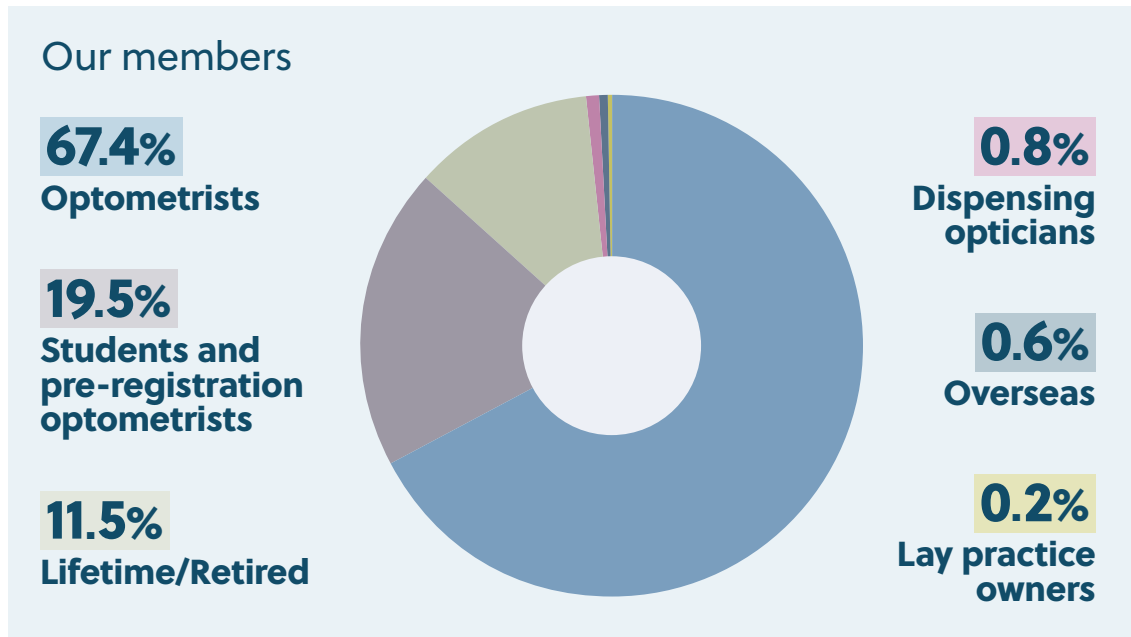
Membership



Our qualified membership grew by just under 3% in 2021, following a relatively static year in membership numbers reflecting the impact of the pandemic in 2020. AOP membership remains highly valued with over 96% of members renewing at the end of the year.

With the resumption of OSCEs, the number of members moving onto our newly-qualified grade started to return to pre-pandemic levels and we welcomed 444 members onto the grade.

The pandemic continued to create uncertainty for some and a greater number of members utilised the career break membership option, allowing them to take the year out of practice whilst retaining access to all of our valued guidance, keeping them up to date and ready for their return to work.





Our Board sets the strategic direction of the AOP, ensuring strong governance and management of the organisation.



Dr Julie-Anne Little
Chairman



Michael George
Past Chairman



Michael Fegan
Lay member



Gordon Ilett
Appointed optometrist member



Tushar Majithia
Elected by AOP Council



Emma Spofforth
Elected by AOP Council



Dharmesh Patel
Elected by AOP Council



Fatima Nawaz
Elected by AOP Council



Jeremy Holmes
Lay member

Copies of the full annual financial statements, the auditor's report and the directors' report are available for members to download from our website.

Promoting the profession, protecting the professional