



Registrant Survey 2016

Final Report

The General Optical Council

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Enventure Research, an independent research agency, was commissioned by the General Optical Council (GOC) to undertake a registrant survey as part of its commitment to gain an up-to-date understanding of the views of its registrants in order to continue to support them in protecting patients and the public.

The survey which was carried out in the summer of 2016 focused on registrants' perceptions of the GOC - in terms of the services that they deliver and the role that they play in regulating the optical professions - as well as the experience of registrants in the workplace, looking at the challenges that they face and their views on the future of the optical professions.

In total, **4,139 survey responses** were received from 25,929 registrants who were invited to take part, representing a 16% response rate. The returned data was weighted to be representative of the GOC registrant population.

Following the survey, five focus groups and 23 in depth interviews were conducted as part of the qualitative research in order to explore some topics and issues in greater depth. The qualitative research was stratified across the UK to ensure representation, including both urban and rural locations. In total 57 participants took part in the qualitative research.

Part One: Registrants' views on the role and performance of the General Optical Council

Perceptions of the GOC's role

The GOC wanted to understand more about how registrants perceive the GOC and its role. Survey respondents were shown a list of statements and asked the extent to which they agreed that each one represented the role of the organisation. The majority of survey respondents agreed the GOC's role was to protect patients and the public (94%), discipline optical professionals who fail to meet the standards of the profession (96%) and to drive high standards of patient care (93%). However, three quarters of respondents (73%) also agreed that the organisation's role was to represent the optical professions, which is not the role of the GOC.

In line with the survey findings, the majority of focus group and interview participants thought that the role of the GOC was to protect patients and the public, discipline optical professionals who fail to meet the standards of the profession and to drive high standards of patient care.

In relation to whether the GOC represents the profession, amongst focus group and interview participants, opinion was split, reflecting the survey findings. Some felt that if the GOC represented the profession this would lead to a conflict of interest in terms of fulfilling its other roles and others said that the GOC needed to represent the profession to be effective in its role of protecting patients and the public.

Perceptions of how well the GOC is carrying out its role

A number of different statements were asked in the survey to assess how well registrants think the GOC is carrying out its role. The majority of respondents (83%) agreed that the GOC sets fair standards for the profession and two-thirds (68%) agreed that the organisation enables registrants to develop their roles for the benefit of patients.

However, there was less agreement amongst survey respondents that the GOC listens to the views of registrants (51%) and is fair when taking action through the fitness to practise process (48%).

A large proportion of survey respondents (40%) said they did not know if they agreed that the GOC is fair when taking action through the fitness to practise process, indicating that many registrants do not have much experience of the process or knowledge of how it works. Focus group and interview participants who had experience of the process felt that the GOC could do more to support registrants about whom a concern had been raised, given the effect it has on individuals.

Views on the GOC registration fee

All GOC registrants are required to pay an annual registration fee. Just over half (52%) of survey respondents agreed that the GOC charges reasonable registration fees. Many focus group and interview participants, however, did not feel that the registration fee was reasonable, as they struggled to see the value for money that the fee provides, and many suggested that the GOC could provide more information about how the fees are set and how the money is spent.

The GOC's Standards of Practice

The GOC's new Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians came into effect on 1 April 2016, replacing the previous Code of Conduct for Individual Registrants.

Overall, the majority (86%) of survey respondents were confident in their ability to meet the new standards, and only a handful were not aware of the revision (2%) or had not read them yet (7%). In terms of understanding the new standards, 42% rated their understanding as 'excellent' or 'very good' and a further 50% rated them as 'good'.

Only around a fifth (17%) said they had made changes to their practice following the introduction of the new standards. In terms of differences by country, those from England and Scotland were more likely to have changed their practice (both 17%) than respondents from Northern Ireland (10%) and Wales (9%).

Focus group and interview participants confirmed the survey results as they largely felt confident in their understanding of the standards and that the new standards reflected their everyday practice. A few participants provided examples of how their practice had changed, for example, a requirement to have an optometrist on site when dispensing lenses and frames and the new standards regarding social media and record keeping.

I like them because it's pretty unambiguous what's expected of you. With the old ones, not everyone would see them the same way. (Dispensing Optician from Cardiff)

Registrant's experience of the Continuing Education and Training (CET) scheme

The GOC's Continuing Education and Training (CET) scheme ensures that all fully qualified registrants keep their skills and knowledge up-to-date. GOC registrants must undertake CET activities and earn a minimum number of points over a three year cycle in order to remain on the GOC register.

Overall there was a fairly even split as to whether survey respondents found the CET scheme challenging or not. Just over half, 51%, said they found the 2013-15 CET cycle either 'very' or 'quite' challenging, compared to 45% who said they found it 'not very' challenging or 'not at all challenging'.

The majority of respondents, almost two-thirds (65%), felt that their practice had improved as a result of undertaking CET in the last cycle (2013-15).

I like the interactive CET. Peer discussion is actually really good...They are really useful. (Optometrist from Edinburgh)

In line with the survey findings, there was a fairly even split between those who found achieving CET points challenging and those who found it easy. There was a suggestion that those working for some large chains found it easy to achieve points as they were given many opportunities by their employer, and those working for independents and as self-employed locums found it more challenging to find the time and opportunities to achieve CET. However, many focus group and interview participants felt there were benefits to undertaking CET such as keeping up-to-date with current good practice, learning new skills and plugging gaps in knowledge. The CET scheme was thought to be particularly beneficial for those who qualified some time ago as it helps to keep them up-to-date with current trends and practise.

In terms of the process for submitting CET points, the survey findings were positive, with nearly three quarters (74%) saying that they found it easy to submit and manage their CET records using the My CET area of the GOC website. The focus group and interview participants confirmed the survey results and said they found the CET system easy to use, however some suggested that the administrative side of recording and logging CET points could be improved as it can be time consuming and onerous.

It's becoming increasingly more difficult to get the points, particularly if you are running a business and having to juggle paperwork and also maintaining your qualifications. (Dispensing Optician from London)

Both survey respondents and focus group and interview participants were asked whether they thought the CET process could be improved. As focus group and interview participants had also mentioned, the most common theme suggested by survey respondents was to simplify the system, speed up points allocation and focus less on reflection. Some participants also suggested that the GOC could do more to regulate the quality of CET on offer so that all

courses, exercises and lectures that provide registrants with points are relevant, useful and insightful. A number of participants also said that they found interactive CET particularly useful and suggested that CET could focus more on interactive elements.

Sometimes the quality of things you do is very poor. You have the ability to comment about it in your feedback, but there's no acknowledgement that anyone has read it. Some of the information that's given is just plain wrong. (Optometrist from Manchester)

Views about the GOC's registration process

The GOC wanted to find out more about registrants' views of the registration process to help improve the service it offers. Overall the findings were very positive and respondents rated their experience of using the 'MyGOC' area of the website highly, with 92% saying it was 'excellent' or 'very good'.

The majority of respondents (93%) also rated their experience of the annual retention process as 'excellent' or 'very good'.

When completing the registration process, respondents are required to declare to the GOC any health problems, disciplinary matters or criminal convictions. Seven in ten (69%) said they were clear about what should be declared and when. Respondents suggested developing a handbook or dedicated webpage (20%) and providing a list of common examples, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) or case studies (12%) in order to make the declaration process clearer.

Nine in ten (90%) said they had accessed the online public register at least once in the past. The majority accessed it 'rarely' (43%) or 'sometimes' (33%). Only one in twelve (8%) said they accessed it 'often'. Usage of the online register seemed lower in Northern Ireland than in England, with 20% of respondents from Northern Ireland saying they accessed it 'often' or 'sometimes', compared to 43% from England.

How the GOC communicates with its registrants

The GOC was keen to understand whether the communications issued by the GOC are well received by its registrants. The majority (82%) of respondents thought the frequency of communication from the GOC was 'about right', but one in ten (11%) thought that it was not often enough. Respondents from Scotland were more likely to say it was 'about right' (85%) than those from England (81%).

When asked if respondents read the GOC eBulletin (a regular e-newsletter sent to all registrants), over three-quarters (78%) said they did, but for the majority this was scan reading (70%) rather than reading it in detail (8%). Of those who read the eBulletin, the majority (89%) said that they found it informative.

Registrants' views on the GOC's customer service

The GOC was keen to understand registrants' perception of the GOC's customer service and how those who had contacted the GOC to make a query or to request information in the last 12 months rated their customer service.

Almost six in ten (57%) agreed that the GOC provided good customer service to registrants. However, eight in ten (80%) of those who had a query or request for information in the last 12 months said it had been resolved and 82% said their query or request had been dealt with promptly.

Part Two: Challenges faced by registrants in the workplace

Commercial pressures

The GOC wanted to explore registrants' views on the challenges they faced as part of their day to day practice in the workplace. Of those surveyed, four in ten survey respondents (41%) said that they had felt under pressure to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed by a patient and 45% said they had felt under pressure to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care. This leaves just under six in ten respondents who said they had not experienced pressure to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed (57%) and to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care (53%). Optometrists, however, were more likely than dispensing opticians to have felt these sorts of pressures, as were those from younger age groups, those working for chains and locums.

The focus group and interview participants discussed in more depth the types of challenges faced by registrants in the workplace and the effect these had on patients and the profession. Overall, participants agreed that there are some pressures to meet commercial targets and to sell certain products in the workplace and they had either experienced these directly or knew a colleague who had. Participants shared anecdotes of registrants losing their jobs for not meeting targets, bonuses being affected and locums not being recalled. However, all participants who mentioned they had experienced commercial pressure were keen to stress that they had not bowed to it and always maintained their professional integrity.

There was also a perception that many registrants were leaving the profession soon after qualifying due to the commercial pressures they felt at work. Participants felt that students were not being adequately prepared for the commercial side of their role whilst at university. Almost all participants knew of someone who had left the profession due to commercial pressure and a few had themselves left roles because of this.

One area identified by participants as having an effect on patients was the length of the sight test. Some participants explained that employers and businesses can put pressure on registrants to conduct as many eye tests as they can in a day. This can result in registrants not being able to always spend enough time with patients. Participants also mentioned that they were under pressure to achieve certain "conversion rate" targets (i.e. to ensure that an eye test with a patient leads to the patient then buying glasses or contact lenses within the store).

We have conversion rates. You are assessed by how many people buy glasses or contact lenses after seeing you. The pressure is on you. (Optometrist from Ipswich)

Focus group and interview participants felt that the commercial pressure had worsened in the last few years and would continue to get worse. They suggested there were a number of reasons why they felt that commercial pressures had worsened. These included larger optical chains gaining more market share, the rise of online sales which squeeze the market, the increased difficulty of customer retention and the ever increasing number of optometrists coming into the profession which puts pressure on jobs and drives down wages.

There are loads of optometrists coming in, trying to crowd onto a very small market and this puts us under pressure. It's supply and demand, there are too many of us.
(Optometrist from Glasgow)

Raising concerns about poor practice

The GOC was interested in finding out about registrants' views about raising concerns with the GOC and their employer in relation to poor practice in the workplace.

Four in ten (40%) survey respondents said they would not feel comfortable reporting a concern to their employer and 45% would not feel comfortable reporting a concern to the GOC.

I wouldn't feel comfortable about going to the GOC. I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that myself. (Optometrist from London)

In terms of raising a concern with an employer, there was a consensus amongst focus group and interview participants that this was largely dependent on the employer-employee relationship. Some feared that if they did raise a concern this could damage working relationships and they could potentially lose their job.

In terms of raising a concern with the GOC, most participants said that the concern would have to be of a very serious nature, such as putting a patient at risk, and every other means of resolution would have to have been explored first. However, they would not feel comfortable raising a concern with the GOC because of the consequences it could have for the registrant about whom the complaint had been raised.

When I was studying for my dispensing course the GOC were made out to be a big scary entity. They have the power to strip you of all of your qualifications and leave you destitute if you put a foot wrong. The fear is really ingrained in you when you are studying. (Dispensing Optician from High Wycombe)

The survey found that almost three in ten respondents (31%) would not feel confident that the GOC would protect their identity and interests if they were to raise a concern. A fifth said they did not know (19%), and therefore could not answer the question.

The majority of focus group and interview participants also did not feel confident that their identity and interests would be protected by the GOC. This was largely due to a lack of awareness about how the GOC's fitness to practise process works. However, like reporting a concern to an employer, participants worried that reporting a concern to the GOC could lead to difficult working relationships and job loss if they were identified as the one raising it in the first place, particularly if the concern was about their employer.

The future of the optical profession

The GOC wanted to explore registrants' views on the future of the profession and how they see their role evolving over the next five years.

Overall six in ten (61%) respondents were optimistic about the future of the profession. Survey respondents from Scotland (75%), Northern Ireland (67%) and Wales (66%) were more optimistic about the future than those from England (60%), as were those who worked for a chain (65%) compared to an independent business (53%).

Almost nine in ten respondents (87%) thought their role would change significantly in the next five years. A larger proportion of optometrists thought their role would change (89%) compared to dispensing opticians (83%). Larger proportions of respondents from Northern Ireland (93%), Wales (91%) and Scotland (89%) thought their role would change compared to England (87%).

When asked why their role would change in the next five years, seven in ten respondents (69%) thought it would be due to technological changes in the industry and six in ten (62%) felt it would change due to a higher expectation from the government and regulators. Over half also felt that an ageing population (55%) and changes in consumer behaviour (54%) would lead to changes in their role.

I'm quite pessimistic. The growth of technology is worrying. (Dispensing Optician from High Wycombe)

Registrants' views on providing NHS "enhanced services"

The survey found that the majority of respondents (90%) were aware of NHS plans for more enhanced optical services to be delivered in the community rather than in hospitals and 40% said they were currently involved in providing these services. A particularly large proportion of respondents from Wales (75%) said they were involved. By contrast, only 38% of respondents from England, 42% from Scotland, and 42% from Northern Ireland said they were involved.

The majority of survey respondents (87%) said they were supportive of the plans for enhanced optical services to be provided in the community. Respondents from England showed lower levels of support (86%) than respondents from Scotland (93%), Wales (94%) and Northern Ireland (93%).

Focus group and interview participants were also supportive of these plans, particularly optometrists who thought that this could lead to more interesting and varied work. However, participants did have a few concerns and reservations. For example, there was a consensus that there is fragmentation across the United Kingdom with different regions doing different things and that communication between optical professionals and hospitals could sometimes be difficult.

It's all a bit mismatched. There are some people doing one thing and some people doing something else. It's a bit of a mess I think, clinically it's a mess. We over here

do different stuff to England, Scotland do something different and Wales do something different. (Optometrist from Lisburn, Northern Ireland)

Of those who said that they did not currently play a role in the provision of enhanced services, 61% of survey respondents said they thought they would in future. Of those who said that they did not, one in six (17%) said it was not cost effective to gain the necessary qualifications, 14% said it was difficult to access the right training and 12% said it was because their employer was not interested in providing these services.

Survey respondents practising as optometrists were asked whether they had considered gaining additional qualifications to prescribe medicines or assist in the management of patients' eye conditions – 64% said they had.

When this was discussed with focus group and interview participants, those who had gained extra qualifications to provide these services mostly said that they had done so because their employer was involved in the delivery of enhanced services or they wanted to be prepared for the future.

I have done a glaucoma referral refinement accreditation here for one of the glaucoma referral schemes and I am also about to start the independent prescribing one. That is to protect myself, to give myself as many skills as possible, to enhance my role in the future. (Optometrist from Coleraine)

Survey respondents who had not considered gaining additional qualifications were asked why this was. The most common response was because they did not have the time to study (37%), followed by a lack of opportunity to use it in practice (34%). A third (33%) said it was not part of their long-term career plan and 17% said it was because they could not afford the training. This was confirmed by focus group and interview participants, who said they had not gained additional qualifications mostly because of the expense of gaining these qualifications and the time involved to study for them.

1. Introduction: About This Research

The GOC commissioned Enventure Research to carry out the registrant survey in 2016. The research had two objectives. Firstly, to gain a better understanding of registrants' views and experiences of the GOC. This will help the GOC to assess its performance so that it can make improvements to how they operate and their customer service. Secondly, to understand the day to day experiences and challenges faced by GOC registrants working in clinical practice. This will enable the GOC to better engage with the profession and to gain more information about their needs for education and training and any pressures they may be under which may prevent them from meeting the standards set by the GOC.

The report is divided into two main sections:

Part One: Registrant's views on the role and performance of the General Optical Council

- Perceptions of the GOC
- Perceptions of how well the GOC is carrying out its role
- Views on the GOC registration fee
- The GOC's Standards of Practice
- Registrant's experience of the Continuing Education and Training (CET) scheme
- Views about the GOC's registration process
- How the GOC communicates with its registrants
- Registrant's views on the GOC's customer service

Part Two: Challenges faced by registrants in the workplace

- Commercial pressures
- Raising concerns about poor practice
- The future of the optical profession
- Registrant's views on providing NHS "enhanced services."

2. Perceptions of the GOC's role

Key findings

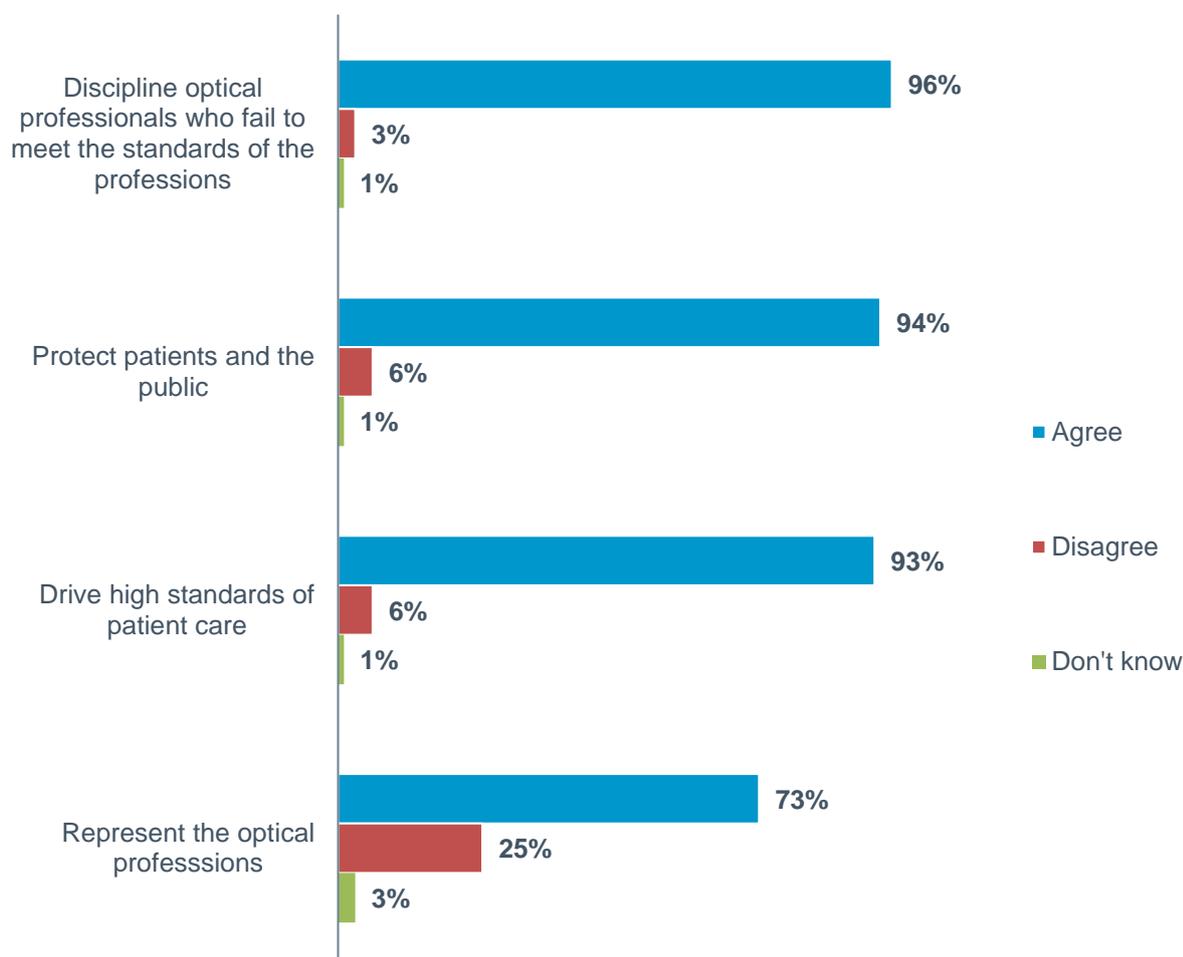
- Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with four statements in regards to the role of the GOC
- The majority of survey respondents agreed that the role of the GOC is to protect patients and the public (94%), discipline optical professionals who fail to meet the standards of the professions (96%) and to drive high standards of patient care (93%). This was reflected amongst focus group and interview participants
- There was less agreement in the survey that its role is to represent the optical professions (73%)
- Student dispensing opticians were most likely to agree that the GOC's role is to represent the optical professions (96%), as were those from the youngest age category (16-34 81%), those who had been on the GOC register for the shortest length of time (1-5 years 86%), females (80%) and respondents who worked for a chain (77%)
- Amongst focus group and interview participants, some felt that this should be a role of the GOC as that would enable it to fulfil its primary role of protecting the public, but others thought that this would lead to a conflict of interest with its other roles

The GOC wanted to better understand how their registrants perceived the role of the GOC. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the four statements outlined below.

The main / statutory role of the GOC is to protect patients and the public – 94% of respondents agreed with this. However, a slightly higher percentage, 96%, perceived the GOC’s role as disciplining registrants who fail to meet the standards of the profession and 93% said the GOC’s role was to drive high standards of patient care. Both of these are regulatory functions carried out by the GOC, but are not the GOC’s main / statutory role.

Representing the optical profession is not the role of the GOC, however nearly three quarters (73%) of the respondents thought that this was the GOC’s role.

Figure 1 – To what extent do you agree that the role of the GOC is to...?
Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to **agree that the role of the GOC is to represent the optical professions** (73% overall) included those who:

- Were student dispensing opticians (96%). By comparison 84% of dispensing opticians agreed
- Were female (80%) compared to male (59%)
- Were aged 16-34 (81%). Those aged 55 and above, by contrast, were less likely to agree (56%)
- Had been on the GOC register for less than five years (86%) compared to 73% overall
- Worked for a chain of opticians (77%) compared to those working for an independent optician (66%)

Focus group and interview feedback

How is the GOC perceived by registrants and how effective is the GOC in fulfilling its role?

In line with the survey findings, the majority of participants agreed that the role of the GOC is primarily to protect patients and the public and ensure high standards in the profession by issuing standards and taking action through the fitness to practise process when necessary.

My perception is that it is to protect the public, to ensure that we adhere to the standards that are laid down for us. (Dispensing Optician from Birmingham)

Most thought that it was effective in this role as it sets appropriate standards for the profession and takes appropriate action through the fitness to practise process when necessary so that patients are provided with good quality eye care.

To make the public safe, in that way it is effective. (Dispensing Optician from Port Glasgow)

However, participants felt the GOC could be more effective if it raised its public profile, particularly if more patients knew how to make a complaint when they had experienced poor care.

Not a lot of patients are aware of the GOC. If they have an issue they go to the practice. They don't even know that it exists. They are not aware that the GOC is there to protect them. (Optometrist from London)

Should the role of the GOC be to represent the optical professions?

In the survey, 73% of respondents thought that the role of the GOC was to represent the optical professions and, in line with this, some focus group and interview participants thought it was. On the question of whether this should be the role of the GOC or not, opinion was

split. Some participants thought that representing the professions came hand-in-hand with protecting the public and others felt this would lead to a conflict of interest, pointing out that there were other organisations whose role is to represent the professions, such as the Association of Dispensing Opticians and the Association of Optometrists.

In order to effectively protect the public, they have to represent the profession. I don't think you can have one without the other. (Dispensing Optician from Cardiff)

They are not meant to. There are other associations that represent us more than the GOC do. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

3. Perceptions of how well the GOC is carrying out its role

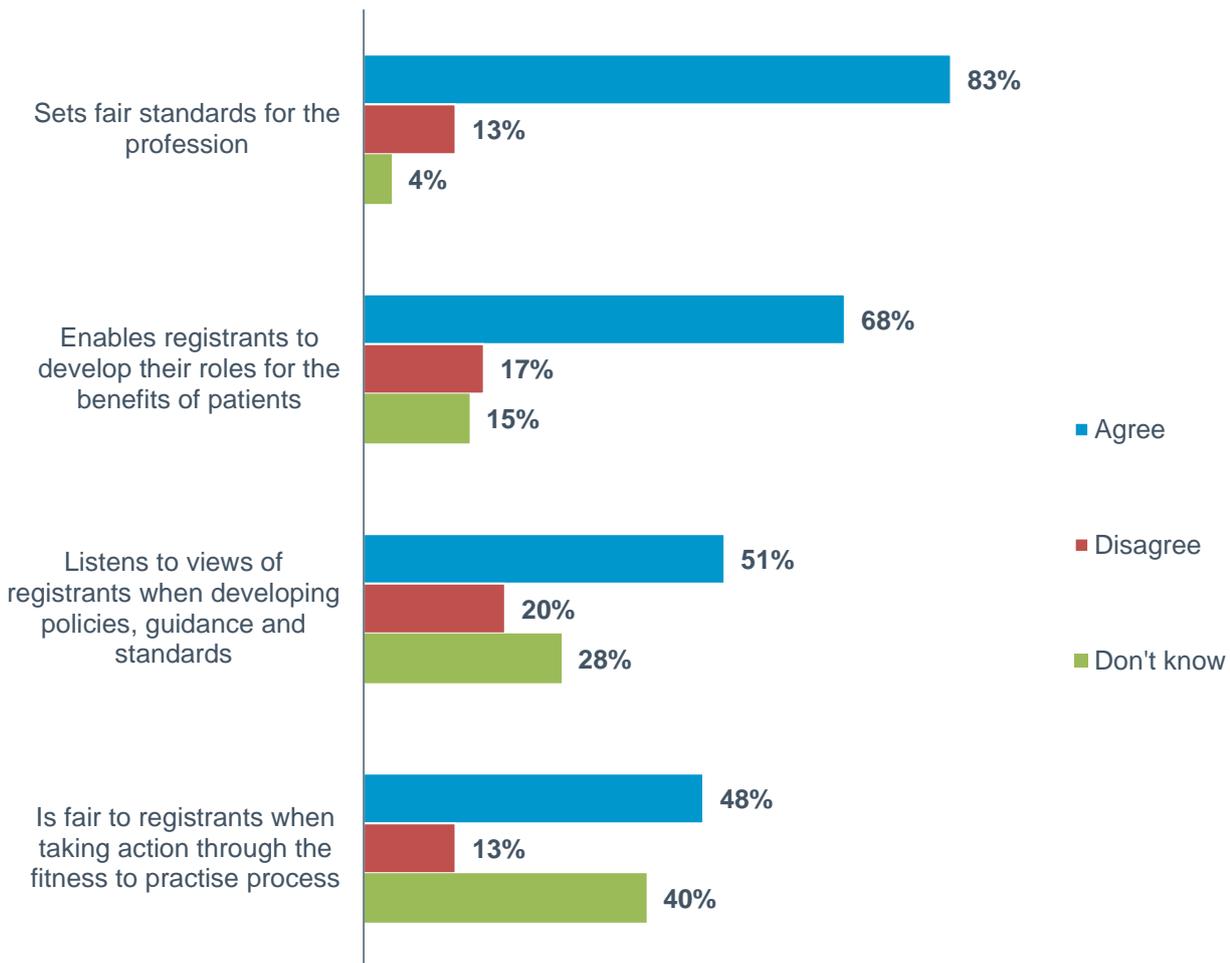
Key findings

- Eight in ten survey respondents (83%) agreed that the GOC sets fair standards for the profession and two-thirds (68%) agreed that the organisation enables registrants to develop their roles for the benefit of patients
- There was less agreement amongst respondents that the GOC listens to the views of registrants (51%), and is fair when taking action through the fitness to practise process (48%)
- A large proportion of survey respondents (40%) did not know if they agreed that the GOC is fair when taking action through the fitness to practise process, indicating that many registrants do not have any experience or much knowledge of this process
- Respondents from England (49%) and Wales (49%) were more likely to agree that the GOC is fair when taking action through the fitness to practise process. By contrast, 40% of respondents from Scotland 42% from Northern Ireland agreed
- Focus group and interview participants who had experience of the fitness to practise process felt the GOC could do more to support registrants against whom a claim had been made
- Survey respondents from Northern Ireland were more likely to agree that the GOC listens to their views when developing policies, guidance and standards (62%) than respondents from other countries
- Focus group and interview participants felt that the GOC could do more to show it acts upon registrants' feedback

The GOC wished to know more about how registrants perceived the organisation in terms of how well it is carrying out its role, asking them what they thought about education for registrants, setting standards for the professions, fairness when taking action through the fitness to practise process, and listening to registrants when developing policies and guidance. Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements about the GOC.

Eight in ten (83%) respondents said they agreed that the GOC sets fair standards for the profession. Two-thirds (68%) agreed that the GOC enables registrants to develop their roles for the benefit of patients. Just over half of respondents (51%) agreed that the GOC listens to the views of registrants when developing policies, guidance and standards, and less than half (48%) said they agreed that the GOC is fair to registrants when taking action through the fitness to practise process. It should be noted, however, that four in ten respondents (40%) said they did not know if the GOC is fair in this regard, indicating that a large proportion of registrants did not have any experience or knowledge of how the fitness to practise process operates.

Figure 2 – To what extent do you agree that the GOC...
Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say they **agree that the GOC is fair to registrants when taking action through the fitness to practise process** (48% overall) included those who:

- Were student dispensing opticians (58%) and student optometrists (61%). By contrast only 42% of optometrists and 49% of dispensing opticians said they agreed
- Had been on the GOC register for less than five years (55%) compared to those who had been on it for 6-20 years (42%) and over 21 years (47%)
- Were from England (49%) and Wales (49%). By contrast, large proportions of respondents from Scotland (48%) and Northern Ireland (49%) said they did not know if they agreed
- Were working full-time (47%) or part-time (46%) compared to those who practiced as locums (40%)

Subgroups more likely to say they **agree that the GOC listens to the views of its registrants when developing policies, guidance and standards** (51% overall) included those who:

- Were student dispensing opticians (64%) and student optometrists (61%). By contrast only 47% of optometrists and 51% of dispensing opticians said they agreed
- Had been on the GOC register for less than five years (59%) compared to those who had been on it for 6-20 years (47%) and over 21 years (47%)
- Were from Northern Ireland (62%) compared to 51% overall
- Worked for a chain (55%) compared to an independent opticians (45%)
- Were working full-time (52%) or part-time (52%) compared to those who practiced as locums (42%)

Focus group and interview feedback

Fairness to registrants when taking action through the fitness to practise process

In line with the survey findings, many participants had little or no knowledge of the fitness to practise process and so felt unable to declare whether or not they felt the GOC was fair when taking action. However, some participants felt that the GOC could do more to support registrants going through the fitness to practise process, particularly as this can be a stressful time. Some participants knew registrants that had been through the process and commented on the impact it had upon them mentally and in some cases there was the perception that registrants were treated as if they were “guilty” before being proven “innocent”.

I think there's a massive hole in the GOC's sense of responsibility to treat registrants like members of the public. Providing support for us is really important. (Optometrist from Cardiff)

You're guilty until proven innocent. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

Does the GOC listen to the views of its registrants when developing policies, guidance and standards?

In the survey 51% agreed that the GOC listens to registrants when developing policies, guidance and standards. Most focus group and in depth interview participants agreed that they are often asked by the GOC to provide their views on policies, guidance and standards that are published by the GOC. Some provided examples of taking part in consultations such as developing the new standards of practice for GOC registrants.

However, there was a consensus amongst some participants that the GOC does not always listen to the views of registrants and that it could do more to take registrants' feedback and opinions into account. The majority of participants felt that it was important that the GOC listened to registrants so that it can fully understand the profession and the day to day real-life challenges they face, in order to be able to effectively regulate the sector.

Most participants were in favour of regular surveys and consultations, along with communication from the GOC about how registrants' feedback is being acted upon.

I think they probably do give a fair opportunity to registrants to have their say. I am just not convinced that they take all that information on board and act upon it. (Dispensing Optician from High Wycombe)

I would like to see afterwards what is being done. (Optometrist from Leeds)

4. Perception of the GOC registration fee

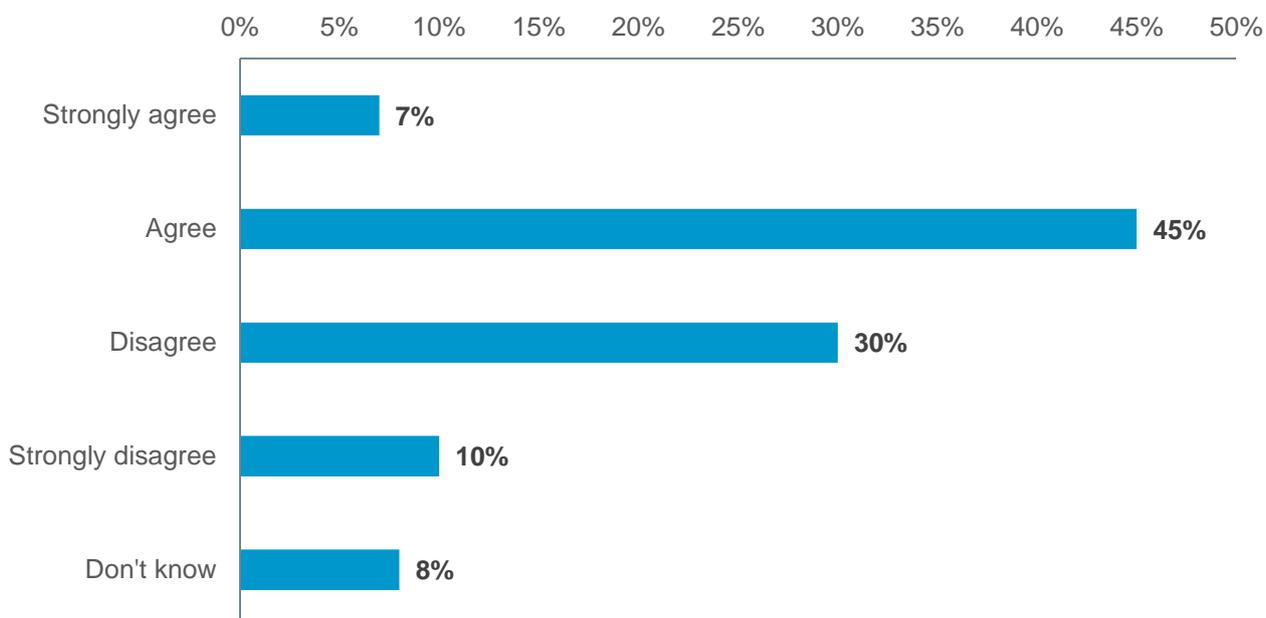
Key findings

- Just over half of survey respondents agreed that the GOC charges reasonable registration fees (52%)
- Student optometrists (71%) and student dispensing opticians (62%) were more likely to agree that the GOC charges reasonable fees than those who were fully qualified (54% of optometrists and 38% of dispensing opticians)
- Most focus group and interview participants did not feel the registration fee was reasonable as they struggled to see the value for money and many felt that the GOC could do more to communicate how the money is spent and to ensure affordability, particularly for those who pay the fee themselves and are newly qualified, or self-employed as locums

Overall, just over half (52%) of survey respondents agreed that the GOC charges reasonable fees (7% strongly agreed and 45% agreed). Four in ten (40%) disagreed (30% disagreed and 10% strongly disagreed).

Figure 3 – To what extent do you agree that the GOC charges registration fees that are reasonable?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to agree that the GOC charges registration fees that are reasonable (52% overall) included those who:

- Were student dispensing opticians (71%) and student optometrists (62%), compared to optometrists (54%) and dispensing opticians (38%)
- Had been on the register for less than five years (57%) compared to those who had been on it for 6-20 years (47%)
- Were from Scotland (58%). By comparison 52% from England, 49% from Wales and 46% from Northern Ireland agreed that the fees were reasonable

Focus group and interview feedback

Does the GOC charge reasonable and affordable registration fees?

Whilst a handful of participants simply accepted the fees were a payment they needed to make in order to be able to practise, particularly those who had them reimbursed by their employer, very few thought that the charges were reasonable, despite 52% in the survey agreeing that the GOC charges reasonable registration fees.

Many participants did not see what their fee provides them with, other than having their name on the register and access to the My CET website, and, as such, there is a perception that the fee is not good value for money.

Some participants felt the fees were particularly high when compared to those that people in other professions had to pay, such as the GMC and GDC, which are perceived to regulate more 'risky' professions and therefore should have higher fees than that of the GOC.

I don't get enough from it to warrant what I pay for it. (Dispensing Optician from Darlington)

I think it's quite expensive compared to other healthcare professionals and how much they have to pay. (Optometrist from London)

Some registrants had their fees reimbursed by their employer, for example, those who worked for large national chains and some who worked in independent practices. Those who paid the fee themselves without reimbursement included those who worked in hospitals, those in domiciliary roles, those who were self-employed locums and some who worked for independent practices. This group of participants largely felt that the fees were not affordable for everyone, particularly for those who are newly qualified, work part-time, or are a single parent. It was also felt that for those who are on career breaks or maternity leave, the cost of remaining on the register is high.

Last year I was on maternity leave for most of the year, so I looked into whether I could get reduced rates because I wasn't really working and it did not seem that flexible. (Optometrist from Belfast)

How the GOC could facilitate the fee paying process?

Some registrants suggested that the GOC could look into staged payments spaced out across the year, such as monthly direct debits, rather than requiring one payment at the start of the financial year. It was felt that this would make the registration fees more affordable for registrants and examples were provided of other registration bodies who offered this sort of payment plan.

I think you should be able to set up a monthly direct debit, or even quarterly. It might not be a lot to some people, but it is to others. (Optometrist from Cardiff)

Information about how the GOC sets the fee level

Some participants were aware of the GOC publishing information about how the fee level is set on its website and in its annual report. However there was a general consensus that there

could be more communication from the GOC in regards to this, particularly when there is a large increase in the fee. However, there was some acceptance that the cost of regulation could be high, particularly when there are so many registrants in the United Kingdom and a large volume of fitness to practise cases.

I don't think it is as transparent as it could be. (Dispensing Optician from Colwyn Bay)

I guess there are a lot of people who contribute to the running of the GOC who need to be paid. (Optometrist from Cardiff)

5. Standards of Practice

The new Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians and Standards for Optical Students came into effect on 1 April 2016, replacing the previous Code of Conduct for Individual Registrants. The GOC wanted to understand registrants' confidence in their ability to meet the new standards, as well as assess registrants' understanding of them and what impact the standards had on registrants' day to day practice.

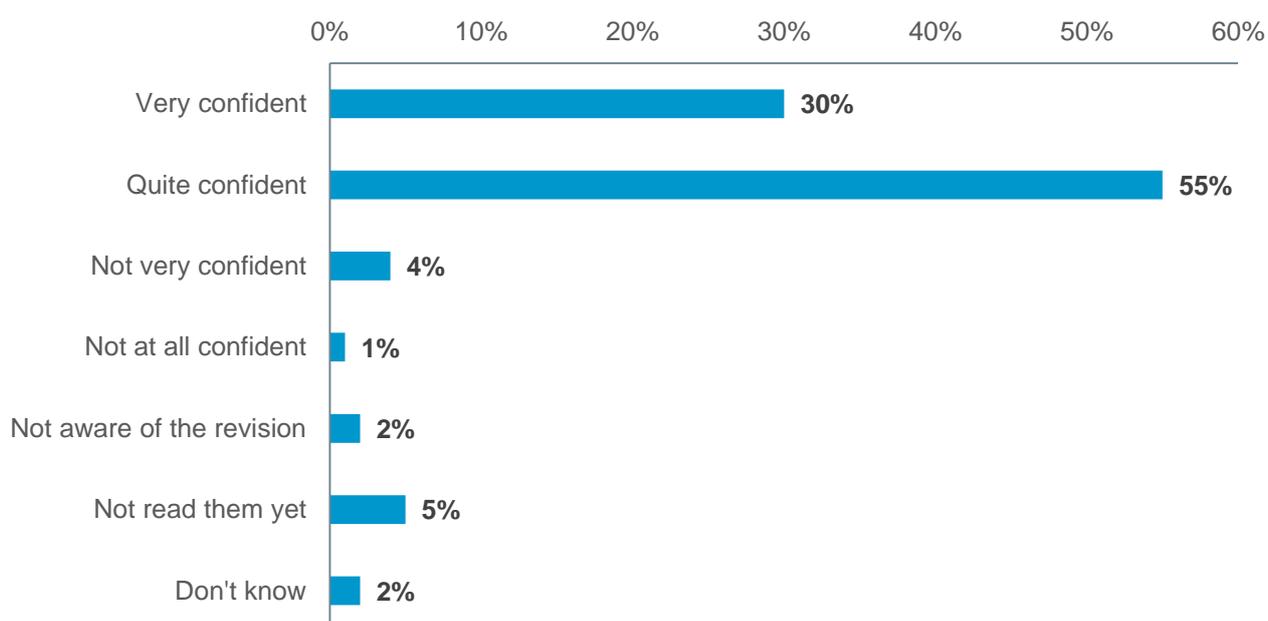
Key findings

- The majority (86%) of survey respondents were confident in their ability to meet the new standards and only a handful were not aware of the revision or had not read them yet (7%)
- A larger proportion of those who were confident in their ability to meet the standards were dispensing opticians (90%), from older age groups and from a White ethnic background (88%)
- Only four in ten (42%) survey respondents felt they had an 'excellent' or 'very good' understanding of the new standards and less than a fifth (17%) had changed their practice following the new standards' introduction
- Those from Northern Ireland were least likely to rate their understanding of the standards as 'excellent' or 'very good' (27%). By comparison 42% in England Wales and 44% rated their understanding as excellent or very good
- When asked if there were any standards that were unclear or unhelpful, focus group and interview participants mentioned the standards concerning duty of candour and consent were confusing and ambiguous
- Overall under a fifth (17%) said that they had changed their practice as a result of the introduction of the new standards
- Those from England and Scotland were more likely to say that their practice had changed following the introduction (17% each) compared to Wales (9%) and Northern Ireland (10%)
- Survey respondents who worked for a chain of opticians were more likely to rate their understanding of the new standards as 'excellent' or 'very good' (45%) and say that their practice had changed (23%), compared to those who worked for an independent opticians (37% 'excellent' or 'very good' understanding; 10% changed practice)
- The majority of focus group and interview participants felt that as the standards reflected their current everyday practice, they had not needed to make any changes. However, a few mentioned changes in their practice such as the need for an optometrist to be on site during dispensing, the new standard regarding social media posting and better record keeping

5.1 Confidence in ability to meet the new standards

Overall, the majority (86%) of survey respondents said they felt confident in their ability to meet the new standards. However, more than one in seven said they were not confident (5%), not been aware of the revision (2%), not read them yet (5%) or did not know (2%). Only a very small proportion (5%) of respondents did not feel confident and a further one in ten (9%) had either not been aware of the revision (2%), not read the new standards yet (5%) or did not know (2%).

Figure 4 – How confident are you in your ability to meet the new standards?
Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

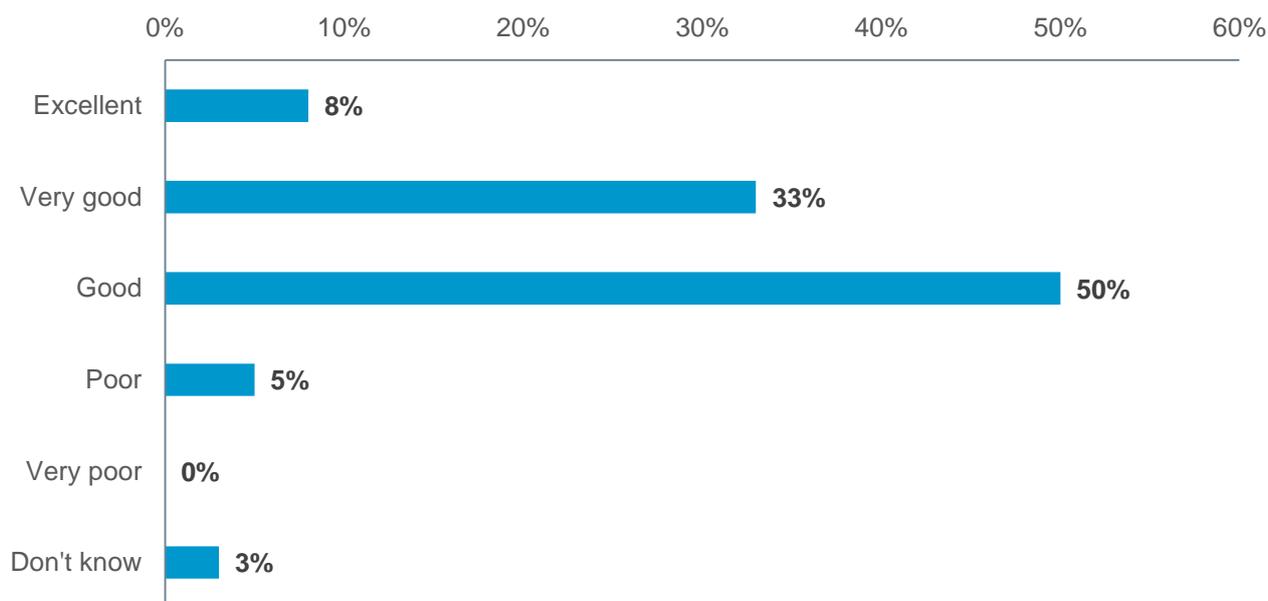
Subgroups more likely to say they were **confident in their ability to meet the new standards** (86% overall) included those who:

- Were dispensing opticians (90%) compared to optometrists (86%)
- Were from the older age groups, 35-54 and 55+ (88% for both), compared to the youngest age group (82%)
- Had been on the register for more than 21 years (89%) compared to those who had been on it for less than five years (83%)
- Were from a White ethnic background (88%) compared to those from a non-White background (81%)

5.2 Understanding of the revised standards

Respondents from the previous question who said they were aware of the new standards and had read them were asked to rate their understanding of them. Four in ten (41%) respondents said that their understanding was ‘excellent’ (8%) or ‘very good’ (33%). Although a small proportion said their understanding was ‘poor’ (5%), half of all respondents (50%) felt that their understanding was ‘good’.

**Figure 5 – How would you rate your understanding of the revised standards?
Base: Those who were aware of and had read the revised standards (3,870)**



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say that their **understanding of the revised standards was ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’** (41% overall) included those who:

- Were from England (42%), Wales (42%) or Scotland (44%), compared to Northern Ireland (27%)
- Worked for a chain of opticians (45%) compared to an independent business (37%)
- Worked full-time (44%) compared to those who worked part-time (37%) or as a locum (37%)

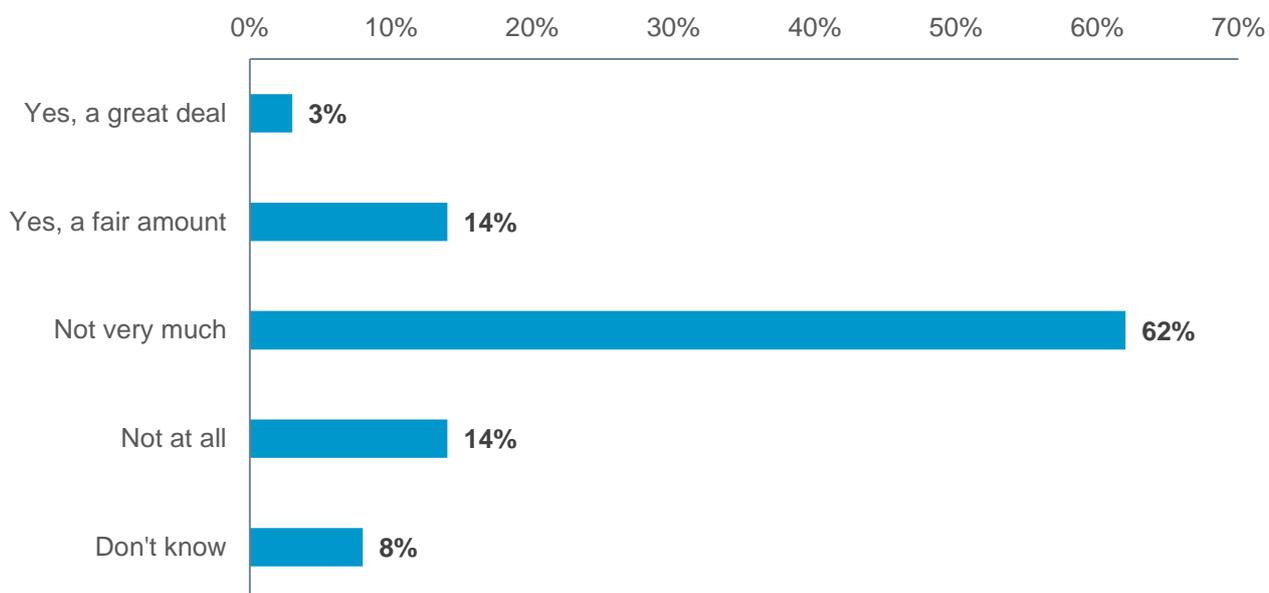
5.3 Changes to practice following introduction of new standards

Of those who were aware of the revised standards and had read them, the majority of respondents either felt that their practice had not changed very much (62%) or not at all (14%) following the introduction of the standards.

Less than a fifth (17%) felt that their practice had changed following the introduction of the new standards (3% a great deal; 14% a fair amount).

Figure 6 – Following the introduction of the new standards, have you changed how you practise on a day to day basis?

Base: Those who were aware of and had read the revised standards (3,870)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say that their **practice had changed following the introduction of the new standards** (17% overall) included those who:

- Were from England (17%) and Scotland (17%), compared to Northern Ireland (10%) and Wales (9%)
- Were from a non-White ethnic background (22%) compared to those from a White background (15%)
- Worked for a chain of opticians (23%) compared to an independent business (10%)

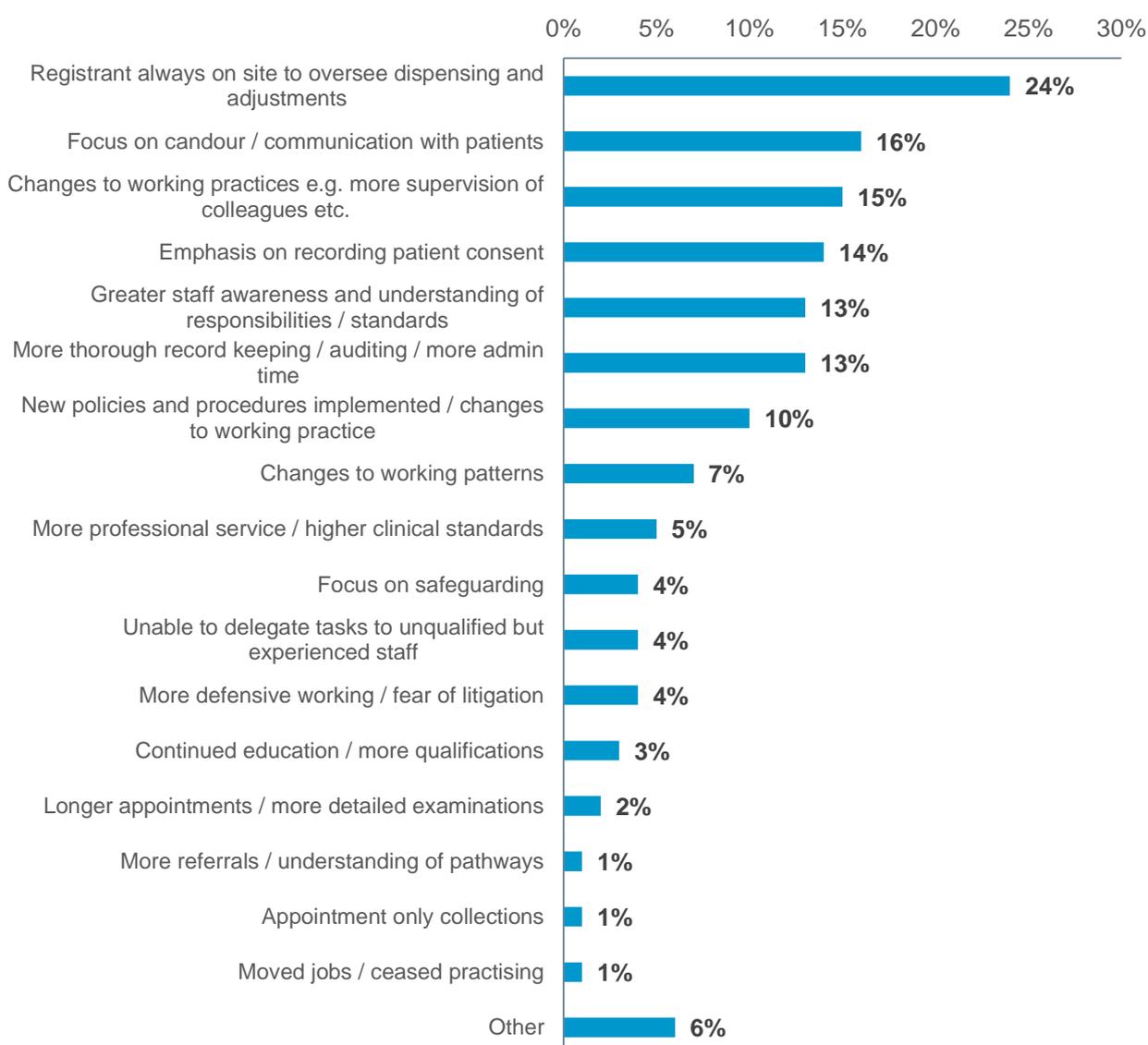
How registrants’ practice has changed since the new standards

Respondents (17%) who said that they had changed the way they practise on a day to day basis were asked to provide comments on how and why their practice had changed. When looking at the four most popular answers, it is interesting to note that these are in relation to areas that the GOC deliberately strengthened, such as supervision and the standards on duty of candour and consent.

A quarter (24%) said that they had changed their practice because they now needed to ensure that a registrant is always on site to oversee all dispensing and adjustments and 16% said they focus more on patient candour and communication with patients. A further 15% said there was more supervision, checks and disciplinary action when things go wrong, 14% said there was a greater emphasis on recording patient consent, 13% thought there was greater staff awareness and understanding of the responsibilities and standards and the same proportion reported more thorough record keeping and carrying out audits.

Figure 7 – How and why has your practice changed?

Base: Those who reported a change in practice (393)



Focus group and interview feedback

Awareness of the new Standards of Practice

All participants were aware of the new Standards of Practice, recalling communication received via email, letters and flyers, and having seen them when they had signed into the GOC website to manage their CET points. A few participants who worked for large chains also mentioned that the new standards had been actively promoted by their employer.

The majority of participants had positive impressions of the new standards, with some saying that they were clearly set out and were prescriptive and specific, which allowed registrants to understand what is expected of them.

I like them because it's pretty unambiguous what's expected of you. With the old ones, not everyone would see them the same way. (Dispensing Optician from Cardiff)

They are nicely set out. It's been put together in a nice booklet and felt accessible. (Optometrist from London)

Understanding of the new Standards of Practice

Most participants felt they had a good understanding of the new standards, generally because they reinforced current practice and most felt that they were common sense. However, when asked whether there were any standards that were unclear or unhelpful, some participants felt some of the standards were confusing, ambiguous, onerous, unrealistic, wordy, not written in plain English and sometimes open to interpretation.

When asked for specific examples, participants mentioned the standard regarding duty of candour, saying that it was confusing that if a mistake is made there should be an apology to the patient but no admission of liability, and the standard regarding consent, saying it was unclear whether this should be written or verbal and always asked. Some registrants mentioned that some chains issue their own set of standards based on the GOC's, but with their own interpretations which may then differ from business to business.

Duty of candour is the big one... we are not to admit liability but we've to say we are sorry. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

Sometimes it's hard because they are not specific and it's hard to sometimes interpret them... You have to obtain patient consent, but it doesn't actually go into what it means. (Optometrist from Bangor, Northern Ireland)

Changes made to everyday practice following the introduction of the new standards

The majority of participants indicated that the standards are referred to in everyday practice, in so far as they are adhered to. Most thought it would be unusual to refer to the standards often in daily practice and saw them as more for reference when required, such as for checking things that they do not often come across or for referring to when speaking to a manager or colleague who is not a GOC registrant.

Because they are guiding background, I wouldn't necessarily consult them on a day to day basis. If there was something that I felt I was unsure about, I may refer back.
(Dispensing Optician from Oadby)

As the majority of participants saw the new standards as positively reinforcing good practice which they already subscribed to, most had not made any specific changes to the way that they practise.

It felt more like a confirmation of what I was doing already. (Dispensing Optician from Colwyn Bay, Wales)

However, there were a few examples of changes in practice or their employer's policy which had come about as a result of the new standards' introduction, such as the requirement that optometrists were required to be on site when glasses and lenses are being dispensed. A few participants also mentioned that they were now more careful about record keeping and note taking as a result of the new standards and because of the perception that there is an increased risk of litigation from the public.

In my store if anyone is dispensing glasses I have to be on the premises. (Optometrist from Wrexham)

I think I'm much more conscious about record keeping and checking everything because it's so clearly written what is required there. And also because of the increasingly litigious nature of the public, so it's not just the standards that have made me change. (Optometrist from Cardiff)

6. Continuing Education and Training (CET)

The GOC wished to gain an in depth understanding of how CET is viewed by registrants in order to improve the CET system in the future. Please note that this set of questions was not asked to student optometrists or student dispensing opticians.

Key findings

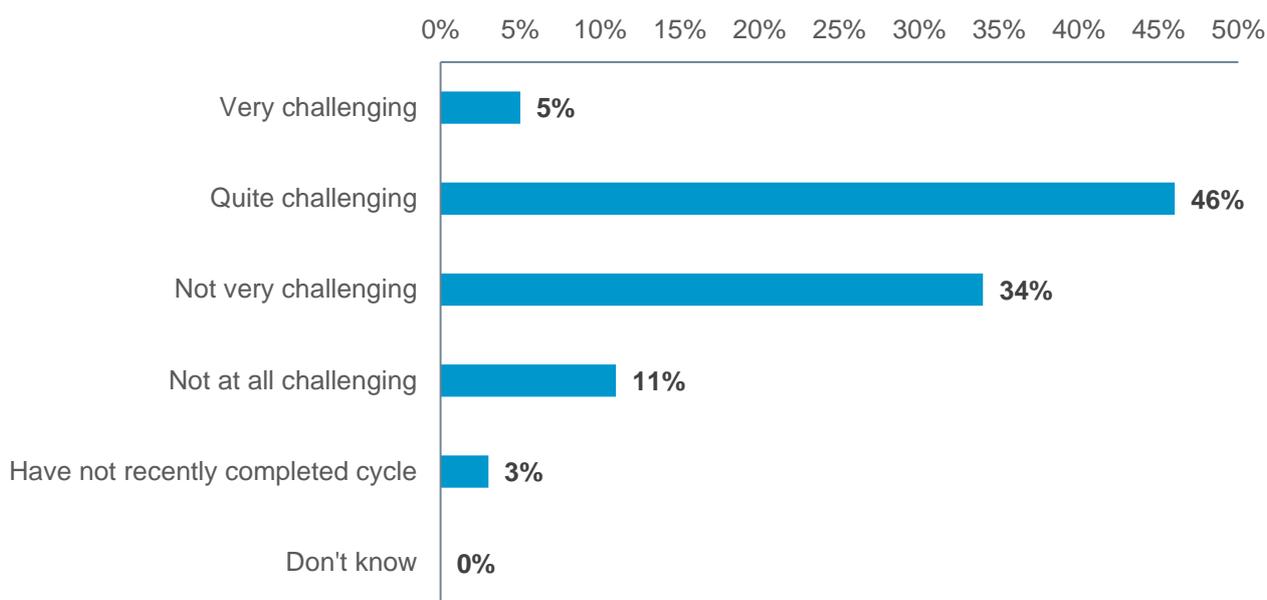
- Around half of survey respondents (51%) said they found it challenging to meet all of the GOC's requirements during the 2013-15 cycle
- Those who found it most challenging included dispensing opticians (66%), those aged 55 and above (57%), those who had been on the GOC register for more than 21 years (54%), those who worked for independent opticians (53%), those working as locums (57%) and those from England (52%)
- Focus group and interview participants who worked for national chains generally found it particularly easy to meet all the requirements as their employers provide ample opportunities to gain points
- However, participants who were self-employed, worked part-time or ran a business found it much more challenging, particularly when it came to finding the time and funding to do CET. Funding was also an issue mentioned by many dispensing opticians who felt it was unfair that they are expected to do the same amount of CET as optometrists but without the same level of funding available
- Almost two-thirds (65%) of survey respondents felt that their practice had recently improved as a result of undertaking CET in the 2013-15 period
- Optometrists were more likely to say that their practice had improved as a result of undertaking CET (69%) than dispensing opticians (57%)
- Most focus group and interview participants felt that there were benefits to undertaking CET, such as keeping up-to-date with current good practice, however most were unable to think of specific examples of how their practice had changed as a result of something they had learnt
- Three-quarters (74%) of survey respondents found it easy to manage and submit their CET records using the My CET area of the GOC website, a view shared by focus group and in depth interview participants
- Some focus group participants suggested that the administrative side of recording and logging CET points could be improved as it can sometimes be time consuming and onerous
- Some participants felt the GOC could do more to regulate the quality of some of the CET on offer so that all courses, exercises and lectures are relevant, useful and insightful and focus on more interactive CET

6.1 Meeting the GOC’s CET requirements

There was a clear divide between how challenging survey respondents found meeting all the CET requirements. Overall, just over half (51%) of respondents said that they found it ‘very’ or ‘quite’ challenging to meet all the GOC’s requirements during the 2013-15 CET cycle (5% ‘very’; 46% ‘quite’). Overall 45% said they did not find it very challenging or not at all challenging.

Figure 8 – If you have recently completed the 2013-15 CET cycle, how challenging was it to meet all the GOC’s requirements?

Base: Optometrists and dispensing opticians (3,312)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say that they found it **challenging to meet all of the GOC’s CET requirements** (51% overall) included those who:

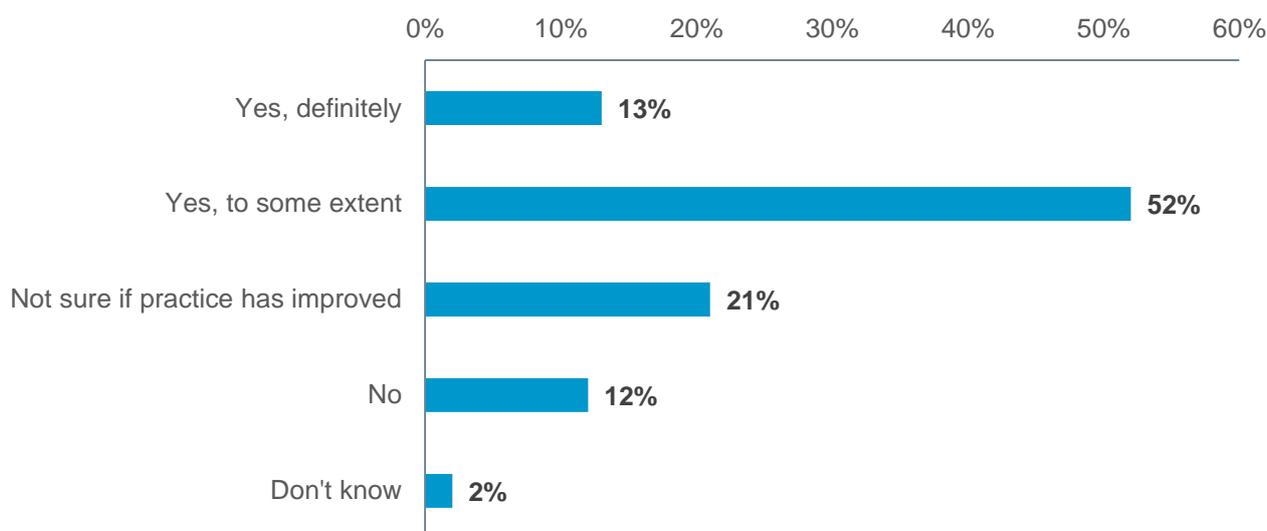
- Were dispensing opticians (66%), compared to optometrists (45%)
- Were aged 55 and over (57%), particularly compared to those aged 16-34 (44%)
- Had been on the GOC register for 6-20 years (54%) or more than 21 years (54%) compared to those who had been on it for less than five years (39%)
- Were from England (52%). By comparison only 42% of respondents from Scotland said they found it challenging
- Worked for an independent opticians (53%) compared to a chain (50%)
- Worked as a locum (57%) compared to those working full-time (50%) and part-time (53%)

6.2 Improvements in practice from undertaking CET

In the survey, the GOC was keen to understand whether registrants had improved their practice as a result of undertaking CET over the 2013-15 period. Two-thirds (65%) of respondents felt that their practice had improved (13% 'definitely'; 52% 'to some extent'). A further fifth (21%) were not sure if their practice had improved and one in ten (12%) felt that it had not.

Figure 9 – In your opinion, has your practice recently improved as a result of undertaking CET over the 2013-15 period?

Base: Those who had recently completed the CET cycle (3,224)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups most likely to say that their **practice had improved as a result of undertaking CET in the 2013-15 period** (65% overall) included those who:

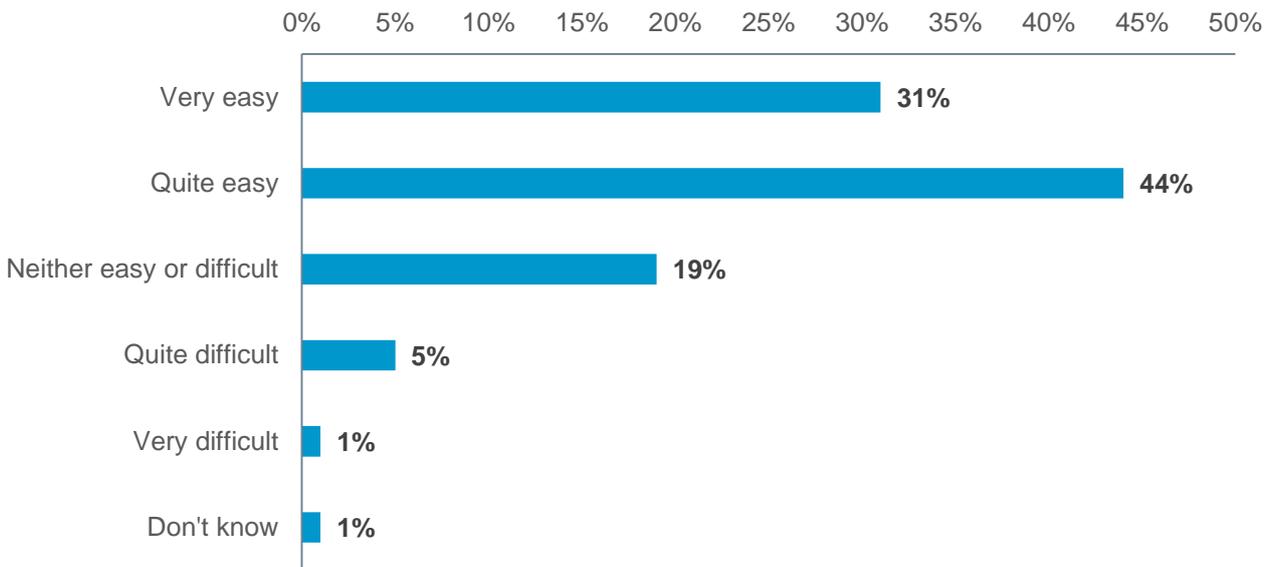
- Were optometrists (69%) compared to those who were dispensing opticians (57%)

6.3 Managing and submitting records using My CET area of website

Respondents who had recently completed the CET cycle were asked how easy they found using the My CET area to manage and submit their CET record. Three-quarters of respondents (74%) reported that it was ‘very’ or ‘quite’ easy (31% ‘very’; 44% ‘quite’). A fifth (19%) found it neither easy nor difficult. Only a very small proportion of respondents (6%) said that using the My CET area of the website was difficult (5% ‘quite’; 1% ‘very’).

Figure 10 – How did you find using the My CET area of the GOC’s website to manage and submit your CET record?

Base: Those who had recently completed the CET cycle (3,224)



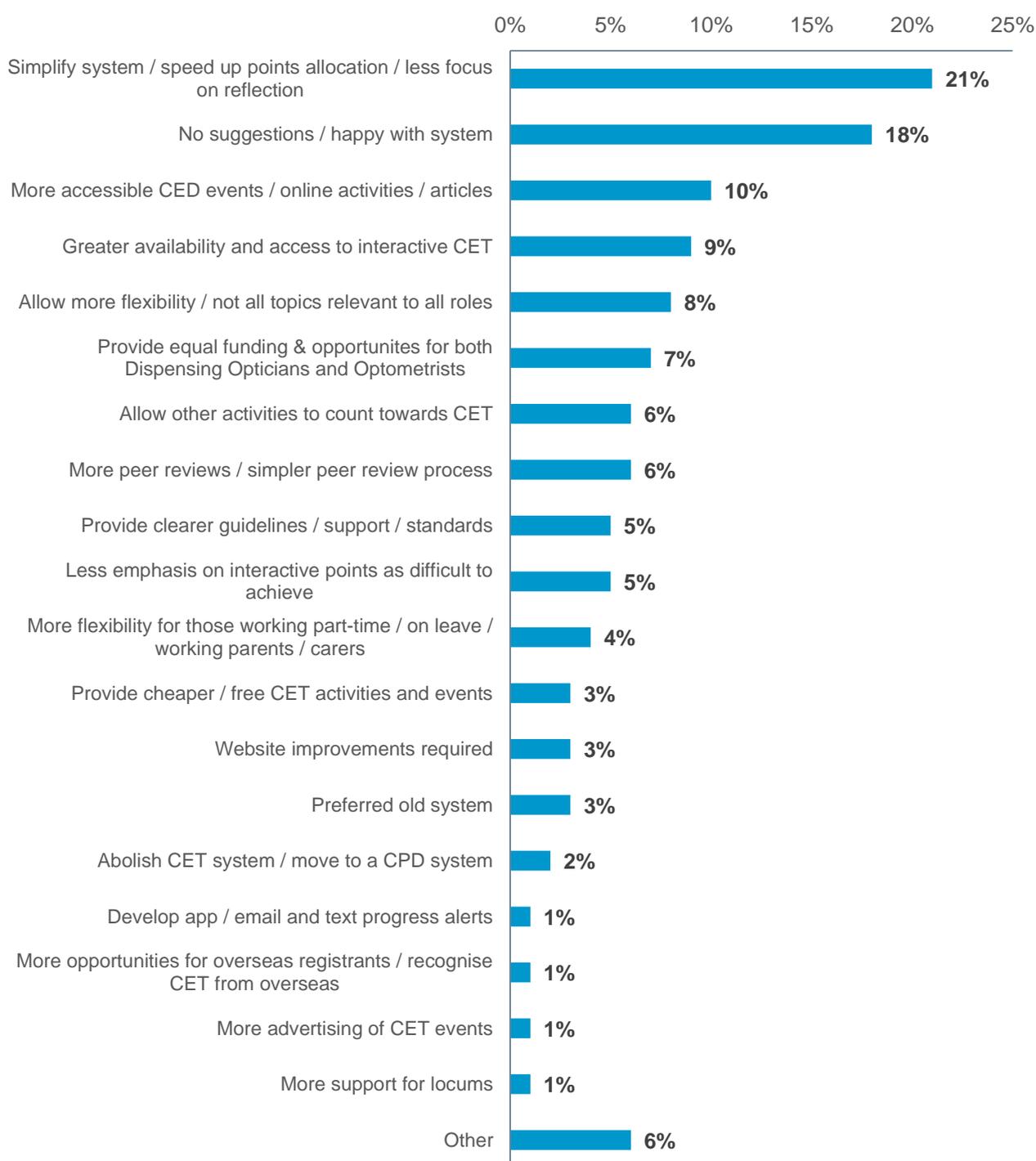
Subgroup analysis

Subgroups most likely to say that **using the My CET area of the website was easy** (74% overall) included those who:

- Were aged 16-34 (78%) compared to those aged 55 and above (66%)
- Had been on the GOC register for less than five years (80%). By comparison, 71% of those who had been on the register for more than 21 years found the My CET area of the website easy to use
- Worked for a chain of opticians (77%) compared to an independent opticians (72%)

Respondents were asked if they had any comments about how the system could be improved. Respondents could type their answers into an open box. Just over a fifth (21%) said they felt that the system could be simplified, focusing on speeding up the allocation of points and with less focus on reflection. Just under a fifth (18%) said they did not have any suggestions or were happy with the system how it is. Other suggestions included offering more accessible CET events, online activities and articles (10%), greater availability of interactive CET (9%) and a range of other responses as shown below.

**Figure 11 – Do you have any comments on how the CET system could be improved?
Base: Those who provided a comment (1,274)**



Focus group and in depth interview feedback

Feedback about the CET system

Many participants liked the CET system, finding it easy to use to track their CET progress. Participants saw the value of completing CET activities in that it enabled registrants to learn new skills, refresh current knowledge and skills and plug gaps in knowledge. This is of particular benefit for those who qualified some time ago and helps them to keep up-to-date with current trends and thinking in the industry.

It's good to have it all on the same website where it is easy to track...It's good to keep up-to-date with knowledge. (Dispensing Optician from Colwyn Bay, Wales)

Having Continuing Education and Training helps you maintain your clinical skills and knowledge. (Optometrist from Coleraine, Northern Ireland)

Changes in practice as a result of undertaking CET

The majority of participants believed that their professional practice had improved and that they were better at their profession as a result of undertaking CET. Most said that what they learnt from CET mostly affirmed what they knew already and could not think of specific examples. However, some participants recalled specific courses or sessions on useful or interesting topics that they had attended.

There was a good paediatrics session that I attended recently and that was very very useful. (Dispensing Optician from Oadby)

There was one about fitting glasses for young babies. That was informative. (Dispensing Optician from Port Glasgow)

Improvements to the CET process and system

When asked about improvements that could be made to the CET system, some participants mentioned that they were asked to describe what they learnt each time they logged in to accept their CET points. This made it an onerous and time consuming task for some, particularly when accepting many points at once, and it can be difficult for registrants to recall specific things they learnt some time after they undertaken the CET.

Participants felt the GOC could look to simplify the system in order to make it easier for registrants to accept their points, such as asking for feedback straight away. Some also questioned why they needed to provide all of the information and whether anyone read what they wrote.

I do find the online evaluation a little tedious... Doing the evaluation on the night of the lecture would be better because otherwise you are doing it some time afterwards. (Optometrist from Ballymena, Northern Ireland)

All the questions, filling them all out.... Sometimes that is a bit time consuming. If you have ten points at the same time to accept, you have to fill out nearly the same thing every time. (Optometrist from Wrexham)

Some participants also questioned the quality and relevance of some CET that is available, particularly in relation to magazine articles that at times feel as if they are simple comprehension exercises, courses that were seemingly based on poor factual information or lectures that were not relevant to registrants' day to day practice. These participants felt that the GOC could do more to regulate the quality of CET and this would minimise the risk of registrants seeing CET as a 'tick box' exercise rather than an opportunity to gain new knowledge and skills.

Some of the lectures at hospital that I have been to, they are of little or no relevance to my day to day work....The only reason I go these lectures is because it gets me my CET points. (Dispensing Optician from High Wycombe)

Sometimes the quality of things you do is very poor. You have the ability to comment about it in your feedback, but there's no acknowledgement that anyone has read it. Some of the information that's given is just plain wrong. (Optometrist from Manchester)

The majority of participants said that they preferred interactive CET, such as peer discussions and lectures as they found these more useful than other forms of CET. For these participants, there could be more of a focus on interactive CET as far as the GOC is concerned.

I like the interactive CET. Peer discussion is actually really good...They are really useful. (Optometrist from Edinburgh)

Some participants felt that it was quite easy to achieve the required number of CET points, particularly those who worked for large national chains who provide ample opportunities to gain points via conferences, peer review discussions and training days. However, participants who worked for independent practices or who were self-employed explained that they sometimes struggled to find the time to gain the number of required points, particularly if they manage a business or have other commitments and responsibilities. There was also a perception that there were not always enough interactive CET opportunities available all year and across the country, with a bias towards London and the South East of England.

My last employer used to hold employee days where we could gain up to 14 points in a day, by doing workshops. It made it very easy. (Dispensing Optician from Oadby)

It's becoming increasingly more difficult to get the points, particularly if you are running a business and having to juggle paperwork and also maintaining your qualifications. (Dispensing Optician from London)

Most of them are in London. It would be great if there were more scattered about. (Optometrist from Chepstow)

Many dispensing opticians also perceived there was an unfairness when it came to CET as optometrists were provided with funding to gain their points, whereas there was little or no funding available to dispensing opticians in the majority of cases.

I have to have the same amount of CET points as my optometrist colleagues who get CET grants and dispensing opticians get nothing. I think that is very unfair. (Dispensing Optician from Ballyclare, Northern Ireland)

7. Views about the registration process

Key findings

- Nine in ten (93%) survey respondents rated their experience of the annual retention process as 'excellent' or 'very good'
- Survey respondents who worked for a chain (95%) were more likely to highly rate their experience of the annual retention process than those who worked for an independent business (92%)
- The majority (92%) of survey respondents rated their experience of using the MyGOC area of the website as 'excellent' or 'very good'
- Seven in ten (69%) survey respondents said they were 'definitely' clear about what should be declared to the GOC and when in terms of their health, disciplinary matters and criminal convictions, and a further 28% were clear 'to some extent'
- Dispensing opticians were more likely than optometrists to be 'definitely' clear about what should be declared and when (75% compared to 69%), as were respondents aged 55 and above in comparison to the other age groups and those from a White ethnic background compared to those from a non-White background (71% compared to 66%)
- In order to make it clearer to registrants about what should be declared and when, suggestions included developing a handbook or dedicated webpage (20%) and providing a list of common examples, FAQs and case studies (12%)
- Nine in ten (90%) had accessed the public online register at least once. Four in ten (43%) said they rarely accessed it and a third (33%) said they accessed it sometimes. Only one in twelve (8%) said they often accessed it
- Dispensing opticians and student dispensing opticians (45% and 47%) were more likely to access the register 'often' or 'sometimes' than optometrists (41%), as were respondents from England (43%), particularly compared to respondents from Northern Ireland (20%) and those working for a chain (45%) compared to those who worked for an independent business (36%)

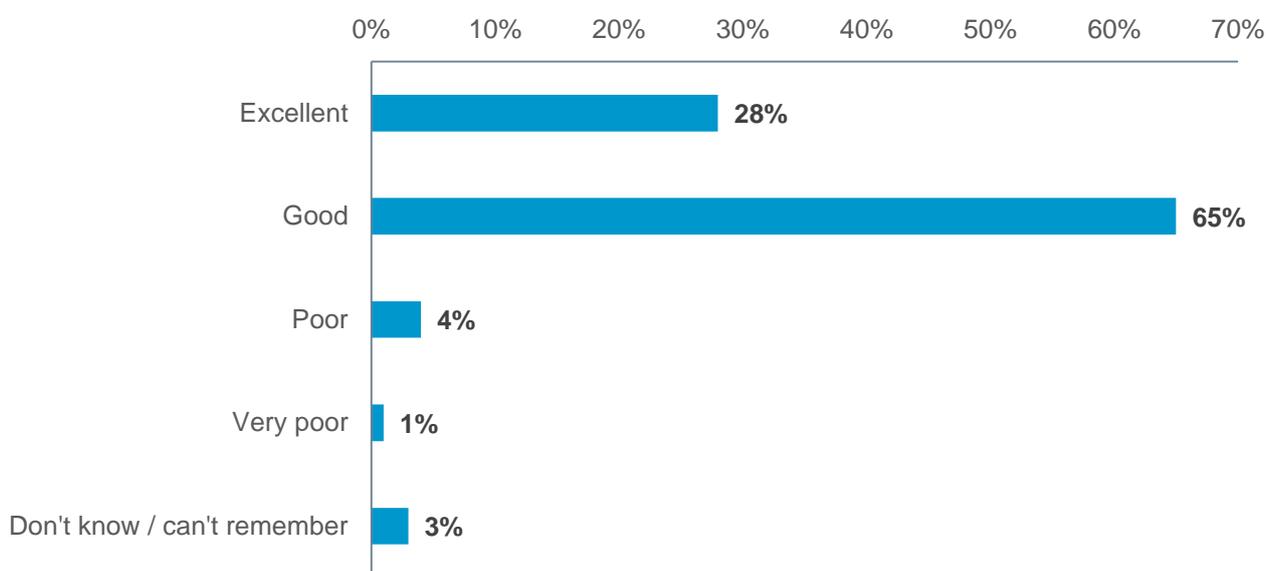
7.1 Experience of using the MyGOC area of website

The MyGOC area is used by registrants to update their details and complete their retention application. The GOC wanted to understand registrants’ experience of using the MyGOC area to help understand if any improvements could be made in the future.

Overall, the results were very positive with nine in ten (92%) respondents saying that their experience of using the MyGOC area was ‘excellent’ (28%) or ‘good’ (65%). Only 5% said their experience was ‘poor’ (4%) or ‘very poor’ (1%).

Figure 12 – How would you rate your experience of using the MyGOC area of the website?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to rate their experience of **using the MyGOC area of the website as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’** (92% overall) included those who:

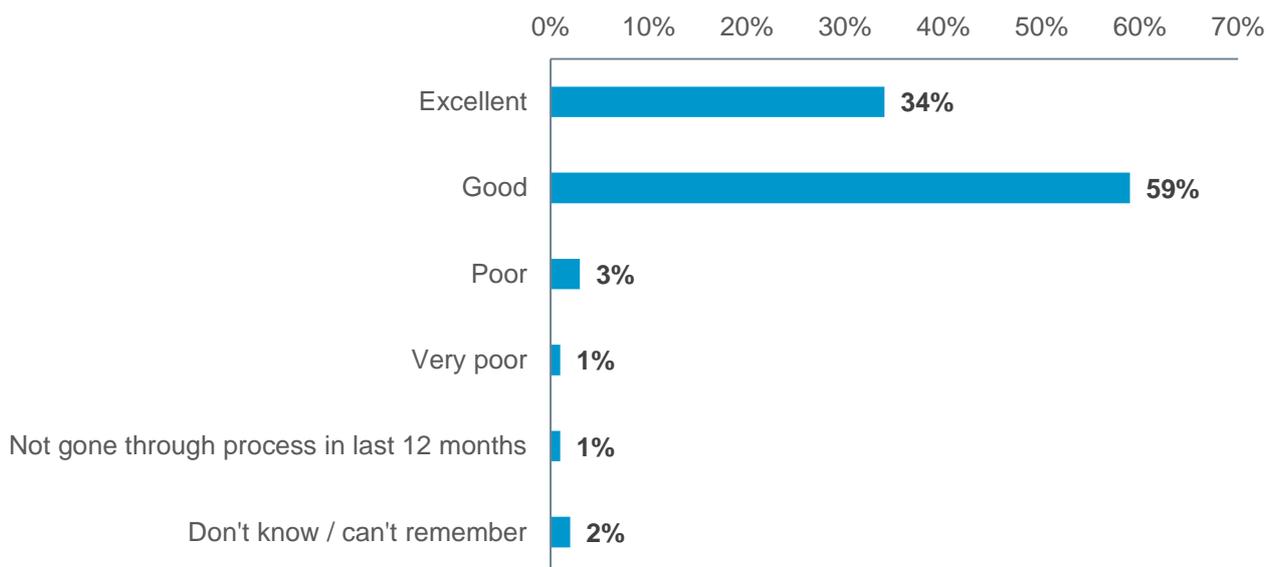
- Were optometrists (94%) and dispensing opticians (93%). By comparison, 82% of student optometrists and 90% of student dispensing opticians rated their experience as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’

7.2 Experience of the annual retention process

The GOC wanted to better understand registrants’ experience of the annual retention process. Overall, the results were positive with nine in ten (93%) respondents rating their experience of the annual retention process as ‘excellent’ (34%) or ‘very good’ (59%).

Figure 13 – If you have gone through the annual retention process in the last 12 months, how would you rate your experience?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups most likely to rate their **experience of the annual retention process as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’** (93% overall) included those who:

- Were optometrists (94%). By comparison, 91% of student optometrists rated their experience as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’
- Were aged 16-34 (94%) and 35-54 (94%) compared to those aged 55 and above (91%)
- Worked for a chain of opticians (95%) compared to an independent opticians (92%)

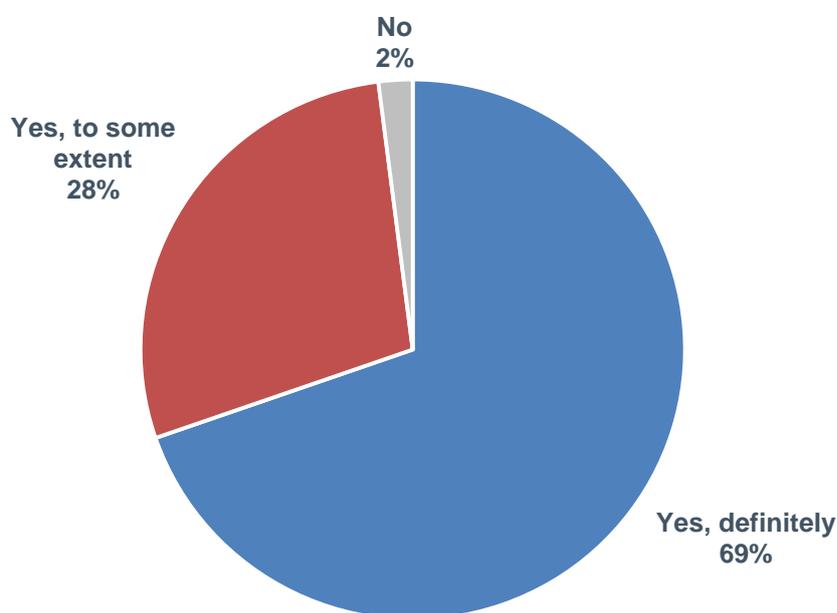
7.3 Clarity of what should be declared to the GOC and when

Registrants are required to make declarations to the GOC about their health, disciplinary matters and criminal convictions. The GOC was interested in understanding whether registrants were clear about what should be declared and when.

Seven in ten (69%) respondents said they were ‘definitely’ clear about what should be declared to the GOC and when regarding their health, disciplinary matters and criminal convictions and a further 28% said they were clear ‘to some extent’. Only 2% of respondents said they were not clear.

Figure 14 – Are you clear about what you should declare and when?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

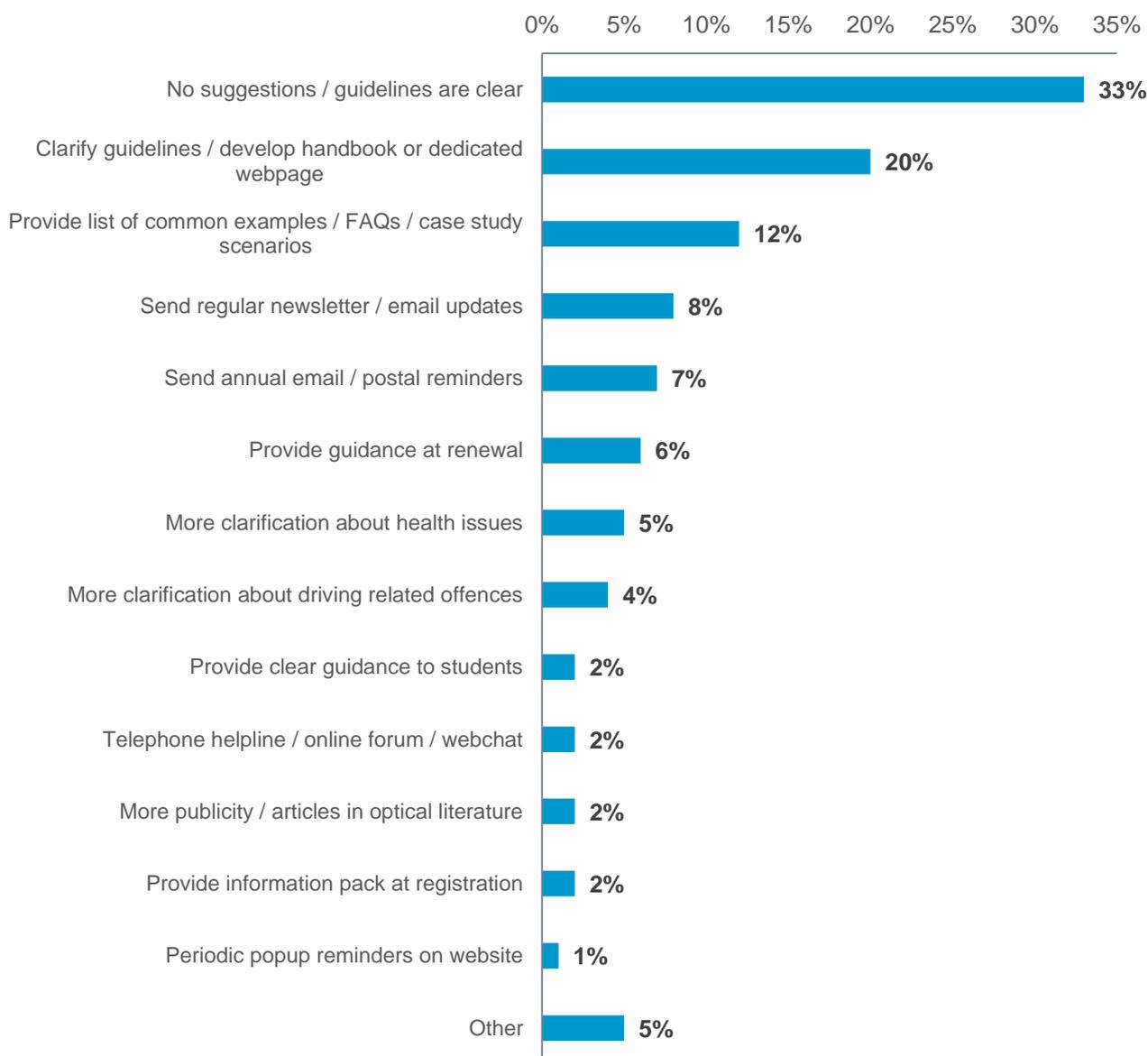
Subgroups most likely to say that they **were ‘definitely’ clear about what should be declared to the GOC and when** (69% overall) included those who:

- Were dispensing opticians (75%). By comparison 69% of optometrists were ‘definitely’ clear
- Were aged 55 and above (75%) compared to those aged 16-34 (65%)
- Were from White ethnic groups (71%) compared to those from non-White ethnic groups (66%)

Survey respondents were asked what the GOC could do to make it clearer to registrants what needs to be declared to the organisation and when. Respondents were able to type their responses into an open box. A third (33%) of respondents said they did not have any suggestions or that the guidelines were already clear enough and a fifth (20%) thought that the GOC could further clarify the guidelines and there were suggestions of developing a handbook or a webpage. One in eight (12%) made suggestions such as publishing common examples, a list of FAQs and case study scenarios. One in eight (12%) made suggestions such as publishing common examples, a list of FAQs and case study scenarios.

Figure 15 – What could the GOC do to make it clearer about what needs to be declared and when?

Base: Those who provided a comment (932)

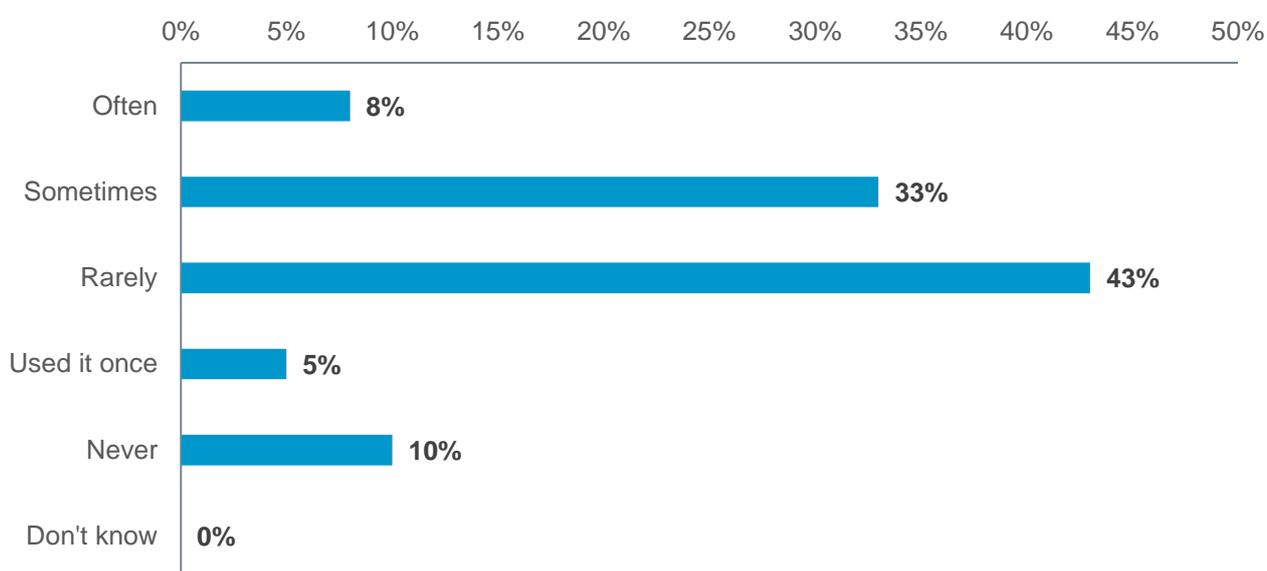


7.4 Frequency of accessing the public online register

The GOC currently hosts and maintains an online register of all registrants in the UK which is available publicly through the GOC website. The GOC was interested in knowing how often registrants access this online register.

Four in ten (41%) said that accessed the public online register ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’. Around half of respondents (48%) said that they ‘rarely’ used it or had used it once and a further one in ten (10%) said they had never used it.

Figure 16 – How often do you access the GOC public online register?
Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups most likely to say that they **used the GOC public online register ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’** (41% overall) included those who:

- Were dispensing opticians (45%) and student dispensing opticians (47%). By comparison 41% of optometrists and 31% of student optometrists used it ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’
- Were male (47%) compared to female (38%)
- Were aged 16-34 (43%) compared to those aged 35-54 (40%) and 55 and above (38%)
- Were from England (43%), particularly compared to Northern Ireland (20%)
- Worked for a chain (45%) compared to independent business (36%)

8. GOC Communication

Key findings

- Eight in ten (82%) survey respondents thought that the frequency of communication from the GOC was 'about right'
- Over three-quarters (78%) of respondents read the GOC eBulletin
- Optometrists and dispensing opticians (82% and 81%) were more likely to read it than student optometrists (72%) and student dispensing opticians (57%)
- Those who had been on the GOC register for 21 years or more (86%) and those working for an independent business were more likely to read it (83%), compared to those who had been on the register for less time and those working for a chain (76%)
- Nine in ten (89%) respondents said they found the eBulletin informative
- Student dispensing opticians and student optometrists (97% and 95%) were more likely to find the eBulletin informative than those who were fully qualified

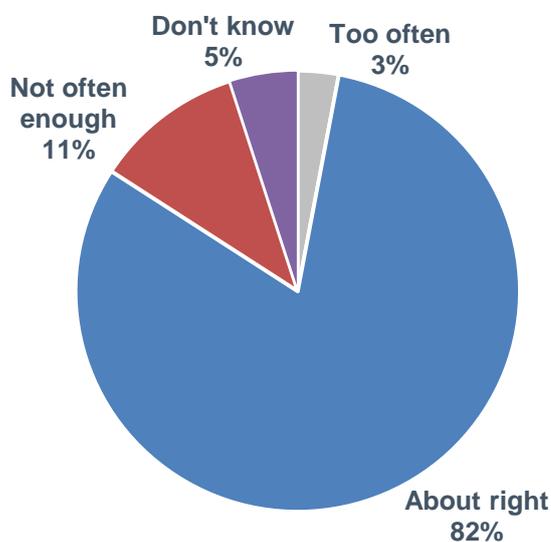
8.1 Frequency of communication

In order to determine how frequently the GOC should communicate with registrants, the survey asked respondents to describe how they felt about the frequency of current communication.

Eight in ten (82%) respondents said that the frequency of communication from the GOC was 'about right' and a further one in ten (11%) said it was 'not often enough'. Only 3% said that they felt that the GOC communicated with them too often.

Figure 17 – How would you describe the frequency that the GOC communicates with you?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



8.2 GOC eBulletin

The GOC sends an eBulletin to all registrants with a registered email address four times a year and was keen to understand whether registrants read it and if they found it informative.

Whilst the majority (78%) of respondents said that they read the GOC eBulletin, for most this was scan reading it (70%). One in twelve (8%) said they read it in detail and 16% said they did not read it. It seems the majority of registrants are sent the eBulletin however, as only 4% claimed to not receive it.

Of those who read the eBulletin, nine in ten (89%) said they found it either ‘very informative’ (8%) or ‘quite informative’ (81%). Around one in ten (11%) felt it was ‘not very informative’.

Figure 18 – Do you read the GOC eBulletin?

Base: All respondents (4,139)

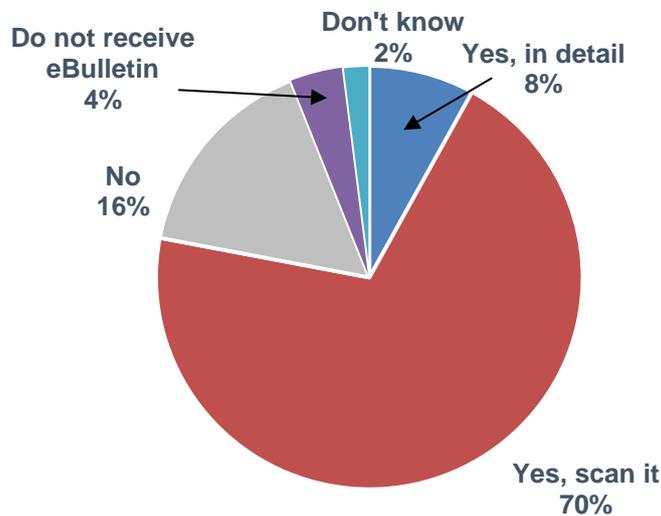
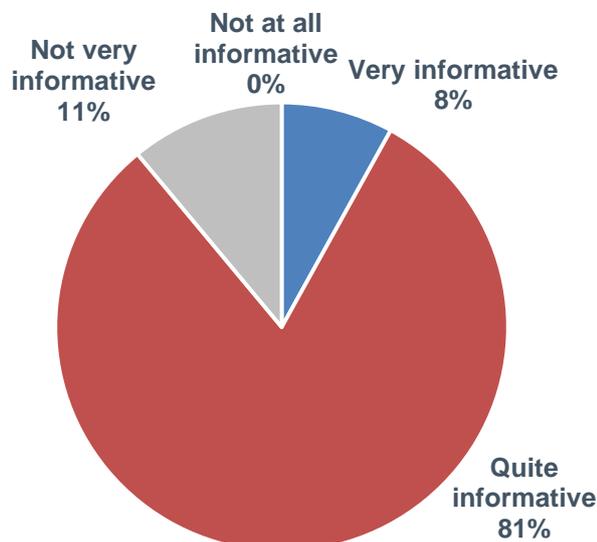


Figure 19 – How informative do you find the GOC eBulletin?

Base: Those who read the GOC eBulletin (3,293)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say that they **read the GOC eBulletin** either in detail or by scanning it (78% overall) included those who:

- Were optometrists (82%) and dispensing opticians (81%) compared to student optometrists (57%) and student dispensing opticians (72%)
- Were aged 35-54 (84%) and 55 and above (87%) compared to 16-34 year olds (69%)
- Had been registered with the GOC for 21 years or more (86%) or for 6-20 years (82%), particularly compared to those who had been on the register for less than five years (66%)
- Worked for an independent business (83%) compared to respondents who worked for a chain (76%)

Subgroups more likely to say that they found the **GOC eBulletin ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ informative** (89%) included those who:

- Were student optometrists (97%) and student dispensing opticians (95%) compared to optometrists (88%) and dispensing opticians (88%)
- Were female (92%) compared to male (85%)
- Were aged 16-34 (92%) compared to 35-54 year olds (88%) and those aged 55 and above (87%)
- Had been registered with the GOC for less than five years (94%) compared to those who had been on the register for 6-20 years (88%) and for more than 21 years (87%)
- Were from England (90%), Scotland (92%) and Northern Ireland (91%) compared to Wales (82%)
- Worked for a chain (91%) compared to respondents who worked for an independent business (86%)

9. GOC Customer Service

Key findings

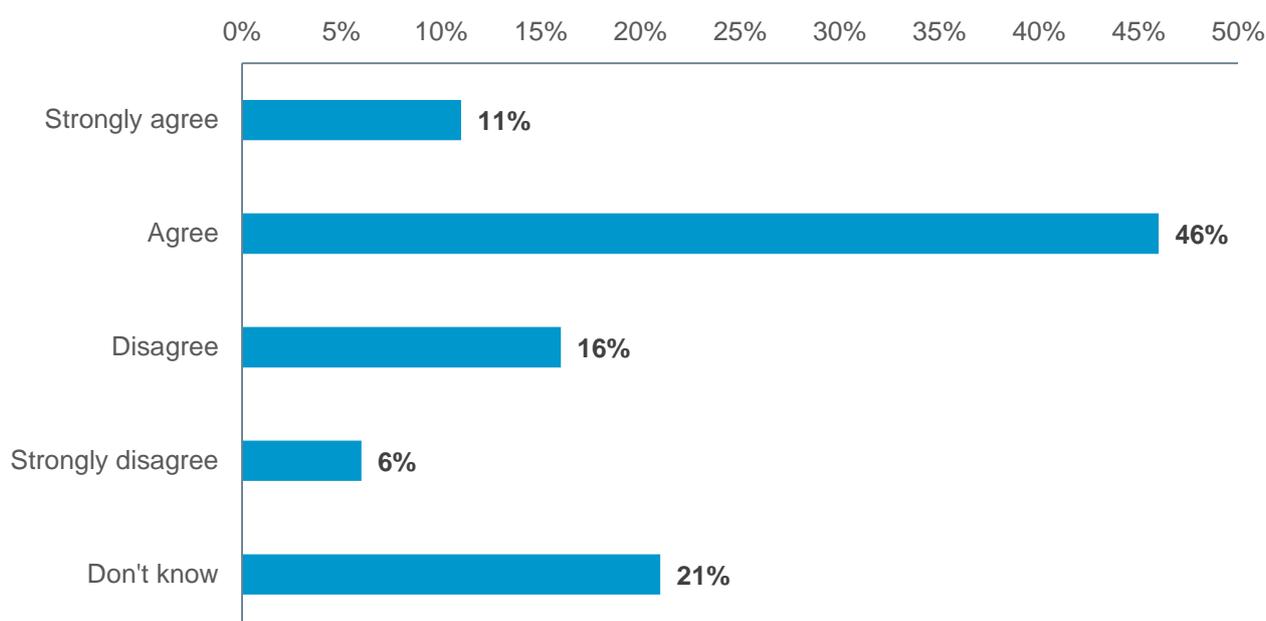
- Overall, almost six in ten (57%) survey respondents agreed that the GOC provides good customer service to its registrants
- A fifth (21%) said they did not know if the GOC provided good customer service to registrants
- Student optometrists (73%) and student dispensing opticians (75%) were more likely to agree that the GOC provides good customer service than dispensing opticians (58%) and optometrists (51%)
- Less than a fifth (18%) of survey respondents had contacted the GOC for information or a query in the last 12 months
- The majority (80%) of those who had contacted the GOC had their query or their request 'definitely' resolved (49%) or 'to some extent' (31%)
- The majority (82%) of those who had contacted the GOC had their query or their request 'definitely' dealt with promptly (48%) or resolved 'to some extent' (34%)

9.1 Customer service provision

Overall, almost six in ten (57%) of survey respondents agreed that the GOC provides good customer service to registrants (11% strongly agreed and 46% agreed). A fifth (21%) disagreed (16% disagreed and 6% strongly disagreed). However, it should be noted that a further fifth (21%) said they did not know, which indicates that some registrants may not have regular enough contact with the GOC to be able to answer the question.

Figure 20 – To what extent do you agree that the GOC provides good customer service to its registrants?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to agree that the GOC provides good customer service to registrants (57% overall) included those who:

- Were student dispensing opticians (75%) and student optometrists (73%), compared to optometrists (51%) and dispensing opticians (58%)
- Had been on the register for less than five years (68%) compared to those who had been on it for more than 21 years (50%)
- Worked for a chain (60%). By comparison 52% of those who worked for an independent business agreed

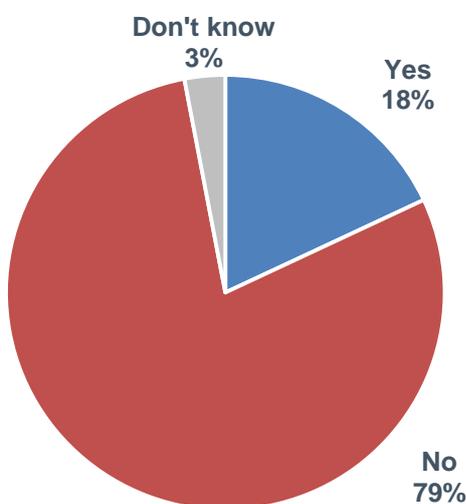
9.2 Contacting the GOC to request information or to make a query

The GOC was keen to understand what proportion of registrants contacted the organisation to request information or to make a query and to find out whether registrants felt their queries and requests were resolved satisfactorily and promptly.

Just under a fifth (18%) of respondents said that they had contacted the GOC in the last 12 months to request information or to make a query, leaving eight in ten respondents who did not make any contact (79%).

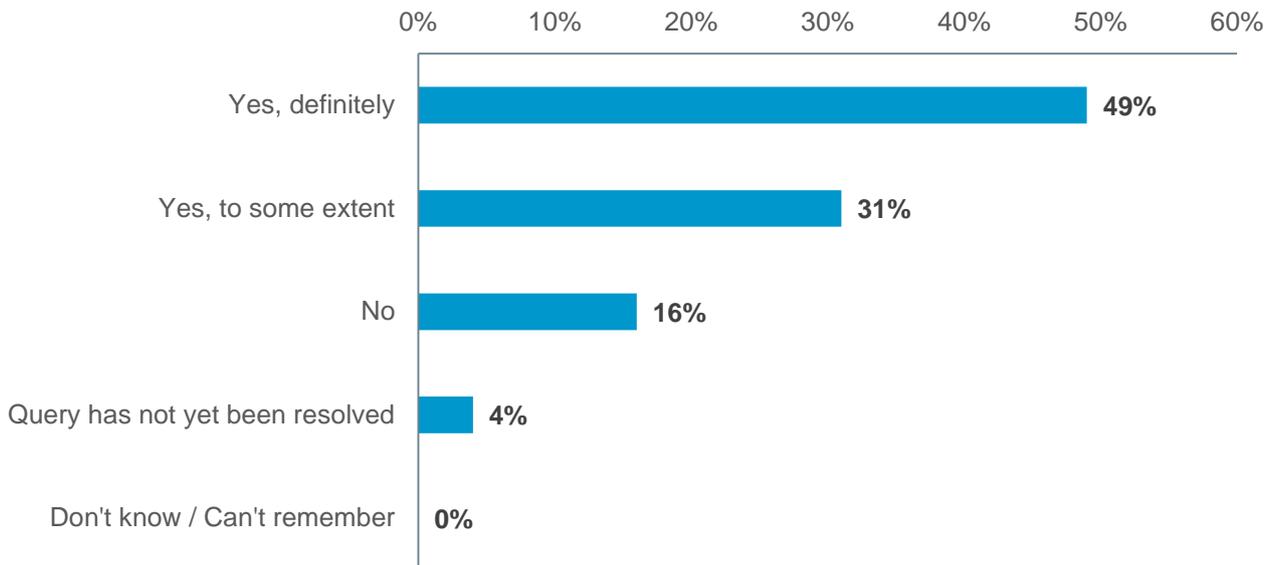
Figure 21 – Have you contacted the GOC to request information or make a query in the last 12 months?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



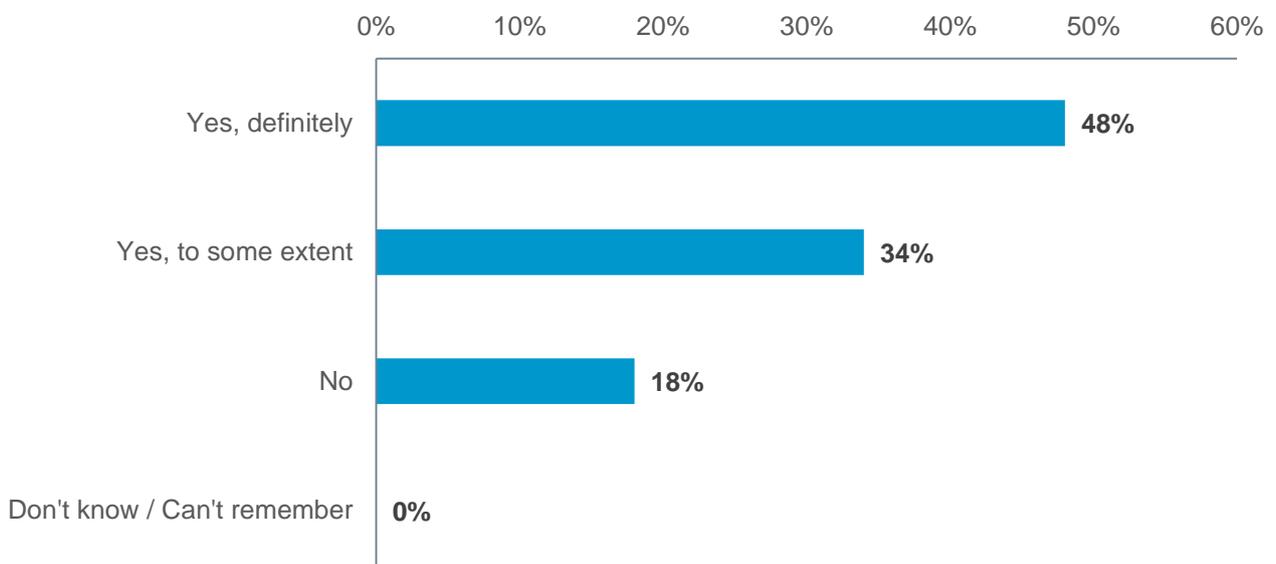
Of those who had contacted the GOC, eight in ten (80%) said their query had been resolved or they had received the information they needed either ‘definitely’ (49%) or ‘to some extent’ (31%). One in six (16%), however, said the query had not been resolved or they had not been given the information they needed, or they were still waiting (4%).

Figure 22 – Did you get the information you needed or was your query resolved?
Base: Those who had requested information or made a query in the last 12 months (747)



Just under half (48%) of respondents who had requested information or made a query said that it had been ‘definitely’ dealt with promptly and a further third (34%) said it had been ‘to some extent’. Just under a fifth (18%) said that a response had not been provided or a query resolved promptly.

Figure 23 – Was your query or request for information dealt with promptly by the GOC?
Base: Those who had had a request for information or query unresolved (717)



10. Challenges in the workplace

Key findings

- Overall, four in ten (41%) survey respondents said that they had 'definitely' or 'to some extent' felt under pressure by an employer or business to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed by a patient
- Almost half of respondents (47%) from Northern Ireland said that they had felt under pressure to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed by patients. By comparison, only 35% in Wales said they had experienced this
- 46% of those who worked for a chain said they had felt under some pressure in the past to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed by a patient, whilst 40% of those who worked for an independent business said they had felt this kind of pressure in the past
- 63% of those who worked as a locum said they had felt under some pressure in the past to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed by patients, compared to 38% of those who worked full-time
- A separate question was asked with regard to the impact of commercial pressures on patient care. In response, more than four in ten (45%) survey respondents had felt under pressure to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care
- 49% of those who worked for a chain said that they had felt under pressure at some point in the past to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care compared to 43% of those who worked for an independent business
- 66% of those who worked as a locum had felt this kind of pressure compared to 42% of those working full-time
- Optometrists (52%) were more likely to have felt this sort of pressure than dispensing opticians (35%)
- All focus group and interview participants at least knew of a fellow registrant who had had experienced commercial pressure and recognised it as an issue in the profession, with some having direct experience of it themselves. Pressure included having employment terminated, being reprimanded for not meeting targets, bonuses being affected and locums not being asked back to work
- Almost all participants who had experienced the commercial pressure to meet targets said that they had not bowed to the pressure and had always maintained their professional integrity
- Amongst participants there was a perception that many registrants are leaving the profession due to the commercial pressure that businesses and employers put them under, particularly those who are newly qualified. All participants knew at least one person who had left the industry and some had themselves left jobs for these reasons

Key findings (continued)

- There was a perception amongst focus group and interview participants that the commercial pressure to sell had worsened lately and will continue to get worse. Reasons for this included the increasing prevalence of large chains and the rise of online sales squeezing the market, the increased difficulty of customer retention and the ever increasing number of optometrists driving up competition for jobs
- Some participants felt the public was wise to the existence of this commercial pressure and therefore shopped around to get the best value for money. However, participants felt patients were perhaps most affected in regards to eye tests as employers put them under pressure to carry out a certain amount of eye tests in a day. This leads to registrants not being able to spend enough time with patients to carry out eye tests in the correct manner

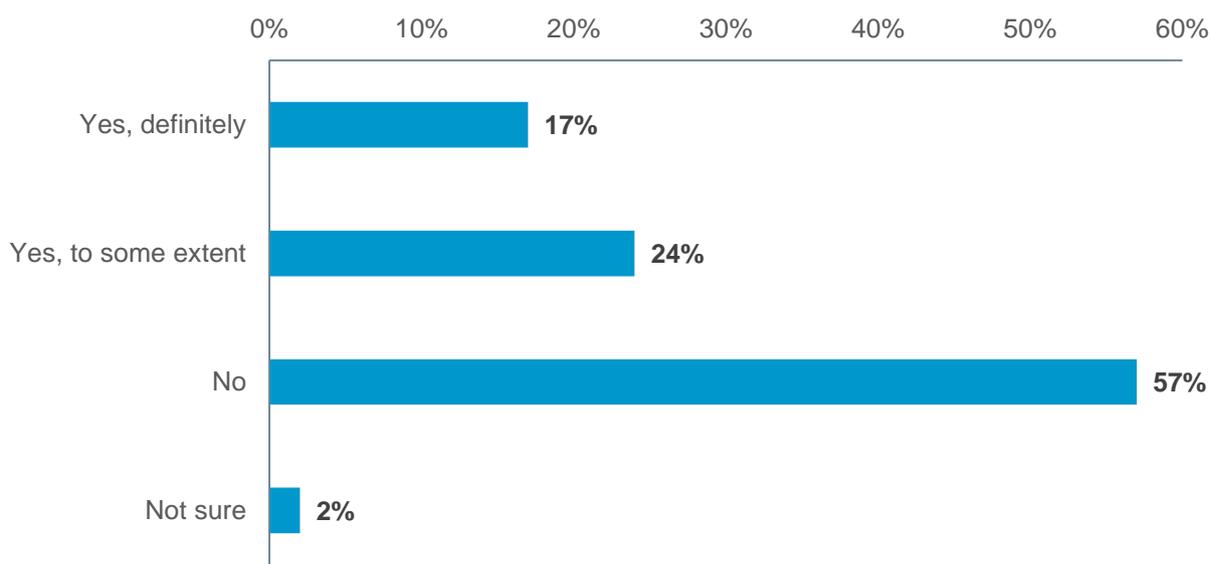
10.1 Pressure to sell products or provide services not needed by patients

The GOC was keen to find out whether its registrants had ever felt under pressure to sell a product or to provide a service that was not needed by patients and whether they had ever felt under pressure to meet targets at the expense of patient care. These findings will help support future GOC policy.

Four in ten (41%) respondents said that they had experienced pressure from an employer or business they worked for to sell a product or provide a service which was not needed by a patient. One in six (17%) said they had ‘definitely’ felt under pressure and a quarter (24%) to ‘some extent’. Almost three in five (57%), however, said they had not felt under pressure in this way.

Figure 24 – Have you ever felt under pressure by an employer or business you have worked for to sell a product or provide a service which you know is not needed by the patient?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say that they **had ‘definitely’ or ‘to some extent’ felt under pressure from an employer or business to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed by a patient** (41% overall) included those who:

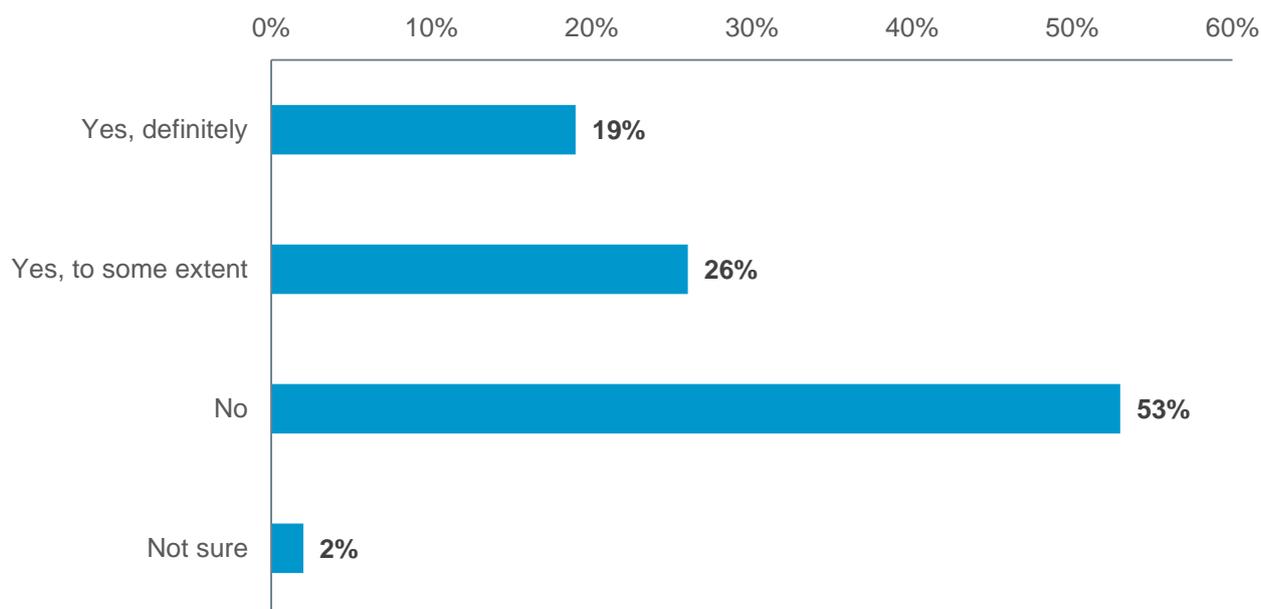
- Were optometrists (47%) compared to dispensing opticians (32%)
- Were aged 16-34 (43%) and 35-54 (43%) compared to those aged 55 and above (30%)
- Were from Northern Ireland (47%), particularly compared to Wales (35%)
- Worked for a chain (46%) compared to those who worked for an independent business (40%)
- Worked as a locum (63%), particularly compared to those working full-time (38%)

10.2 Pressure to meet commercial targets at expense of patient care

Over four in ten respondents (45%) said that they had felt under pressure from an employer or business that they had worked for to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care (19% ‘definitely’, 26% ‘to some extent’). Over half (53%) said that they had not experienced this type of pressure.

Figure 25 – Have you ever felt under pressure by an employer or business you have worked for to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say that they **had ‘definitely’ or ‘to some extent’ felt under pressure from an employer or business to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care** (45% overall) included those who:

- Were optometrists (52%) compared to dispensing opticians (35%), student dispensing opticians (37%) and student optometrists (37%)
- Were aged 16-34 (46%) and 35-54 (48%) compared to those aged 55 and above (31%)
- Worked for a chain (49%) compared to those who worked for an independent business (43%)
- Worked as a locum (66%), particularly compared to those working full-time (42%)

Focus group and in depth interview feedback

Pressure to meet targets

Amongst focus group and interview participants there was an almost even split between those who had experienced pressure to meet targets (including selling products that are not always needed by patients) and those who had not, although all participants at least knew of someone who had had this experience and were aware of the prevalence of pressure in the profession.

There was a widely held view that many employers are often primarily concerned with the commercial aspect of sales of glasses and lenses, rather than providing a healthcare service to patients and that registrants are sometimes put under pressure to compromise their professional responsibilities. However, the majority of participants were keen to stress that they had never given in to this pressure, taking pride in the service they provide to patients and putting them first ahead of sales targets.

We have conversion rates. You are assessed by how many people buy glasses or contact lenses after seeing you. The pressure is on you. (Optometrist from Ipswich)

I've certainly experienced that kind of pressure. I will not compromise and I've upset a few people by standing my ground. But I can sleep at night and haven't compromised my own integrity. (Optometrist from Cardiff)

Opinion was divided on whether or not there was more pressure to meet targets (such as conversion rates) when working for a chain or an independent business and some participants who had experience of working for both noted that independent businesses are often just as commercially focused as chains.

It was also noted that the majority of chains were franchises and therefore the commercial pressure put on employees would vary from store to store. However, those working for chains reported that they were often held accountable for meeting their targets by sales managers who were not qualified optical professionals and often saw patients simply as customers.

Can I just make the point that this is not just a multiple problem? Individual practices can be just as bad. (Dispensing Optician from Glasgow)

These targets come from non-registrants. My boss is not a GOC registrant. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

Amongst participants there were stories of registrants being reprimanded if they did not meet their targets, not receiving their salary bonus and losing their jobs. Locums also felt under pressure to meet targets such as conversion rates or conduct a certain number of eye tests so they are re-hired.

My wife used to work for [name taken out] and if they didn't hit their goals at the end of the week, they were ready to go at the end of the month. (Dispensing Optician from Cardiff)

You are always worrying that you want to have decent figures or good enough figures to be asked back to the stores you've been working in because you know there will be competition between the locums. (Optometrist from Coleraine, Northern Ireland)

However, some participants pointed out that the industry is dependent on the sale of glasses, frames and contact lenses as optical businesses often make a loss on eye examinations and it was felt that this was, in part, due to patients' expectations that the eye test should be low value or even free in some cases. Cheap and free eye tests often leave registrants feeling that their time is of little or no value.

You do not make your income from the professional services you are offering. You only make it from products you are selling. (Dispensing Optician from Glasgow)

It's so dispiriting. Sometimes you run over, you spend 40 minutes with a patient and then you've referred them, you've taken photographs, you've done repeat measures and then they hand you a voucher which is on the back of a bus ticket or something. (Optometrist from Birmingham)

When asked about whether they had raised the issue of pressure with their employer, a few registrants mentioned that they had done so in the past. However, they felt they were largely ignored and their concerns were not taken seriously. Other participants mentioned that in some cases registrants may be reluctant to raise an issue through fear of losing their job.

I brought it up so many times, but it falls on deaf ears. (Optometrist from Edinburgh)

If you stick your head above the parapet, you are a target. You are almost bullied into submission into leaving for ease of your sanity. (Dispensing Optician from London)

Some participants mentioned that they had left jobs because of the pressure to meet targets. There was also a perception that many newly qualified registrants leave their job or the profession altogether as their university courses and training do not prepare them adequately for the pressure of working in a retail environment.

I left a high-street practice because of the pressure to sell. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

Undergraduate students don't really have an awareness of that side of the profession so it can be quite a shock sometimes whenever they finish their training and pre-registration year...There's quite a few from my year who very quickly left the profession. (Optometrist from Coleraine)

The impact on patients

Some participants mentioned that as a result of targets, they are not able to spend enough time with patients to be able to carry out a full eye test in the correct manner. Others spoke of constantly being interrupted by colleagues during appointments to sign forms linked to dispensing lenses and frames, and make decisions, which meant there were constant distractions. This would then lead to spending even less time with patients which could pose a risk for the patient that something important might be missed. Some participants suggested that the GOC could introduce a minimum eye testing time which would help ensure the quality

of eye tests for patients and stop employers putting pressure on registrants to see as many patients as possible during a day.

They are reducing testing times to fit more people in...We are trying to rush our eye tests. (Optometrist from Newry, Northern Ireland)

The GOC should say the test should be x amount of time as a minimum. (Dispensing Optician from Birmingham)

When asked, participants thought that not all patients were necessarily aware of the commercial targets a store may have in place and others are wise to it. Some patients may have an eye test at one particular store and then go to another store or go online to buy lenses and frames in order to get a perceived value for money. There is a perception that more and more patients think of themselves as customers rather than patients and if they have a bad experience, rather than complain to the store or the GOC, they will simply take their custom elsewhere which is easy to do given the choice available in the market.

Patients' perception of money and value for money varies... I'll get my eye test there and then get my cheap glasses there. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

They are more concerned that they have spent a lot of money on a pair of glasses, rather than the quality of care they have received. It's a sad indictment on the profession's ability to communicate the importance of eye care to patients. (Optometrist from Newcastle)

Pressure to meet targets in the future

Some participants pointed out that there has always been commercial pressure to sell in the industry since de-regulation around 30 years ago. However, there is the perception that it has increased somewhat recently and will get worse in the future. A number of reasons for this were put forward, which included the increased prevalence of large chains and the rise of online sales squeezing the market, the increased difficulty of retaining customers and the ever increasing number of optometrists driving up the competition for jobs.

It's the worst it's ever been. I am seriously contemplating de-registering...I think it's the corporates. They have devalued eye care to the point where it is almost a disposable thing. (Optometrist from Newcastle)

There are loads of optometrists coming in, trying to crowd onto a very small market and this puts us under pressure. It's supply and demand, there are too many of us. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

It was also suggested that the GOC could support them more in terms of representing their interests when their professionalism is compromised by employers' targets.

The GOC needs to start talking to the employers, as well as registrants. It is the big thing that is missing. Employers have to take on board that the Code of Conduct has to happen. (Dispensing Optician from Birmingham)

11. Raising concerns

The GOC was interested in registrants' views about raising concerns about poor practice in the workplace to determine how best to support registrants to raise concerns in the future.

Key findings

- Four in ten (40%) survey respondents would not feel confident with raising a concern to their employer
- A higher proportion of survey respondents would feel confident about reporting a concern to their employer (52%) than to the GOC (47%)
- Dispensing opticians were more likely to feel comfortable about raising concerns with their employer than optometrists (58% compared to 48%), as were those in full-time employment compared to locums (56% compared to 43%)
- There was a consensus amongst focus group and interview participants that comfort with raising a concern with an employer was dependent on the employer-employee relationship, but some people would be fearful that raising a concern could lead to difficult working relationships and losing their job, particularly in independent businesses
- Only 47% said they would feel comfortable with raising a concern with the GOC
- Three in ten (31%) survey respondents said they would not feel confident that the GOC would protect their identity and interests if they did report a concern and a fifth (19%) said they did not know
- Student optometrists (59%) and student dispensing opticians (69%) were more likely to say that they would feel more comfortable raising a concern with the GOC than fully qualified dispensing opticians (54%) and optometrists (39%)
- Most participants would only report a concern to the GOC if it was very serious and only if the concern had not been resolved any other way, but would not feel comfortable doing so given the consequences it might have for those involved
- Most participants would not feel confident that the GOC would protect their identity and interests if they were to raise a concern, but this was mostly due to a lack of awareness about how the fitness to practise process works. However, like reporting a concern to an employer, participants had the same worries about it leading to difficult working relationships and job security if they were identified
- Respondents who worked for a chain (50%) were more likely to be confident that the GOC would protect their identity and interests than those working for an independent business (46%), and so were those who worked full-time (52%) compared to locums (39%)
- Just over half of survey respondents (51%) said they were aware of the role of the Optical Consumer Complaints Service (OCCS). Those most likely to be aware included those aged 55 and above (72%), and those who worked full-time (54%)

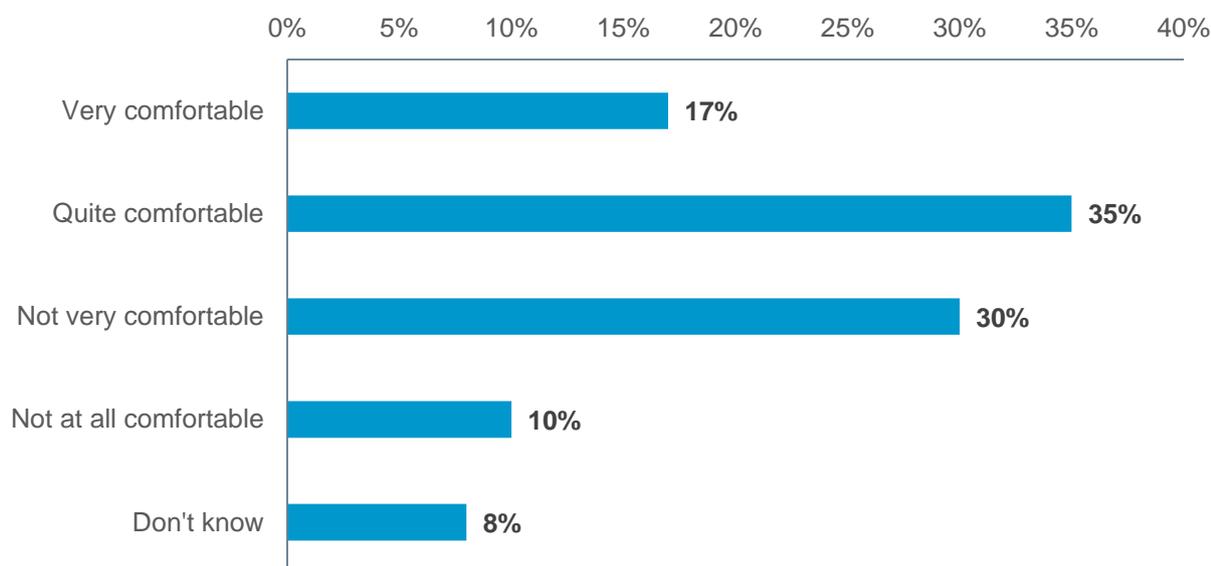
11.1 Raising fitness to practise concerns with employer and the GOC

Respondents were asked to state how comfortable they were with raising a fitness to practise concern with their employer and with the GOC. A larger proportion of respondents said that they would feel comfortable with raising a fitness to practise concern with their employer (52%) than with the GOC (47%).

One in six (17%) respondents said that they would feel ‘very’ comfortable with raising a fitness to practise concern with their employer and a further third (35%) would feel ‘quite’ comfortable. However, this leaves four in ten respondents (40%) who would feel ‘not very’ comfortable (30%) or ‘not at all’ comfortable (10%) about raising a concern with their employer.

Figure 26 – How comfortable would you feel about raising a fitness to practise concern with your employer?

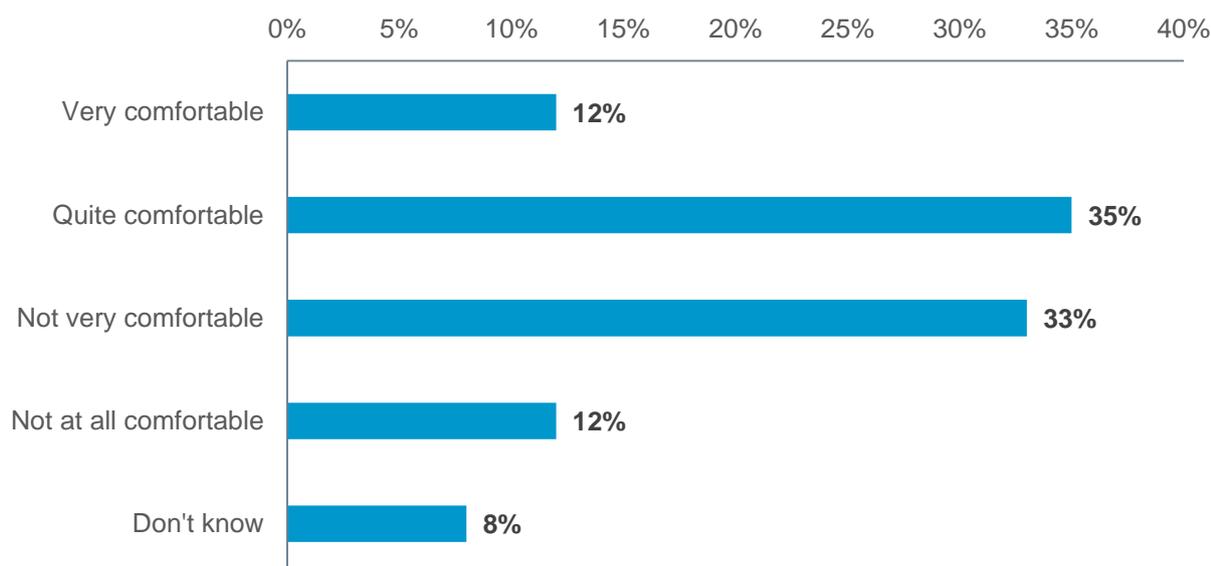
Base: All respondents (4,139)



Only one in eight respondents (12%) said that they would feel ‘very’ comfortable about raising a concern with the GOC and a further third (35%) would feel ‘quite’ comfortable. Over two in five (45%) said that they would feel ‘not very’ comfortable (33%) or ‘not at all comfortable’ (12%) with raising a concern with the GOC.

Figure 27 – How comfortable would you feel about raising a fitness to practise concern with the GOC?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say that **they felt ‘very’ or ‘quite’ comfortable about raising a fitness to practise concern with their employer** (52% overall) included those who:

- Were dispensing opticians (58%) and student dispensing opticians (60%) compared to optometrists (48%), and student optometrists (51%)
- Were male (56%) compared to female (50%)
- Worked full-time (56%), particularly compared to those working part-time (47%) and as a locum (43%)

Subgroups more likely to say that **they felt ‘very’ or ‘quite’ comfortable about raising a fitness to practise concern with the GOC** (47% overall) included those who:

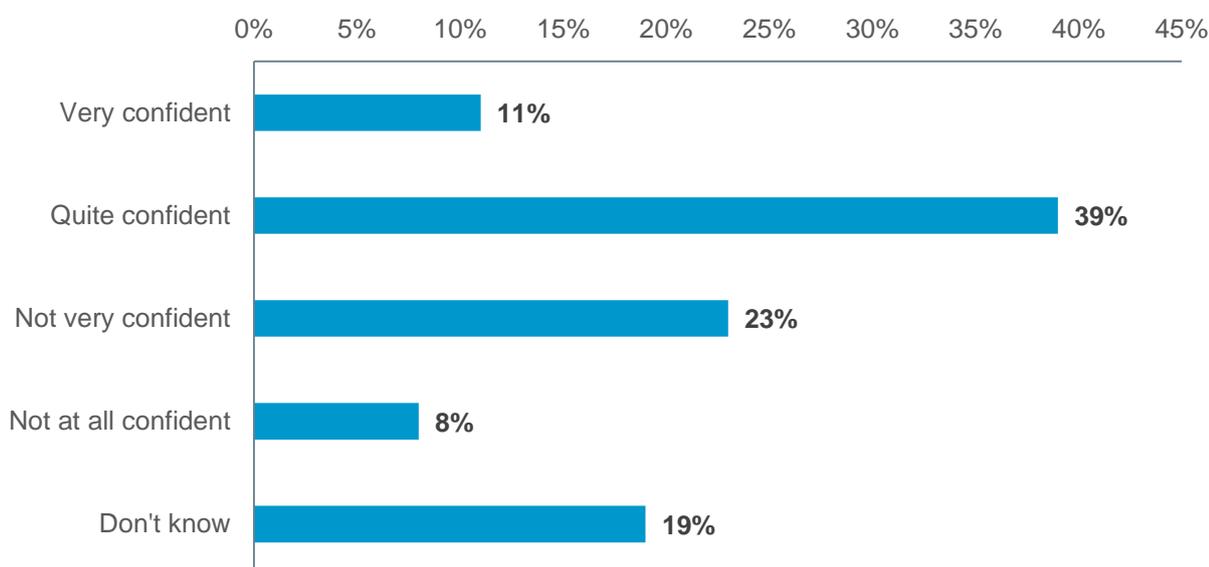
- Were student optometrists (59%), student dispensing opticians (69%) and dispensing opticians (54%) compared to optometrists (39%)
- Were aged 16-34 (50%), particularly compared to those aged 55 and above (40%)
- Had been on the GOC register for less than five years (57%), compared to those who had been on the register for 6-20 years (44%) and for more than 21 years (41%)

11.2 Confidence in GOC protecting identities and interests when raising a concern

All respondents were asked how confident they would feel that the GOC would protect their identity and interests if they raised a concern about another registrant or business. One in ten (11%) respondents felt ‘very’ confident and a further four in ten (39%) felt ‘quite’ confident. A quarter (23%) did not feel very confident and one in ten (8%) did not feel confident at all. It should also be noted that a fifth (19%) of respondents said they did not know in relation to this question, perhaps indicating a low level of awareness amongst registrants as to how the GOC acts when a concern has been raised.

Figure 28 – If you were to raise a concern about another registrant or optical business in the future, how confident would you be that the GOC would protect your identity and interests?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely say they would **feel confident that the GOC would protect their identity and interests if they raised a concern** (50% overall) included those who:

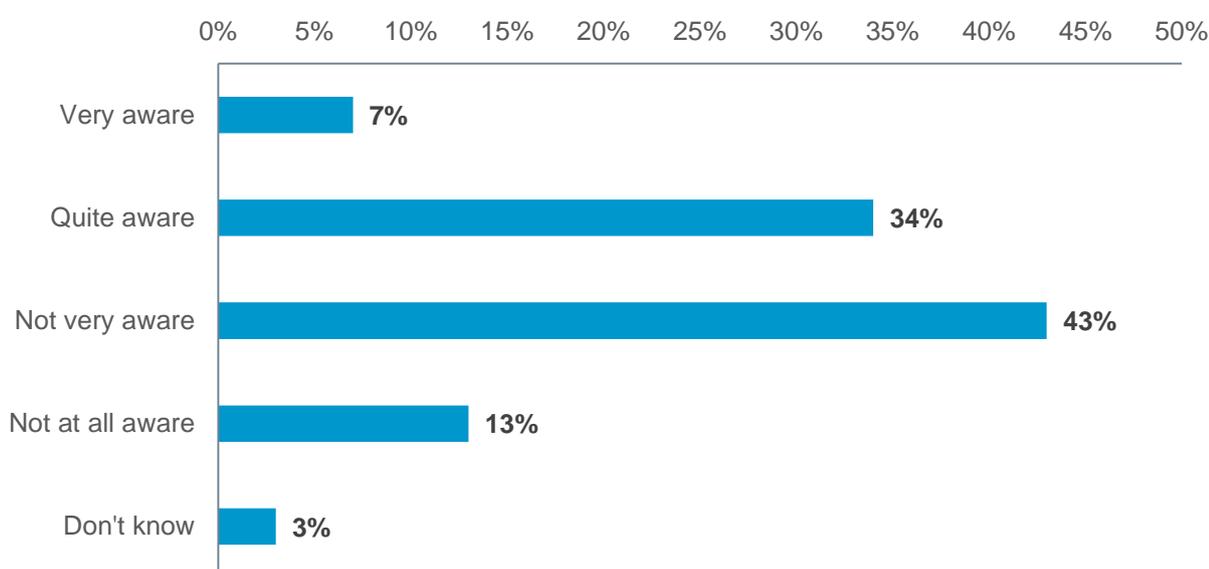
- Were student optometrists (66%) and student dispensing opticians (72%) compared to dispensing opticians (52%) and optometrists (43%)
- Were aged 16-34 (56%) compared to 35-54 and 55+ (both 46%)
- Had been on the GOC register for less than five years (62%) compared to 6-20 years (45%) and 21+ years (43%)
- Worked for a chain (50%) compared to an independent business (46%)
- Worked full-time (52%), particularly compared to those who worked as locums (39%)

11.3 Awareness of the ‘Raising Concerns with the GOC (Whistleblowing)’ policy

The GOC has recently introduced a new policy called ‘Raising Concerns with the GOC (Whistleblowing)’ and was keen to understand how many registrants were aware of the new policy. Almost three in five (56%) respondents said that they were ‘not very’ (43%) or ‘not at all’ (13%) aware of the new policy. Four in ten (41%), however, said that they were either ‘very’ (7%) or ‘quite’ (34%) aware of it.

Figure 29 – How aware are you of the GOC’s new policy ‘Raising concerns with the GOC (Whistleblowing)?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say they were **aware of the new ‘Raising concerns with the GOC (Whistleblowing) policy** (41% overall) included those who:

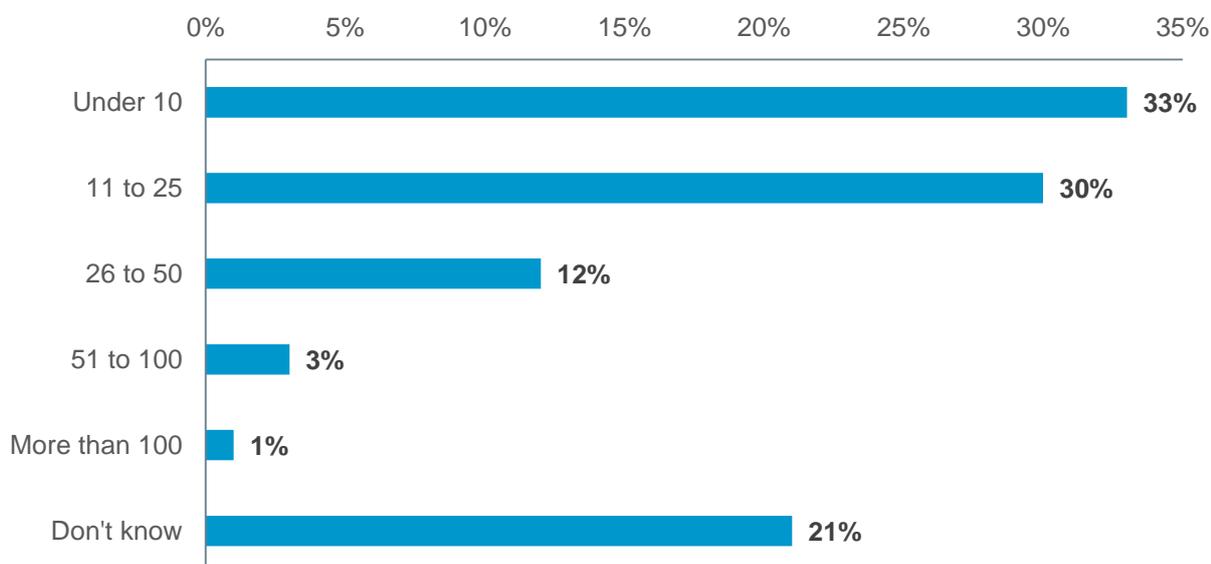
- Were aged 55 and above (51%), particularly compared to 16-34 year olds (33%)
- Had been on the GOC register for more than 21 years (51%), particularly compared to those who had been on the register for less than five years (35%)
- Worked full-time (42%), particularly compared to those who worked part-time (38%)

11.4 Removing registrants from the register

Respondents were asked to estimate the number of registrants that the GOC removes each year from the register due to fitness to practise proceedings. One third (33%) estimated that the number was under 10, and three in ten (30%) thought the number was between 11 and 25. Only 16% believed the number was above 26 and a fifth (21%) of respondents said they did not know the answer, again highlighting low levels of awareness of the fitness to practise process.

Figure 30 – How many registrants do you think the GOC removes from the register each year due to fitness to practise proceedings?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

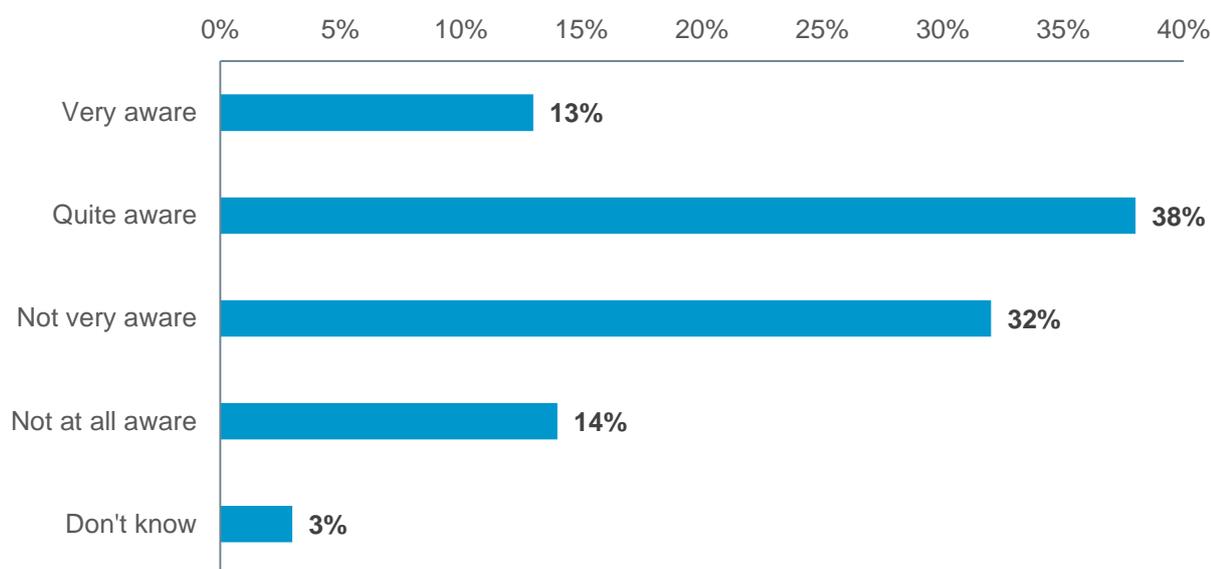
Subgroups more likely say they thought the **GOC removed 25 or fewer registrants from the register each year due to fitness to practise proceedings** (62% overall) included those who:

- Were optometrists (72%), particularly compared to dispensing opticians (50%)
- Were male (67%) compared to female respondents (60%)
- Were aged 55 and above (68%), particularly compared to 16-34 year olds (59%)
- Had been on the GOC register for more than 21 years (69%), particularly compared to those who had been on the register for less than five years (56%)
- Worked for an independent business (65%), particularly compared to those who worked for a chain (61%)
- Worked as a locum (68%), particularly compared to those who worked full-time (62%)

11.5 Awareness of the role of the OCCS

All respondents were asked how aware they were of the Optical Consumer Complaints Service (OCCS) in providing a free mediation service to help resolve consumer complaints. Just over half (51%) of respondents said they were aware, either ‘very’ (13%) or ‘quite’ aware (38%). However, more than four in ten (46%) said that they were ‘not very’ (32%) or ‘not at all’ (14%) aware of the service.

**Figure 31 – How aware are you of the role of the Optical Consumer Complaints Service (OCCS) in providing a free mediation service to help resolve consumer complaints?
Base: All respondents (4,139)**



Subgroups more likely to say that they were **aware of the role of the OCCS** (51% overall) included those who:

- Were optometrists (58%), particularly when compared to student optometrists (28%)
- Were male (63%) compared to female (44%)
- Were aged 55 and above (72%) compared to other age groups
- Had been on the GOC register for more than 21 years (71%), particularly compared to those who had been on the register for less than five years (34%)
- Were from a White ethnic background (56%) compared to those from a non-White ethnic background (38%)
- Worked full-time (54%), particularly compared to those who worked part-time (47%)

Focus group and in depth interview feedback

Encountering an issue or concern about the practice of a fellow registrant or the way a business is run

When asked what they would do in the first instance if they encountered an issue or concern about the practice of a fellow registrant or the way an organisation was run, most participants said that it would depend on the circumstances and that it would be a 'judgement call'. If it was a concern about a fellow registrant, the majority would speak to the person directly to find a resolution or speak to someone else within their practice such as a colleague or a line manager. In some cases, some participants would speak to the Association of Optometrists or the Association of Dispensing Opticians for advice, particularly if it related to the way an organisation was run.

It depends on the severity of the case. If I saw a one-off, something minor I might just have a word with the registrant to further clarify. (Optometrist from Swansea)

I would talk to the AOP for guidance... They can give you legal advice or just discuss it with you. (Optometrist from Belfast)

Raising a concern or issue with an employer

Some participants said they would feel comfortable about raising a concern or issue with an employer and others said they would not. It seemed that this was often dependent on the nature of the relationship between the employee and the employer. There were some participants who said they would be scared of raising concerns as this may affect their job security. There were a few participants who had had experience of raising concerns with their employer and they reported satisfactory outcomes.

I was working with someone who appeared to be doing all the right tests, but he wasn't. But he was my boss, I was his employee. (Optometrist from Cardiff)

I took advice from a friend and brought it to the attention of the store director and then it was sorted out with the supervisor of the pre-reg and no further problem occurred. (Dispensing Optician from Oadby)

There was a suggestion that it is perhaps easier to raise a concern in a large chain of opticians in comparison to an independent business. Chains often have a dedicated channel, such as an HR department, or a fellow employee whose job it is to deal with these sorts of issues. It may be harder, on the other hand, to raise a concern within an independent business as it could lead to a breakdown in trust amongst employees that would affect working relationships. However, some participants pointed out that concerns may not always be dealt with as they should by chains as there may be a desire to protect the brand.

In a multiple you're quite lucky as there are specific colleagues who are there to deal with that kind of work. (Dispensing Optician from Cardiff)

The person would be able to work out very easily who had raised it if it was a very small practice. You'd be quite vulnerable. (Optometrist from Cardiff)

Something was raised to an employer but they didn't take it to the GOC... they pretty much did nothing about it... there was an element of them protecting their name. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

Raising a concern or issue with the GOC

Most participants felt that the concern would have to be of a very serious nature, with all other means of resolution exhausted before they raised it with the GOC and even then they would need to be sure of all of the facts. Although most could come up with examples of when it would be appropriate to raise a concern with the GOC, there were a few participants who struggled to think of scenarios of when it would be appropriate and a few also admitted that they would not know how to raise a concern.

When it's out of your hands and is serious enough, you have to go to the GOC... I wouldn't feel comfortable but if it's got to be done, it's got to be done. (Dispensing Optician from Port Glasgow)

If I was to raise something with the GOC, I would have to be 100% sure with the situation. There would be no comeback from it. (Dispensing Optician from Nottingham)

I'm struggling to think of anything I would go to the GOC about. I can't think of a scenario. (Optometrist from Cardiff)

On the whole, very few participants said they would feel comfortable about raising a concern with the GOC. Some said they were scared of the GOC, having heard stories of the fitness to practise process and the impact that it can have on registrants concerned, in terms of the stress it can put them under. For these participants, this would put them off approaching the GOC if they had a concern as they know one of the consequences of reporting the concern could be the loss of a fellow registrant's livelihood. Some also speculated that some employers actively discourage registrants from raising concerns with the GOC given the consequences this may have for the business and the individuals concerned.

I wouldn't feel comfortable about going to the GOC. I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that myself. (Optometrist from London)

When I was studying for my dispensing course the GOC were made out to be a big scary entity. They have the power to strip you of all of your qualifications and leave you destitute if you put a foot wrong. The fear is really ingrained in you when you are studying. (Dispensing Optician from High Wycombe)

Employers maybe feel they don't want to go down that route and destroy that person's career. (Dispensing Optician from Manchester)

When asked if they felt the GOC would protect their identity and interests if they were to raise a concern, a few said they would be confident that this would happen. However, for most they would not feel confident, although this is largely due to a lack of awareness about how the fitness to practise process works. There was also speculation that safeguarding people's identity would be difficult in small stores once a complaint had been reported and this could

lead to difficult working relationships. A few participants even said they would fear losing their own job and this would be enough to put them off raising a concern with the GOC.

The other opticians are going to hate you...No-one would trust you. (Optometrist from Wrexham)

The consequence may be that you lose your job. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

12. The future of the optical professions

The GOC wanted to find out how optimistic registrants are about the future of the profession and how they see their roles evolving over the next five years. They also wanted to find out more about whether registrants are involved, or would like to be involved, in delivering enhanced services and any barriers against delivering these.

Key findings

- Six in ten (62%) survey respondents said they were optimistic about the future of their profession
- Survey respondents from Scotland were more optimistic (75%) than those from England (60%), as were those who worked for a chain of opticians (65%) compared to those working for an independent business (53%)
- Almost nine in ten (87%) survey respondents thought that their role would change significantly in the next five years
- Optometrists were more likely to say that they thought that their role would change significantly (89%) compared to dispensing opticians (83%), as were respondents from Northern Ireland (93%) compared to England (87%)
- Almost seven in ten respondents (69%) felt that technological changes would be a reason for a change in their role
- Six in ten (62%) felt that a higher expectation from the government and regulators would be the reason for the change in their role
- Over half felt that an ageing population (55%) and changes in consumer behaviour (54%) would be the reasons for changes in their role
- Optometrists were more likely to be involved in delivering enhanced NHS services (47%) than dispensing opticians (36%)
- Three-quarters of survey respondents from Wales (75%) said they were involved in the delivery of enhanced services, by contrast only 38% of respondents from England said they were
- Almost nine in ten (87%) survey respondents said they were supportive of the NHS plans for more enhanced services to be delivered in the community
- Respondents from England showed the lowest level of support, with 86% saying they were supportive compared to 93% from Scotland, 94% from Wales and 93% from Northern Ireland
- Amongst focus group and interview participants there was enthusiasm for these plans, particularly amongst optometrists who thought that they would lead to more challenging and varied work
- A fifth of respondents (19%) who said they did not see themselves playing a role in the provision of enhanced services in the future said it was not cost effective to gain these qualifications (17%), it was difficult to access the right training (14%) and because their employer was not interested (12%)
- Optometrists were asked if they had considered gaining additional qualifications to prescribe medicines or assist in the management of patients' eye conditions. Six in ten (64%) said that they had

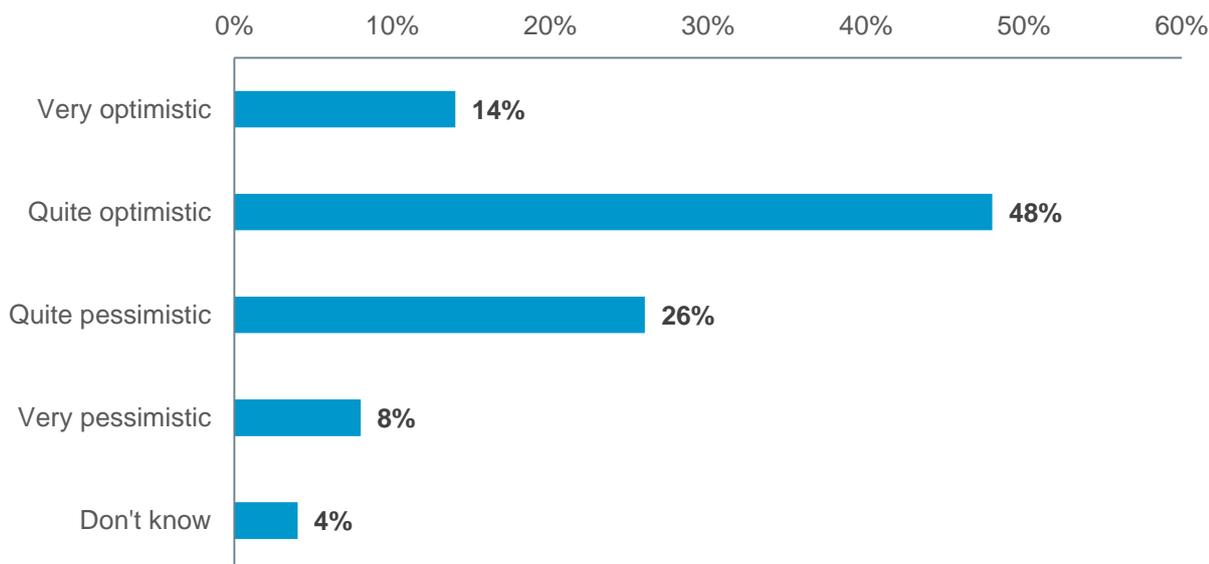
Key findings (continued)

- Of those survey respondents who said they had not considered additional qualifications, 37% said that it was because they did not have the time to study, 34% had no opportunity to use it in practice, 33% said it was not part of their long-term career plan and 17% said it was because they could not afford the training

12.1 Optimism about the future of the profession

All respondents were asked how optimistic they were about the future of their profession. Six in ten (62%) respondents said they were optimistic, either ‘very’ (14%) or ‘quite’ optimistic (48%). However, a third (34%) of respondents said that they were ‘quite’ (26%) or ‘very’ (8%) pessimistic about the future of their profession.

**Figure 32 – How optimistic would you say you are about the future of your profession?
Base: All respondents (4,139)**



Subgroups more likely to say that they were **optimistic about the future of their profession** (62% overall) included those who:

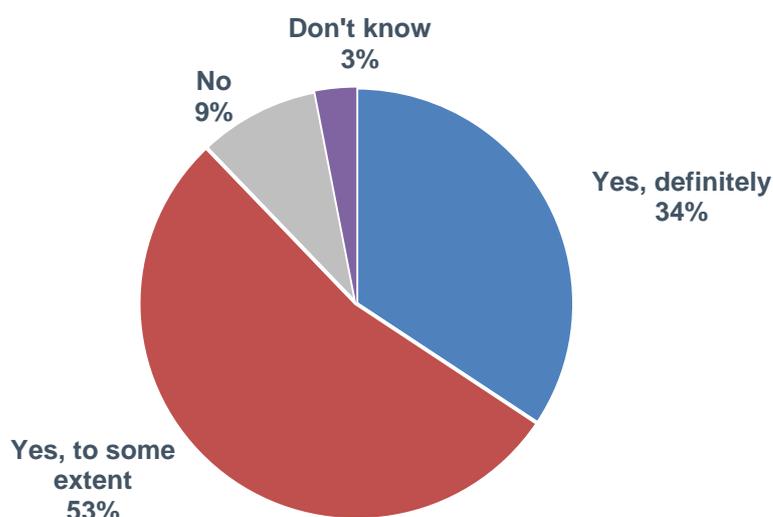
- Were from Scotland (75%), particularly compared to those from England (60%)
- Were student optometrists and student dispensing opticians (both 83%), compared to fully qualified dispensing opticians (65%) and optometrists (53%)
- Were aged 16-34 (69%), particularly compared to those aged 55 and above (53%)
- Had been on the GOC register for less than five years (77%), particularly compared to those who had been on the register for more than 21 years (53%)
- Worked for a chain (65%), particularly compared to those working for an independent business (53%)
- Worked full-time (63%) and part-time (62%) compared to those who worked as locums (45%)

12.2 Change in role over the next five years

The GOC was keen to understand whether registrants felt their role would change significantly over the next five years and what registrants felt the reasons would be for this change.

A third (34%) of respondents said they thought their role would ‘definitely’ change significantly and over half (53%) said they thought it would change ‘to some extent’. Only one in ten (9%) respondents felt that their role would not significantly change in the next five years.

Figure 33 – Do you think your role will change significantly in the next five years?
Base: All respondents (4,139)

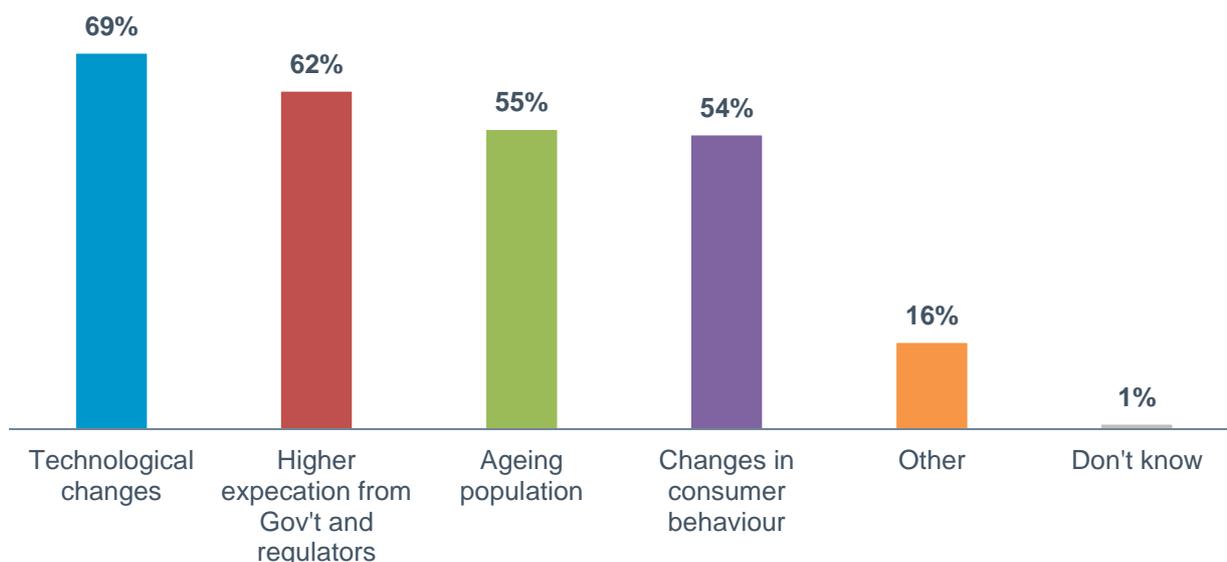


When asked about what they thought the reasons would be for the change, seven in ten (69%) respondents said it would be technological changes (such as auto-refraction for example) and six in ten (62%) thought there would be higher expectations from the Government and regulators about the type of care that optical professionals should deliver. Over half also felt that an ageing population (55%) and changes in consumer behaviour (54%) would lead to a significant change in their role.

One in six (16%) said there was another reason why they thought their role would change. Other reasons included:

- playing a wider role in providing enhanced services like diagnosing and treating patients
- completing training, changing career or retiring in the next five years
- more commercial pressure, with increased competition from online suppliers and alternative dispensers would mean more of a focus on more sales and profit
- too many new optometrists meaning there would be increased competition for jobs and reduced wages
- an increasing pressure from the NHS coupled with a lack of funding

Figure 34 – What are the reasons why you think it will change?
Base: Those who think their role will change in the next five years (3,620)



Subgroups more likely to say that they think **their role will ‘definitely’ or ‘to some extent’ change significantly in the next five years** (87% overall) included those who:

- Were optometrists (89%) compared to dispensing opticians (83%)
- Were from Northern Ireland (93%) and Wales (91%), particularly compared to those from England (87%)
- Worked for a chain (89%), particularly compared to those working for an independent business (87%)

Student optometrists (80%) and student dispensing opticians (76%) were more likely than optometrists (65%) and dispensing opticians (70%) to cite **technological changes as a reason for the change**, and those who worked for a chain (72%) compared to those who worked for an independent business (64%).

Optometrists (68%) were more likely than dispensing opticians (53%) to say that the **higher expectation from the Government and regulators** was the reason for the change, as were those who worked for a chain (66%) compared to those who worked for an independent business (58%).

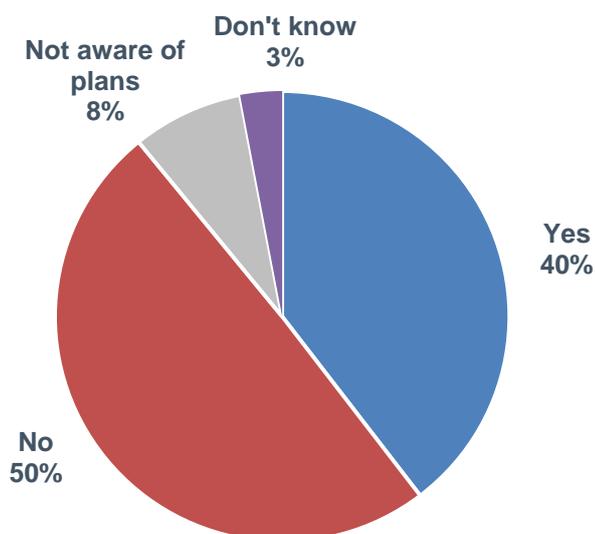
12.3 Providing enhanced eye care services in community settings

In the United Kingdom the NHS is planning for GOC registrants to provide eye care services in community settings, for example a 'Primary Eyecare Assessment and Referral Service' (PEARS) and a 'Minor Eye Conditions Service' (MECS), and in some areas these services are already being delivered. The GOC was keen to understand how many registrants were involved in providing enhanced eye care services in community settings and whether they were supportive of the NHS plans.

The GOC wanted to find out how supportive registrants are of NHS plans for the optical profession to deliver enhanced eye care services in community settings. The GOC was keen to find out how many are already delivering these services and why some registrants were not.

The majority of respondents (90%) were aware of the NHS plans to provide these services. Four in ten (40%) respondents said they were currently involved in the delivery of these services.

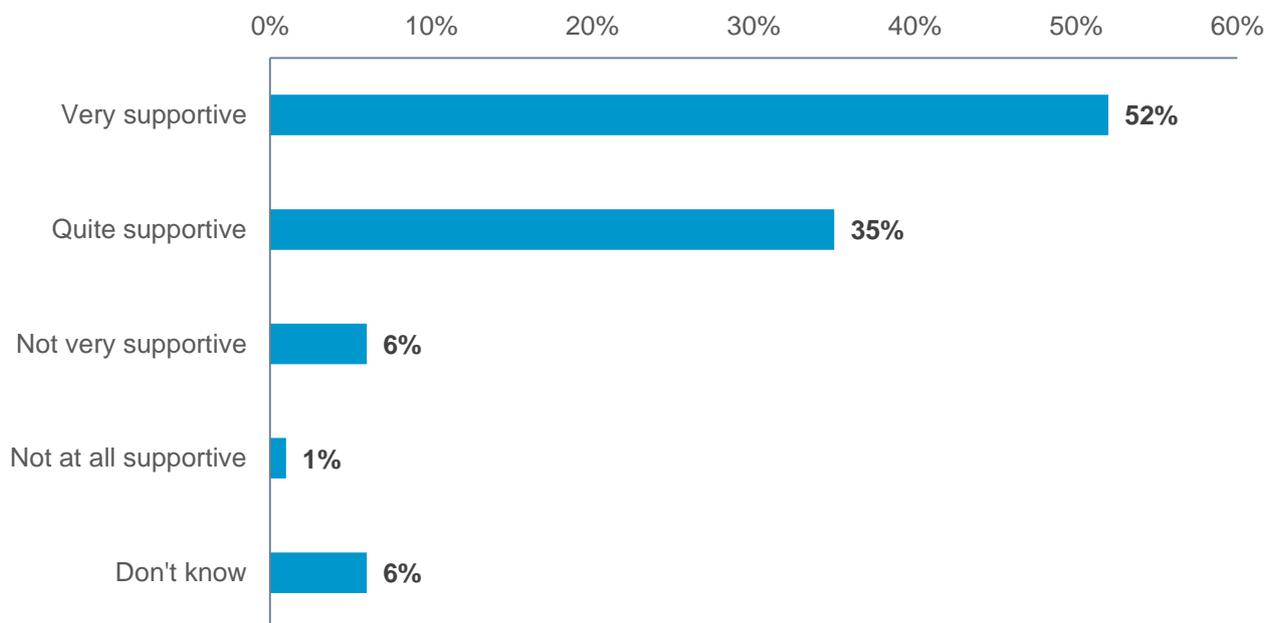
Figure 35 – Are you currently involved in delivering enhanced eye care services?
Base: All respondents (4,139)



More than half (52%) of respondents said they were ‘very’ supportive of the plans to provide enhanced eye care services in community settings and a further third (35%) said they were ‘quite’ supportive. Only 7% of respondents said they were ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ supportive.

Figure 36 – How supportive are you of providing enhanced eye care services in community settings?

Base: Those who were aware of the plans (3,825)



Subgroups more likely to say that they were **involved in delivering enhanced eye care services** (40% overall) included those who:

- Were optometrists (47%) compared to dispensing opticians (36%)
- Were aged 35-44 (43%) and 55+ (42%), compared to those aged 16-34 (36%)
- Were from a White ethnic background (42%) compared to those from a non-White ethnic background (34%)
- Were from Wales (75%), particularly compared to those from England (38%)
- Worked full-time (44%) compared to those who worked part-time (35%)

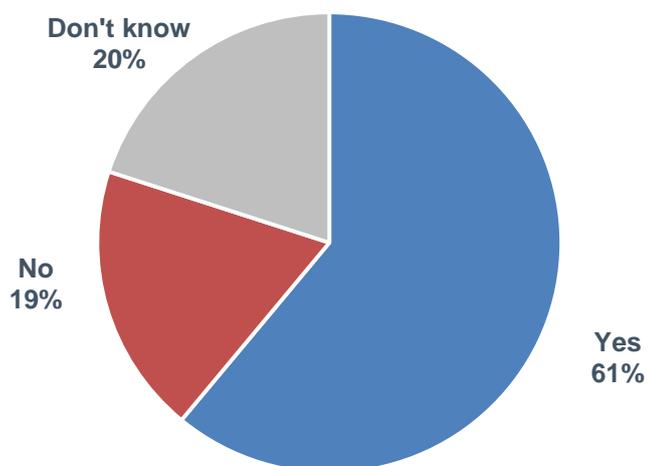
Subgroups more likely to say that they were **‘very’ or ‘quite’ supportive of plans to provide enhanced eye care services in community settings** (86% overall) included those who:

- Were optometrists (88%) compared to dispensing opticians (84%)
- Were aged 16-34 (87%) and 35-44 (88%), compared to those aged 55 and above (83%)
- Were from Scotland (93%), Wales (94%) and Northern Ireland (93%) compared to those from England (86%)
- Worked full-time (88%) compared to those worked part-time (85%)

12.4 Barriers in delivering enhanced eye care services

Respondents who said they do not currently play a role in delivering enhanced eye care services were asked whether they saw themselves doing so in the future. Six in ten (61%) registrants said they could see themselves playing a role and a fifth could not (19%). A substantial proportion of respondents also said that they did not know (20%).

Figure 37 – Do you see yourself playing a role in delivering these services?
Base: Those who do not currently play a role in delivery (2,063)

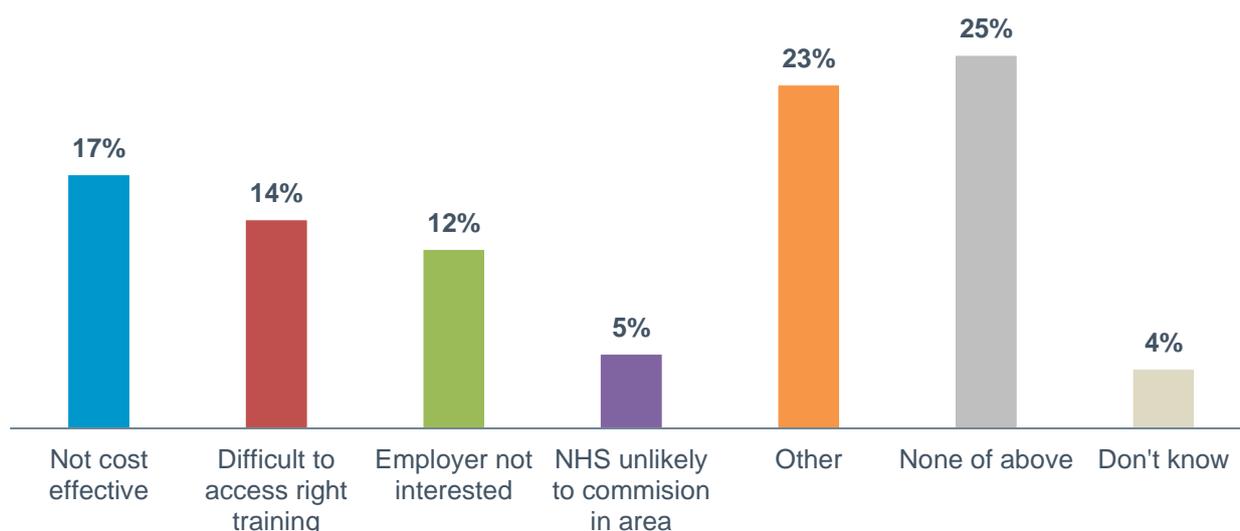


Respondents who said they did not see themselves playing a role in delivering enhanced eye care services were asked the main reason why this was. Almost a fifth (17%) said the main reason was that it was not cost effective for them to deliver the services, a further 14% said it was because it was difficult for them to access the appropriate training and 12% said the main reason was because the organisation they work for was not interested in providing the services. However, a quarter (25%) of respondents said that none of the reasons listed applied to them.

A quarter of respondents (23%) also provided another reason for why they did not see themselves playing a role in enhanced services. These included not working in the community or in a hospital (28%), followed by retiring or leaving the profession in the near future (23%) and respondents saying that delivering these services was not relevant to their role or their qualifications (17%).

Figure 38 – What is the main reason why you don’t see yourself playing a role in delivering these services in the near future?

Base: Those who do not see themselves playing a role in delivering services (391)



Subgroups more likely to see themselves **playing a role in delivering enhanced eye care services** (61% overall) included those who:

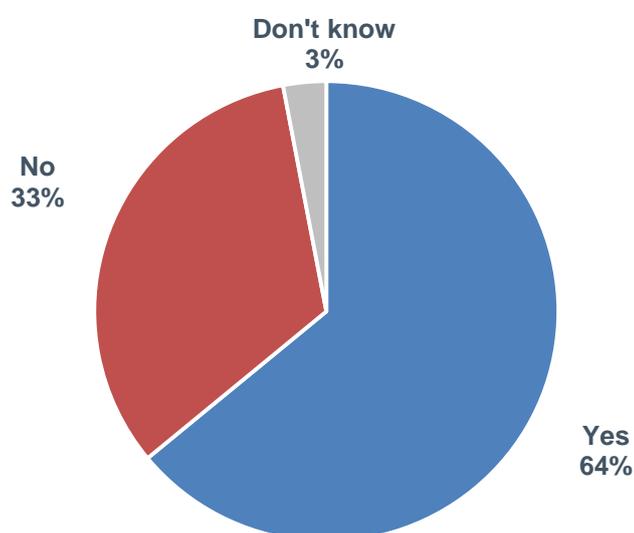
- Were optometrists (65%) compared to dispensing opticians (41%)
- Were from Northern Ireland (78%), particularly compared to those from England (61%), Scotland (66%) and Wales (71%)
- Were aged 16-34 (74%) and 35-44 (56%), particularly compared to those aged 55+ (39%)
- Had been on the GOC register for less than five years (75%), particularly compared to those who had been on it for over 21 years (46%)
- Were from a non-White ethnic background (78%) compared to those from a White ethnic background (55%)
- Worked for a chain (66%) compared to those who worked for an independent business (56%)

12.5 Qualifications to prescribe medicines or assist in management of eye conditions

Optometrist respondents were asked whether they would consider gaining another qualification to allow them to prescribe medicines or to assist in the management of eye conditions. Almost two-thirds (64%) said that they had considered gaining an additional qualification and a third (33%) said they had not.

Figure 39 – Have you considered gaining another qualification to allow you to prescribe medicines to patients or to assist in the management of their eye conditions?

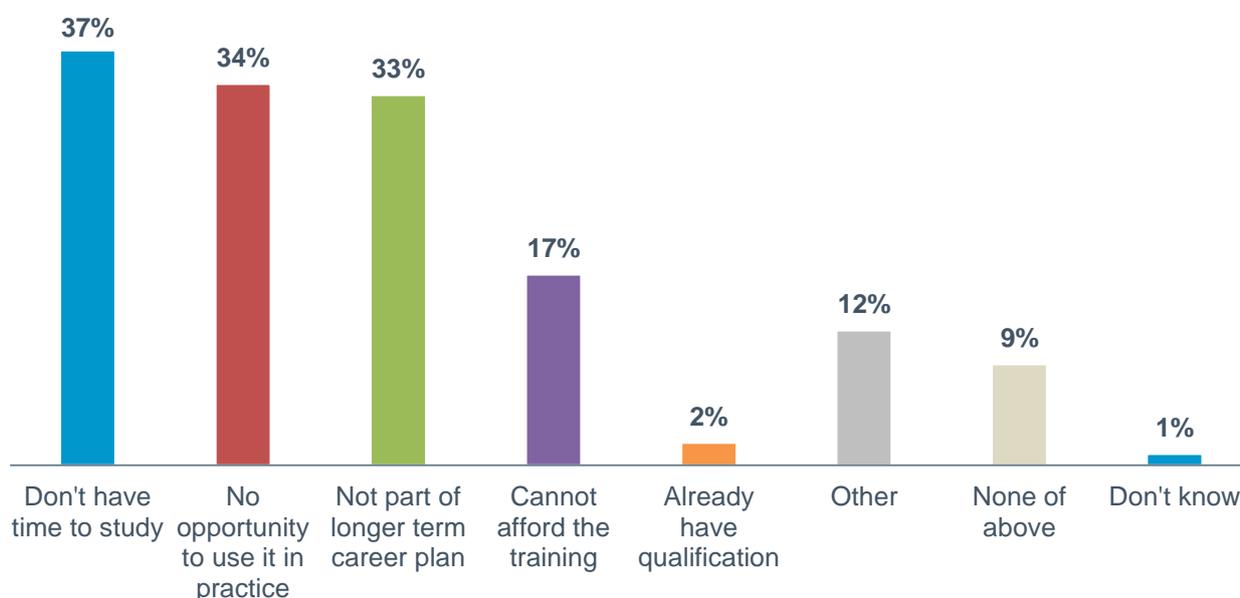
Base: Those who said they were optometrists (2,314)



Respondents who said they had not considered gaining an additional qualification were asked the main reason why this was. The most common reason was that respondents did not have the time to study for a qualification, with 37% providing this reason. A third (33%) said that they did not see it as part of their longer term career plan and a further third (34%) said that they did not think there would be the opportunity to use the qualification in practice. Just under a fifth (17%) said they could not afford the training and only 2% of respondents said that they had the qualification already.

One in eight (12%) respondents provided another reason. The most popular ‘other’ reason was that respondents did not work in the community or in a hospital (28%), followed by respondents retiring or leaving the profession soon (23%) and respondents saying that this would not be relevant to their role or qualifications (17%).

Figure 40 – Why have you not considered an additional qualification to allow you to prescribe medicines to patients or to assist in the management of eye conditions?
Base: Those who have not considered an additional qualification (769)



Subgroups more likely to have considered **gaining another qualification** (64% overall) included those who:

- Were aged 16-34 (69%), particularly compared to those aged 55+ (45%)
- Had been on the GOC register for less than five years (77%), particularly compared to those who had been on it for over 21 years (52%)
- Were from a non-White ethnic background (69%) compared to those from a White ethnic background (62%)
- Were from Scotland (74%), particularly compared to those from England (62%)
- Worked full-time (67%) compared to those who worked part-time (61%) or as a locum (62%)

Focus group and in depth interview feedback

Opinions about the future of the profession

Like survey respondents, focus group participants had mixed views about how optimistic or pessimistic they were about the future of their profession. Optimism generally focused on the provision of more eye care services in the community (enhanced services), particularly amongst optometrists. However, there was also pessimism about the future of the industry with a particular focus on the rise of online sales and the overcrowded market place pushing down prices and having a negative impact, particularly for independent businesses.

For about 10-20% of the profession it is very positive. It is going down a healthcare route. They are doing a lot more of the MECs and the schemes that are looking at people with eye healthcare problems. For the other 80% it will get more and industrial. (Optometrist from Ipswich)

I feel sorry for the independents with people like Asda and their prices. Now is not the time to set up business as an independent. (Dispensing Optician from Nottingham)

Pessimism about the future focused on new technology in the industry and some worried that technological advances would lead to roles becoming redundant, job losses and the loss of interaction with patients. However, some were optimistic when talking about technological advances when it came to eye tests as this would enable them to spend more time focusing on the medical side of the profession.

I'm quite pessimistic. The growth of technology is worrying. (Dispensing Optician from High Wycombe)

I like to think it would make it more efficient. (Dispensing Optician from Darlington)

Some optometrist participants mentioned that they were pessimistic about their profession as there was an ever increasing number of optometrists qualifying from university and not enough jobs in the market. Participants worried that this will lead to a further reduction in optometrists' wages as the larger chains will want to take on optometrists on lower salaries. Participants felt that the GOC could do more to support them in this regard by regulating the number of qualified optometrists in order to maintain quality in the industry.

There are too many optoms on the market. (Optometrist from London)

The GOC should have some sort of control over how many people the universities are taking in to maintain quality. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

Preparation for the future

Most participants said they felt prepared for future changes in the profession, but a few mentioned having colleagues who were not or did not feel ready for changes. A few knew of some older registrants who had struggled to adhere to standards and who had been struck off the register or were under investigation by the GOC after failing to adapt to changes.

Every person I know who is in my age group and is still practising is actually either suspended or is under investigation by the GOC because their standards of performance have fallen short. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

One of the older optoms in the practice is a bit frightened as she feels her skill level is not up to scratch, but I keep telling her it's something we do every day. (Optometrist from Ballymena)

When asked about how the GOC could support registrants and the sector to deal with future changes, most participants said they did not know as they had very little knowledge of the GOC. However, a few mentioned that the GOC could do more to regulate internet sales so patients are not put at risk, ensure that large chains adhere to GOC standards rather than set their own, and proactively do more to help those who have been on a career break to get back to work.

I think online needs to be more regulated, more laws put in place. I had just yesterday a patient wearing lenses they hadn't been fitted with. It just shouldn't be possible to buy lenses that they haven't been fitted for. (Optometrist from Ballymena)

They need to think about the number of women coming through as optometrists. It's 55% now I think and chances are a lot of them will go on career breaks to have children and there is no mechanism to support them returning to work. Absolutely nothing in place and we are the only profession that doesn't have that. (Optometrist from London)

Enhanced services

As also seen in the survey, participants were mostly aware of the NHS plans for more optical services to be provided in the community. Optometrists in particular were enthusiastic about these plans as it would result in their jobs being more interesting and varied. However, these plans seem to have less of an impact on the roles of dispensing opticians and most dispensing opticians did not foresee many changes in their role as a result.

It's going to be more challenging and more rewarding. (Optometrist from Chepstow)

There isn't really anything for DOs. (Dispensing Optician from Ballyclare, Northern Ireland)

There was a general consensus that enhanced services would have financial benefits for the NHS and that patients will benefit as they will be able to avoid a hospital appointment and be seen quickly by an optometrist. However, some participants mentioned that the provision of these services were currently fragmented across the UK, and felt that schemes that work in one place may not work elsewhere.

Waiting lists won't be as long. Patients who maybe have to be seen quickly don't have to wait as long as they do at the moment. It will relieve pressure on the NHS and hospital staff. (Optometrist from Newry, Northern Ireland)

It's all a bit mismatched. There are some people doing one thing and some people doing something else. It's a bit of a mess I think, clinically it's a mess. We over here

do different stuff to England, Scotland do something different and Wales do something different. (Optometrist from Lisburn, Northern Ireland)

Participants discussed the potential issues and challenges with the provision of enhanced services. Some participants felt that there was the possibility that if registrants are providing more clinical services, there is an increased risk of litigation from the public and this may dissuade them from being involved in offering these services. Others felt that registrants would take on more responsibilities with expanded roles, but would not be sufficiently remunerated for providing these services given the current financial challenges the NHS faces.

As a young optometrist coming into the profession I think there is a lot of weight on their shoulders... the young people that I work with are absolutely terrified about making a mistake. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

I see my workload increasing, my responsibilities increasing but my remuneration has been going down. (Optometrist from North Berwick)

Some participants felt that the large chains will never fully support the plans, given the impact it will have financially for businesses. These businesses rely on the sale of lenses and frames and so will want to prioritise these over the provision of healthcare services. The cost of equipment to be able to provide these services can also be expensive and there is often limited remuneration.

We have a quota of sight tests that they have to hit every week. If we were to offer these additional services that will eat up more testing time so we will be under even more pressure from those high up to achieve our quota. (Dispensing Optician from High Wycombe)

The trouble is there is no money. It is not fundable. Equipment is horrendously expensive and it does not pay to do health service at the moment... They haven't sorted the fees out. (Optometrist from Lisburn, Northern Ireland)

When asked whether they were involved in providing enhanced services, participants in England referred to their involvement in providing MECS (Minor Eye Condition Services), Welsh participants referred to WECS (Welsh Eye Care Services) and a few participants from Northern Ireland also mentioned having gained qualifications related to providing enhanced services. Most participants from Scotland believed all in the profession had undertaken additional training in Scotland to provide enhanced services and that the qualifications such as independent prescribing are included as part of university optometry courses.

We are getting a lot more involved with the NHS in regards to emergency eye care walk-in systems. (Dispensing Optician from Darlington)

We have WECS, I'm just undertaking an independent prescribing course. (Optometrist from Chepstow)

Minor Eye Conditions Clinic, I am in the process of doing my exam for that. (Optometrist from Ballymena, Northern Ireland)

We learnt for the qualifications at uni. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

Participants who had gained extra qualifications to be able to provide enhanced services said that they had done so either because it was necessary to carry out their current role or to be prepared for the future, when they foresee more optometrists providing these services. However, a few participants mentioned that they or someone they knew had gained extra qualifications, spending time and money to do so, and then not been able to use them in their current role.

I have done a glaucoma referral refinement accreditation here for one of the glaucoma referral schemes and I am also about to start the independent prescribing one. That is to protect myself, to give myself as many skills as possible, to enhance my role in the future. (Optometrist from Coleraine)

I did the glaucoma one in June but I can't use it in practice because you have to work with an ophthalmologist. (Optometrist from Manchester)

Most participants who had experience of providing enhanced services had a positive view, particularly focusing on the satisfaction they feel from looking after patients, the money that they are paid and preferring the work to carrying out eye tests which could sometimes be mundane. However, it can sometimes be challenging. For example, if a patient shows up without having made an appointment there is an expectation that they are still seen and this has to fit around other appointments. Some participants also spoke of the additional paperwork that these appointments create and not always being given enough time by their employer to catch up.

We get paid properly for seeing a patient under MECS. (Optometrist from Birmingham)

It's awful because there is lots of paperwork and you are not given any time to do it...Those tests take longer and our employer doesn't care. (Optometrist from Wrexham)

Some participants also mentioned that communication can be fragmented between hospital staff and opticians. Some participants spoke of having made referrals to hospital and then receiving no further communication in regards to patients' reported outcomes and others had had patients referred to them by GPs when there had been no need. These participants suggested that the GOC could put pressure on the NHS to improve communication and referrals.

As long as the hospital give me feedback it's fine... we have to phone the hospital to ask what's happened and they tell us they have sent a letter to their GP – what do they know about eyes? (Optometrist from Glasgow)

The problem is that doctors have not got the hang of what it is. You have doctors sending patients to you for silly reasons. It needs to be more joined up. (Dispensing Optician from Colwyn Bay, Wales)

Optometrist participants who had not gained additional qualifications to provide enhanced services were asked the reasons why. These participants indicated that gaining these

qualifications can be expensive and time consuming, especially when they are under pressure from their employer to make sales and are already required to pay their annual retention fee.

From a commercial point of view if you spend a day doing all these different things it can be very satisfying, however by the end of the day I have maybe only taken £200 in the till and then the next day I will get a phone call from my boss about my conversion rate. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

It's something I'm avoiding because of the cost involved. (Optometrist from Bangor)

13. Key findings

Part One: Registrants' views on the role and performance of the General Optical Council

Perceptions of the GOC's role

The majority of survey respondents agreed that the GOC's role was to protect patients and the public, discipline optical professionals who fail to meet the standards of the profession and to drive high standards of patient care. This was corroborated by focus group and interview participants. A smaller, but still substantial proportion of survey respondents agreed that the GOC's role was to represent the optical professions. Opinion was split amongst focus group and interview participants with some feeling that if it represented the profession this would lead to a conflict of interest in terms of fulfilling its other roles and others thinking that it needed to represent the optical professions in order to be effective in its role of protecting patients and the public.

Perceptions of how well the GOC is carrying out its role

The majority of survey respondents agreed that the GOC sets fair standards for the profession and a large proportion agreed that the organisation enables registrants to develop their roles for the benefits of patients. There was less agreement that the GOC listens to the views of registrants and is fair when taking action through the fitness to practise process. However, a large proportion of respondents did not know if the GOC was fair, indicating that many registrants do not have much experience of this process and how it works.

Focus group and interview participants who had experience of the fitness to practise process felt the GOC could do more to support registrants about whom a concern had been raised, given the effect it has on individuals.

Views on the GOC registration fee

Just over half of registrants agreed that the GOC charges reasonable registration fees. Many focus group and interview participants, however, disagreed with this as they struggled to see the value for money that the fee provides. Many suggested that the GOC could provide more information about how the fees are set and how the money is spent.

The GOC's Standards of Practice

Overall the majority of survey respondents were confident in their ability to meet the new standards and rated their understanding as 'excellent', 'very good' or 'good'. However, less respondents, around a fifth, said they had made changes to their practice following the introduction of the new standards. Focus group and interview participants explained this result by saying that although they were mostly confident in their understanding of the new standards, they had not needed to make changes to their practice as the standards reflected their everyday practice anyway. A few participants, however, provided examples of how their practice had changed, for example, introducing a requirement to have an optometrist on site

when dispensing lenses and frames, and the new standards regarding social media and record keeping.

Registrants' experience of the Continuing Education and Training (CET) scheme

Overall there was a fairly even split as to whether respondents found the CET scheme challenging or not and this was reflected in the focus group and interview findings. There was a suggestion amongst participants that those working for large chains found it easy to achieve points as they were given many opportunities to do so by their employer, whilst those working for independents or as self-employed locums struggled more to find the time and opportunities.

The majority of survey respondents felt that their practice had improved as a result of undertaking CET in the last cycle. Focus group and interview participants felt there were many benefits to undertaking CET such as keeping up-to-date with current good practice, learning new skills and plugging gaps in knowledge.

In terms of the process for submitting CET points, the survey findings were positive as the majority said they found it easy to submit and manage their CET records using the My CET area of the GOC website. Focus group and interview participants confirmed these findings saying it was easy to use, but some suggested the administrative side of recording and logging CET points could be improved as it can be time consuming and onerous.

Some focus group and interview participants also felt that the GOC could do more to regulate the quality of CET on offer so that all courses, exercises and lectures that provide registrants with points are relevant, useful and insightful. A number of participants also said they found interactive CET particularly useful and thought that CET could focus more on the interactive elements.

Views about the GOC's registration process

Overall survey respondents were very positive about the registration process, with a very large proportion of respondents rating their experience of using the 'MyGOC' area of the website and the annual retention process highly.

The majority of respondents seemed to be clear about what should be declared and when to the GOC in regards to health problems, disciplinary matters and criminal convictions. Respondents suggested that in order to make it clearer the GOC could develop a handbook or dedicated webpage, provide a list of Frequently Asked Questions or case studies.

Although nine in ten had assessed the online public register at least once in the past, the majority had used it only 'sometimes' or 'rarely'. Usage of the online register seemed lower in Northern Ireland than in other countries, particularly compared to England.

How the GOC communicates with its registrants

The majority of survey respondents felt that the frequency of communication from the GOC was about right, but one in ten felt it was not frequent enough.

When asked if they read the GOC eBulletin (a regular e-newsletter sent to all registrants), the majority of respondents said they read it and found it informative.

Registrants' views on the GOC's customer service

Almost six in ten respondents agreed that the GOC provided good customer service to registrants. Of those who had contacted the GOC in the previous 12 months for a query or information request, eight in ten said that this had been resolved and that it had been done so promptly.

Part Two: Challenges faced by registrants in the workplace

Commercial pressures

Four in ten survey respondents said they had experienced pressure from an employer in the past to provide a service or sell a product that was not needed by a patient and had felt under pressure to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care.

Focus group and interview participants discussed in more depth the types of challenges registrants faced in the workplace and the effect these had on patients and the profession. Overall, participants agreed that there was some pressure to meet commercial targets and to sell certain products and many had either experienced this themselves or knew someone else in the profession that had. However, all participants were keen to stress that they had not bowed to the pressure and had always maintained their professional integrity.

Some focus group and interview participants held the perception that many registrants were leaving the profession within a few years of qualifying due to commercial pressures they faced at work. They thought students were perhaps not being adequately prepared for the commercial side of their role whilst at university. Almost all participants knew of someone who had left the profession due to these commercial pressures and a few themselves had left roles in the past because of this.

Some participants felt that these industry pressures particularly affected patients in relation to sight tests, explaining that employers and businesses can put pressure on registrants to conduct as many sight tests as possible during a day and this can result in not being able to spend enough time with patients. Participants also mentioned that often they are under pressure to achieve certain "conversion rate" targets (i.e. to ensure that a sight test leads to a sale of glasses or lenses in the store).

Participants felt that the commercial pressure had worsened in the last few years and would continue to get worse. Reasons for this included larger optical chains gaining more market share, the rise of online sales squeezing the market, the increased difficulty of customer retention and the ever increasing number of optometrists coming into the profession.

Raising concerns about poor practice

Four in ten survey respondents said they would not feel comfortable reporting a concern to their employer and a slightly larger proportion would not feel comfortable reporting a concern to the GOC.

In terms of raising a concern with an employer, there was a consensus amongst focus group and interview participants that comfort with raising a concern was largely dependent on the employer-employee relationship. Some feared that if they raised a concern, however, this could damage working relationships and lead to them losing their job.

In relation to raising a concern with the GOC, most participants said that the concern would have to be of a very serious nature, such as putting a patient at risk, and every other means of resolution explored before they would consider it. However, they would not feel comfortable with raising a concern with the GOC given the consequences it would have for the registrant about whom the complaint was made.

In the survey three in ten would not feel confident that the GOC would protect their identity and their interests if they raised a concern and this lack of confidence was also seen amongst focus group and interview participants. However, this seemed to be largely due to a lack of awareness about how the GOC's fitness to practise process works.

The future of the optical professions

Overall, six in ten respondents were optimistic about the future of the profession. Respondents from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were more optimistic than those from England, as were those who worked for a chain compared to an independent business.

Nine in ten thought their role would change significantly in the next five years. A larger proportion of optometrists thought their role would change than dispensing opticians and respondents from Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland were more likely to think it would change than those from England.

The most popular reason for expecting a change in role was technological changes in the industry, followed by a higher expectation from the government and regulators. Over half also felt that an ageing population and changes in consumer behaviour would also cause changes in their role.

Registrants' views on providing NHS "enhanced services"

The majority of survey respondents were aware of NHS plans for more enhanced optical services to be delivered in the community rather than hospitals and four in ten said they were currently involved in providing these services. A much larger proportion of respondents from Wales said they were involved than those from England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The majority of survey respondents were supportive of the plans for enhanced optical services to be provided in the community, however there were lower levels of support

amongst respondents from England in comparison to those from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Focus group and interview participants were also supportive of these plans, particularly optometrists who thought it could lead to more interesting and varied work. However, some participants did have concerns and reservations, such as fragmentation across the UK with different regions doing different things and the difficulty of communicating with hospitals.

Of those who did not play a role in the provision of enhanced services, six in ten respondents thought they would in the future. Of those that said they did not see themselves playing a role, the most popular reasons given were that it was not cost effective to gain the qualifications, that it was difficult to access the right training, and that their employer was not interested in providing these services.

Six in ten respondents who said they were optometrists said they had considered gaining additional qualifications to prescribe medicines or assist in the delivery of enhanced services. Focus group and interview participants who had gained additional qualifications explained that they had done so because their employer was involved in the delivery of enhanced services or they wanted to be prepared for the future.

Survey respondents who had not considered gaining additional qualifications most commonly said this was because they did not have the time to study, that there was a lack of opportunity to use it in practice, that it was not part of their long-term career plan, or because they could not afford the training. This was confirmed by focus group and interview participants, who said they had not gained additional qualifications mostly because of the expense of gaining these qualifications and the time involved to study for them.

14. Methodology

A mixed quantitative and qualitative approach was taken to this research in the form of a survey, focus groups and in depth telephone interviews.

The questionnaire was developed in partnership between the GOC and Enventure Research. Prior to the survey commencing, the questionnaire, including the structure, question wording and response options, was tested with a handful of registrants over the telephone and online with a small random sample. This helped ensure that the questionnaire was easy to understand, would elicit useful responses, and was of a suitable length and that the questions were asked in a non-biased manner. For reference, a copy of the questionnaire can be found in **Appendix A**.

At the start of fieldwork, an online link to the survey was sent by email to all individual GOC registrants (optometrists, dispensing opticians, student optometrists and student dispensing opticians) with a registered email address, to ensure that all registrants had the opportunity to participate and provide their views and opinions. Two further email reminders were sent out to non-responders to encourage them to take part. A link to the survey was also publicised on the GOC website and Twitter account. To access the survey registrants needed to log in using their GOC registration number. To encourage them to take part, registrants were invited to take part in a prize draw with the chance to win high street shopping vouchers.

In total, **4,139 survey responses** were received from 25,929 registrants who were invited to take part, representing a 16% response rate. The returned data was weighted to be representative of the GOC registrant population.

Following the survey, five focus groups and 23 in depth interviews were conducted as part of the qualitative research in order to explore some topics and issues in greater depth. Researchers from Enventure Research used a specifically designed discussion guide to allow all research topics to be covered. A copy of the focus group and interview discussion guide can be found in **Appendix B**. The qualitative research was stratified across the UK to ensure representation, including both urban and rural locations. In total 57 participants took part in the qualitative research.

Throughout the report, those who took part in the survey are referred to as ‘respondents’ and those who took part in the focus groups and in depth interviews are referred to as ‘participants’.

15. Interpretation of the findings

Weighting

As the survey was sent out to all individual registrants, and only a sample responded to the survey, weights have been applied to the returned data to ensure that certain subgroups are not over or under represented within the data and that the data is as close to the demographic profile of individual GOC registrants as possible in terms of gender, age and optical profession. Weighting adjusts the proportions of certain groups within a sample to match more closely to the proportions in the target population. All results presented within this report are based on the weighted data, which was calculated using registration population statistics provided by the GOC.

Interpretation of the survey data

This report contains tables and charts. In some instances, the responses may not add up to 100%. There are several reasons why this might happen:

- The question may have allowed each respondent to give more than one answer
- The question may not have been asked to all respondents, for example a question may have been asked based on how a respondent answered another question
- Only the most common responses may be shown in the table or chart
- Individual percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number so the total may come to 99% or 101%
- A response of between 0% and 1% will be shown as 0%

As the online survey was undertaken with a sample of individual registrants, all results are subject to sampling tolerances. For example, when interpreting the results to a survey question which all respondents answered, where 50% responded with a particular answer, there is a 95% chance that this result would not vary by more than +/- 1.4 percentage points had the result been obtained from the entire GOC individual registrant population.

Subgroup analysis has been undertaken to explore the results provided by different demographic groups, such as role, place of work, country, gender and age group. This analysis has only been carried out where the sample size is seen to be sufficient for comment. Where sample sizes were not large enough, subgroups have been combined to create a larger group.

Throughout this report, those who took part in the survey are referred to as 'respondents'.

Interpretation of the qualitative feedback

When interpreting qualitative research feedback, which for this research has been collected via focus groups and in depth interviews, it is important to remember that these findings differ to those collected via a quantitative methodology. Qualitative findings are collected by speaking in much greater depth to a select number of participants (in this case, 57

registrants). These discussions were digitally recorded and notes made to draw out common themes and useful quotations.

Therefore, it should be remembered that qualitative findings are not meant to be statistically accurate, but instead are collected to provide additional insight and greater understanding based on in depth discussion and deliberation, something not possible to achieve via a quantitative survey. For example, if the majority of participants in a series of focus groups hold a certain opinion, this does not necessarily apply to the majority of the individual registrant population.

Throughout this report, those who took part in qualitative research (focus groups or in depth interviews) are referred to as 'participants'.

16. Respondent and Participant Profile

Individually registered optometrists, dispensing opticians, student optometrists and student dispensing opticians were invited to take part in the survey. The respondent sample (4,139 respondents) was made up of 56% optometrists, 24% dispensing opticians, 8% student optometrists, 7% student dispensing opticians, and 5% student optometrists undertaking the pre-registration scheme. In relation to UK country, 78% of the respondents were from England, 6% from Wales, 10% from Scotland and 3% from Northern Ireland.

The table below presents the weighted survey respondent profile.

Demographic	Count	Percentage
Gender		
Male	1435	35%
Female	2671	65%
Prefer not to say	33	1%
Age		
16 - 24	662	16%
25 - 34	1199	29%
35 - 44	952	23%
45 - 54	704	17%
55 - 64	497	12%
65 +	124	3%
Prefer not to say	1	0%
Ethnicity		
White	2838	69%
Other ethnic group	1301	31%
UK Nation		
England	3232	78%
Wales	235	6%
Scotland	397	10%
Northern Ireland	119	3%
Outside UK	76	2%
Prefer not to say	80	2%
Role		
Optometrist	2317	56%
Dispensing optician	1013	24%
Student optometrist	351	8%
Student dispensing optician	297	7%
Student optometrist undertaking pre-reg scheme	209	5%
Out of work / retired	10	0%

Other ¹	40	1%
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Demographic	Count	Percentage
Place of work		
Independent opticians	1528	37%
National chain	2126	51%
Regional chain	211	5%
Hospital	276	7%
Domiciliary care	98	2%
Academia	144	3%
Not currently working	37	1%
Student	318	8%
Other ²	160	4%
Work status		
Full-time	2522	61%
Part-time	1105	27%
Locum	613	15%
Not currently working	139	3%
Retired	5	0%
On parental leave	40	1%
Other ³	33	1%
Specialty qualifications		
Contact lens specialty	275	8%
Additional supply specialty	85	3%
Supplementary prescribing specialty	42	1%
Independent prescribing specialty	132	4%
None of the above	2803	85%
Don't know	43	1%

¹ Includes Contact Lens practitioners, academics and lecturers, those in management roles, CET providers and contributors, assessors and examiners, and those in operational and administrative roles.

² Includes locum, professional bodies, membership organisations, manufacturing, advisory roles, charity and voluntary sector, academia, Public Health, NHS, Diabetic Screening Service, Prison Service, specialist and community clinics

³ Includes academic, short-term contracts, placements, about to start a new role, maternity leave, long-term sick, career breaks and covering more than one role

The tables below present the stratification of focus groups and in depth interviews.

Group	Location	Stratification
1	England (Manchester)	Equal split of gender, and between optometrists and dispensing opticians
2	England (London)	
3	England (Birmingham)	
4	Wales (Cardiff)	Mix of age groups and ethnicities
5	Scotland (Glasgow)	

Interview	Location	Stratification
1	England (Darlington)	Focus on other locations than cities where focus groups took place Split by gender, and between optometrists and dispensing opticians Mix of age groups and ethnicities
2	England (Ipswich)	
3	England (High Wycombe)	
4	England (Leeds)	
5	England (Nottingham)	
6	England (Oadby)	
7	England (Newcastle)	
8	Northern Ireland (Belfast)	
9	Northern Ireland (Newry)	
10	Northern Ireland (Coleraine)	
11	Northern Ireland (Bangor)	
12	Northern Ireland (Ballyclare)*	
13	Northern Ireland (Belfast)*	
14	Northern Ireland (Lisburn)*	
15	Northern Ireland (Ballymena)*	
16	Wales (Swansea)	
17	Wales (Wrexham)	
18	Wales (Chepstow)	
19	Wales (Colwyn Bay)	
20	Scotland (Edinburgh)	
21	Scotland (Port Glasgow)	
22	Scotland (North Berwick)	
23	Scotland (Edinburgh)	

*Four additional interviews were conducted with participants from Northern Ireland as no focus group took place in that country.

17. Acknowledgments

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