



General Optical Council



Business Plan

1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025



Foreword

Leonie Milliner, Chief Executive and Registrar

This business plan, for the financial year 2024-25, marks the final year of our “Fit for the Future” strategy. It represents the culmination of work and activities which aim to achieve our vision of being recognised for delivering world-class regulation and excellent customer service.

“Fit for the Future” has included several important pieces of work, some of which have spanned years, designed to protect the public and uphold public confidence in the professions and businesses we regulate. This includes introducing new requirements for qualifications we approve to ensure that the skills and abilities of our registrants remain up to date and in line with the needs of the patients and service transformation; a new continuing professional

development (CPD) scheme; investing in our digital transformation; and developing and improving our customer service, including achieving the Customer Excellence Standard (CSE), an independent quality mark for customer focus, in 2023.

We have also worked hard to address long-standing issues with timeliness in fitness to practise, which was recognised by the Professional Standards Authority’s (PSA) reviews of our performance in 2021-22 and 2022-23 which concluded we had met all 18 Standards of Good Regulation for two years in a row..

There is still more to do to meet the ambitious goals we set for ourselves in the “Fit for the Future” strategic plan.

This business plan highlights some of the key work programmes for the coming year, including planning for prospective reforms to business regulation and revising our standards for optometrists, dispensing opticians, and students to ensure continued public protection.

Our investment in our digital transformation continues, with a new case management system to support the effective management of fitness to practise, and improvements to our internal HR, payroll and finance systems.

The research we commission provides useful data and insights to inform the development of our policies and regulatory operations. In 2024-25 we intend to commission additional lived experience research to understand in more detail the impact of harassment, bullying, victimisation, and negative working conditions upon registrants in the workplace.

We also plan to undertake additional lived experience research with people with disabilities and from minority ethnic backgrounds to help us understand better barriers to care.

We will also develop a new corporate strategy to guide us through the next five years of our work, so we can continue to protect the public and support eyecare professionals to contribute to their full professional capability in the best interests of patients.

As always, we will continue to put GOC values and our public duty to progress equality, diversity and inclusion at the heart of all we do. To deliver this ambitious plan, working with all our stakeholders will be crucial. I thank you for your support so far and look forward to engaging with you in the year ahead. Together we can make sure that the GOC is truly “Fit for the Future”.



About the General Optical Council

We are the UK-wide regulator for optometrists and dispensing opticians, student optometrists and dispensing opticians, and optical businesses.

Our mission is to protect the public by upholding high standards in the optical professions. Our vision is to be recognised for delivering world-class regulation and excellent customer service.

We protect the public and uphold high standards and public confidence in the optical professions by:

- setting standards for the performance and conduct of our registrants
- maintaining a register of individuals who are fit to practise or train as optometrists or dispensing opticians,

and bodies corporate who are fit to carry on business as optometrists or dispensing opticians approving qualifications leading to registration

- investigating and acting where registrants' fitness to practise, train or carry on business may be impaired.

This business plan for 2024-25 demonstrates how we will continue to protect the public and ensure registrants can continue to utilise their full professional capabilities within service redesign across each part of the UK.

It represents the final year of delivery of our current strategic plan and sets us up for future work as we look towards our next five year strategy for 2025-30.

Public protection at the heart of what we do

The public must have confidence in our ability to protect them, and our registrants must consider that we are fair and proportionate in the decisions we make.

We achieve this by maintaining a register of individuals who are fit to practise or train, and bodies corporate who are fit to carry on business. This includes managing annual registrant and student renewal processes.

We will continue to maintain fair, proportionate, and efficient processes for investigating fitness to practise concerns, including:

- continuing to embed improvements in our triage and casework processes to speed up investigations

- undertaking a review of the efficiency of hearings operations to identify opportunities to be more cost effective whilst maintaining public protection
- updating our guidance on a range of topics including indicative sanctions guidance
- launching our new electronic case management system to support the robust management of our end-to-end casework process
- sharing learning from FTP outcomes with registrants through our FTP bulletin to embed good practice.



Upholding the highest professional standards

We will update our existing standards for fully-qualified and student registrants to ensure they are fit for purpose, and reflect the current context within which registrants practice, students are trained, and businesses operate.

This process began last year, where we engaged extensively with stakeholders, including professionals, patients and the public, on a range of topics related to our standards including social media and online conduct, maintaining professional boundaries, leadership and delegation and supervision.

We launched a public consultation in February 2024 on the proposed new Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians, the Standards

for Optical Students and consequential amendments to the Standards for Optical Businesses.

Once the consultation closes, we will consider all responses thoroughly, before drafting the final sets of standards. We plan to publish the revised standards in autumn 2024.

Separately, we will continue to progress work on reviewing our 2013 statement on the testing of sight following stakeholder concern that some sight test models which are separated by time, place or person may not adequately protect the public.

Developing business regulation to enhance patient protection

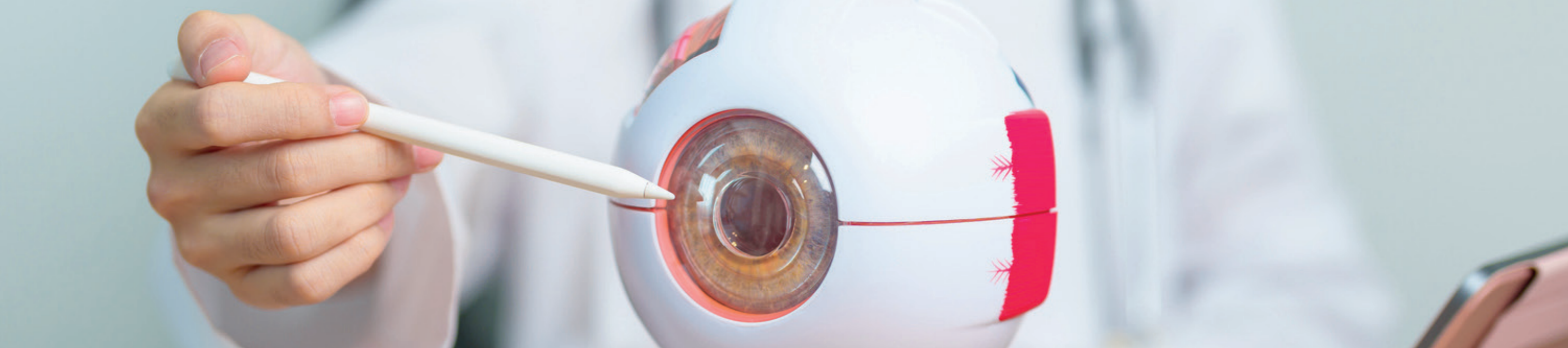
Only around half of optical businesses operating in the UK are registered with the GOC, creating a regulatory gap where patients may be protected when using one business on their local high street but not the one next door. There is broad consensus among sector bodies that all businesses carrying out restricted functions should be registered with us.

We are currently in the process of developing proposals for a new model of regulation of optical businesses to extend regulation to all optical businesses that is fit for purpose, which we will consult on in 2024/25.

The issues that we need to consider include business and ownership structures; regulatory supervision (including assessing the effectiveness

and cost of any potential assurance or compliance activity); enforcement approach and sanctions; and access to consumer redress.

Extending business regulation will require legislative change to the Opticians Act 1989. By developing proposals now, we will be ready to move at pace when working with the Department of Health and Social Care to modernise our legislative framework and close this regulatory gap.



Focus on Education and Continuing Professional Development

This year sees the final year in the first three-year cycle of our new, more flexible Continuing Professional Development (CPD) scheme, which gives registrants more control over their learning and development and the ability to tailor their own personal scope of practice. This year registrants will be required for the first time to complete a reflective exercise, which we will support by sharing a range of resources.

Following the introduction of our new Education and Training Requirements (ETR), providers of GOC-approved qualifications will continue to submit their plans to meet our new requirements, which we will review and note. Whilst providers are adapting their qualifications to meet our new requirements, we will continue to quality assure GOC-approved qualifications

against the handbooks and prepare for the introduction of our new Quality Assurance and Enhancement Method for those who have adapted.

We will continue to support the sector to organise and respond to the changes we've made to qualifications we approve through our continued financial support of SPOKE (Sector Partnership for Optical Knowledge and Education), and we will continue to chair and provide administrative support for the Sector Strategic Implementation Steering Group.

We also expect to agree new processes for international routes to registration under the ETR following our public consultation last year.

Looking to the future: A new strategy for 2025-30

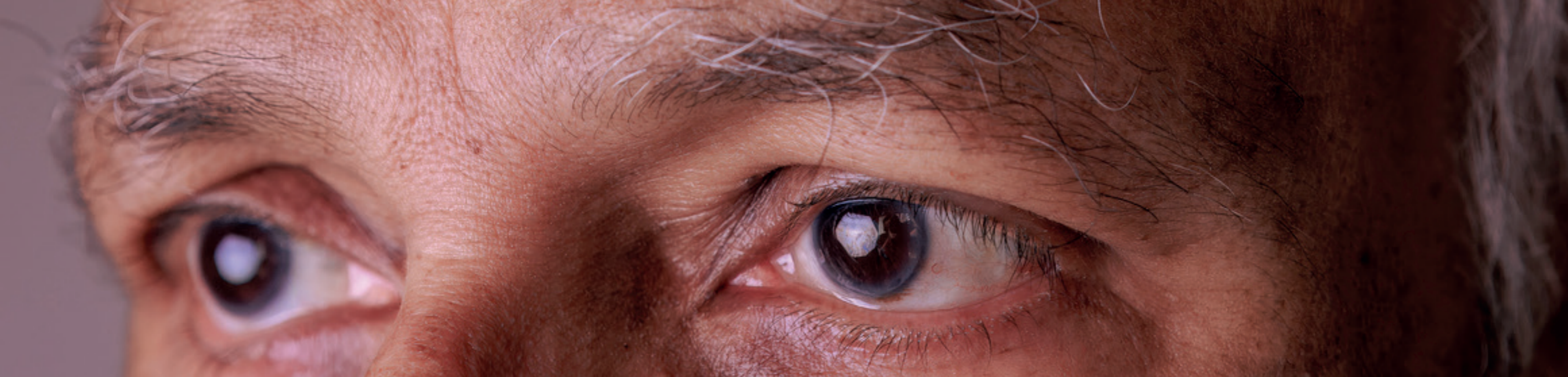
Our new strategy will outline our mission and objectives for the next five years, aiming to sustain our success as a high performing regulator, building on our strengths and the areas where we wish to improve, and setting out our vision for change. Our ambition remains to be a world-class regulator; agile, robust and effective in our regulatory responsibilities, well regarded by stakeholders and continuing to meet all the PSA standards of good regulation.

The new strategy will be supported by an EDI strategy, financial strategy, digital strategy, people plan and a business performance reporting framework.

We have engaged with stakeholders over the course of last year, and this year, we will consult on our proposed strategy.

We will maintain strong governance procedures, including implementing the recommendations from our Governance review, undertaking all member appointments and supporting the work of our Council and committees to ensure they inform decision-making and identify and manage any risk appropriately.

Our public duty and commitment to progress equality, diversity, and inclusion, which underpins all our work, including delivering our EDI strategy and annual report about how EDI is embedded across the organisation, remains vital.



Accountability

By protecting the public, we are also protecting the reputation of the optical professions. Public confidence in the professions we regulate is already strong and we expect this to be maintained.

We will continue to run our annual survey measuring public perceptions of the professions and experience using optical services, as well as our survey of all individual GOC registrants, exploring their attitudes to work and career plans, and the second wave of our survey of business registrants.

We should also be rated highly by the Professional Standards Authority, aiming to maintain meeting 18 out of 18 of the Standards for Good Regulation.

We will measure and track success on a business-as-usual basis quarterly reporting to our leadership team and Council.

Our finances

Most of our income comes from fees set for our registrants, which we use to deliver our core functions, strategic objectives and mission. For the 2024/25 budget, our focus is to deliver value in our business-as-usual (BAU) operations, planning for a better than break-even position for BAU and achieving a surplus before reserve expenditure.

Where necessary, we will use our reserves for the successful completion of strategic projects and other Council-approved designated operations. We will ensure we maintain reserve levels within our Reserves Policy limits, while investing effectively and appropriately in achieving our strategic aims.

Budget 2024/2025	000 (thousands)
Income	£12,341
Expenditure (business as usual)	£12,325
Surplus / (Deficit) before reserve expenditure	£16
Reserve expenditure	£1,181
Surplus / (Deficit) after reserve expenditure	(£1,165)
Unrealised investment gains	£221
Surplus / (Deficit)	(£944)

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