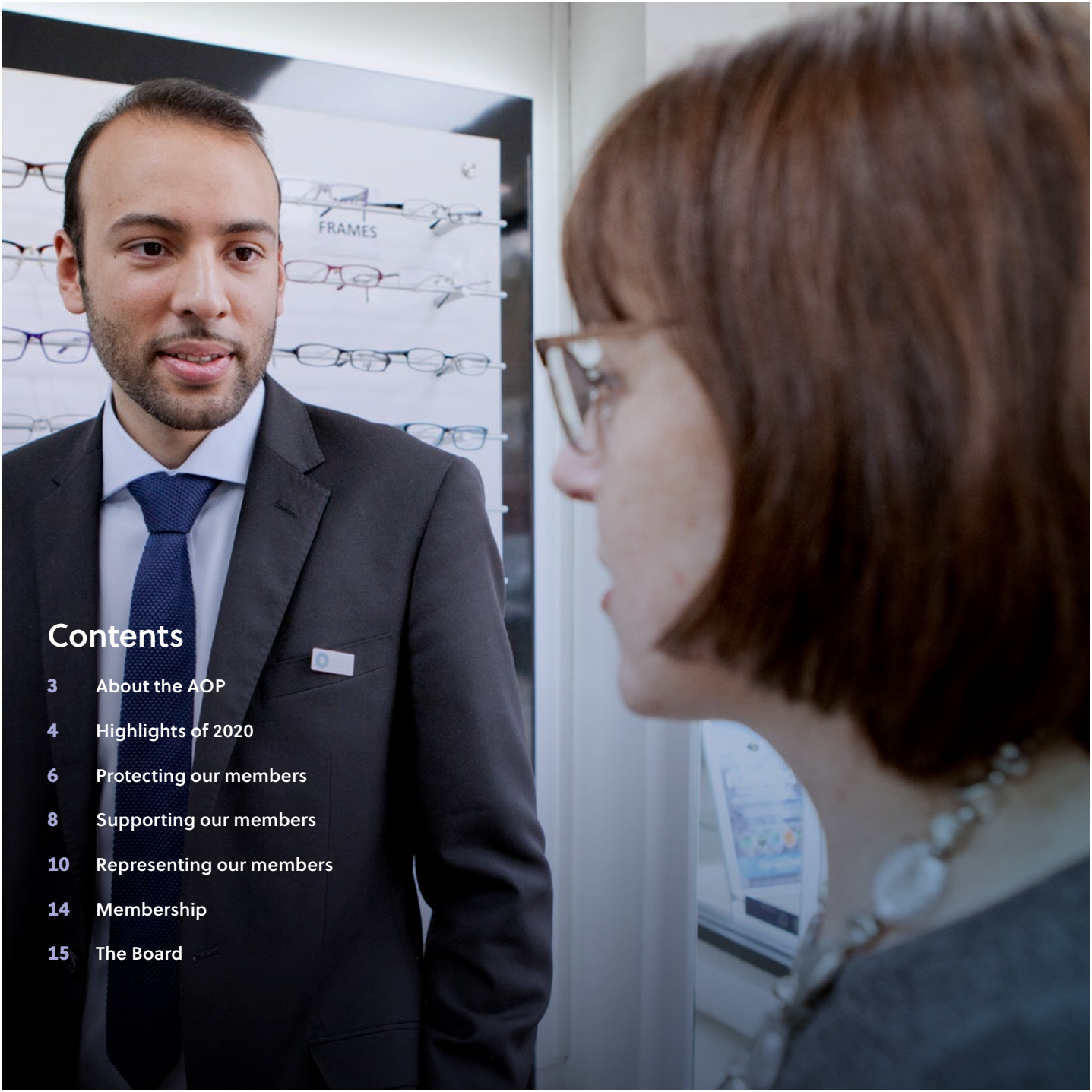




Association of
Optometrists



Annual report 2021



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About the AOP



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

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

Our mission

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

What we do

Assist our members to prosper, wherever they work

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

Provide unrivalled support for eye health practitioners


Defend, represent and protect our individual members

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Highlights of 2020



We surveyed members in April to find out how best we could support you during the pandemic and received over 2000 responses



HENRIETTA ALDERMAN
AOP CHIEF EXECUTIVE

2020 was a life-changing year but as I write this we are slowly emerging into a new normal. The resilience of members has been extraordinary and the AOP team has adapted to new ways of working to ensure members have been supported throughout this most difficult of times.

We approached the challenges of COVID-19 in multiple ways. We surveyed members in April to find out how best we could support you during the pandemic and received over 2000 responses, which helped us tailor our activities to your needs. We negotiated with NHS England, with others in the sector, for financial assistance for members, we ensured relevant pragmatic advice was communicated and we adapted the website to provide additional relevant resources. We also took the decision to relieve financial pressure being felt by members by reducing their membership fee by 20% when they needed it most.

The AOP adapted to support members' educational needs with all live education being converted to webinars to ensure members were able to meet their CET/CPD requirements. This resulted in over 70 virtual events being delivered and over 30,000 sessions being booked.

One of the biggest challenges was keeping members up-to-date with the constantly changing situation on a daily and weekly basis with guidance and resources provided by the legal, clinical, regulatory and policy teams — and responding to an unprecedented number of member queries.

A decision was taken not to hold Board or Council elections during 2020 and therefore the organisation was fortunate in maintaining a stable and committed leadership.



The importance of the AOP being agile and responding quickly to members' needs remains paramount. This is reflected in the 2021 theme 'Agility and stability'



MICHAEL GEORGE
AOP CHAIRMAN

In spite of the enormous pandemic-related workload, influencing the regulatory regime and the wider political and policy environment in our members' interests was a key objective during 2020. This focused heavily on working with and influencing the General Optical Council (GOC) across a range of projects and issues and this will be ongoing into 2021.

The importance of the AOP being agile and responding quickly to members' needs remains paramount. This is reflected in the 2021 theme 'Agility and stability — support in challenging times'. The Board's strategy for the coming year is based on consolidation and improvement.

The AOP, with other sector bodies, will continue to make significant efforts to engage fully with NHS England and the

Department for Health and Social Care to press for new and amended primary care extended services in England to be as ambitious, well-funded and accessible as possible. We will also be engaging with the optometry bodies in other parts of the UK promoting the same objectives.

As I pass the Chairman's gavel to Julie-Anne Little this June, I am confident that she will be well supported by our refreshed Council who will help to keep us informed of issues affecting our diverse membership. I am grateful to outgoing Council and Board members for their valuable contributions; and to the members, Councillors and staff of the AOP for supporting me during my time as Chairman.

Protecting our members



2020 was a challenging year and we are pleased we were able to help members navigate the many clinical and legal issues that arose


In 2020 the legal and regulatory department had a pivotal role to play in the AOP's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.


Our employment and clinical and regulatory teams, in particular, responded to a significant increase in enquiries from members on a wide range of topics including PPE, infection control, testing times, the furlough scheme, and other employment issues such as redundancy. Many members required advice on an ongoing basis, due to changes to the landscape as matters developed, including to government schemes. The increase in enquires and the frequency of government and NHS updates meant the teams regularly provided website and email updates with guidance for the wider membership, as well as advising on individual cases.

Outside of COVID-19, the usual work of defending our members in contested matters such as claims, and existing GOC and NHS investigations continued, with much of this work moving to a remote environment. This provided challenges, but also opportunities, and many of these ways of working are likely to continue into the future.

2020 was a challenging year and we are pleased we were able to help members navigate the many clinical and legal issues that arose.

Respect

Our staff have a right to work in a safe environment 

That includes freedom from abuse, discrimination, harassment and racism 

We operate a no-tolerance policy 



TACKLING RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION AT WORK

We responded to members' concerns about racism and discrimination at work by creating new guidance, anti-discrimination resources for practice, and offering advice and support to members who experience racism or discrimination at work through a newly formed AOP Anti-racism and equality team.

www.aop.org.uk/discrimination

NEW
in 2020



We produced new online employment law, clinical and regulatory advice and guidance, to assist members in navigating the key COVID-19 issues affecting them.

NEW
in 2020

There were a total of 2002 employment queries, representing a 67% increase on the previous year, including:

262%
INCREASE IN
SALARY QUERIES

233%
INCREASE IN
REDUNDANCY
QUERIES

157%
INCREASE IN
STAFF BENEFITS
QUERIES

89%
INCREASE IN
LOCUM QUERIES

Employment law guidance on COVID-19

- FAQs for employees and employers on the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough)
- FAQs for locums about the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme

Clinical and regulatory guidance on COVID-19

- Remote consultations
- Practice and equipment hygiene and correct use of PPE
- Considerations for returning to work, including an example COVID-19 risk assessment
- Webinar: COVID-19 clinical and professional guidance
- Webinar: COVID-19 urgent and emergency care

There were a total of 2635 clinical and regulatory queries, representing a 23% increase on the previous year, including:

95%
INCREASE IN
INSURANCE
QUERIES

Five new legal case studies

We expanded the number of anonymous case studies on our website to 11, providing valuable points of learning from a variety of situations, and illustrating how we offer expert assistance when members need it most.

Supporting our members



I'd just like to thank everybody at the AOP for working hard at keeping your members informed and educated during the COVID-19 crisis. I feel that the AOP really is there for its members. Thank you — **AOP MEMBER**

In a year dominated by COVID-19, we supported our members with online guidance, education and practice resources to help them navigate the various challenges presented by the pandemic. We set up our online coronavirus information hub in March, which received over 400,000 visits last year.

We delivered online education, professional development and specialist webinars to help members adapt to the new reality of clinical practice during COVID-19, enabling thousands of members to continue their education, training and professional development during lockdown.

We delivered education for all modes of practice including locums, hospital optometrists, newly-qualified, independents, business owners, therapeutic prescribers and students. We also continued our well-received health and wellbeing programme with webinars on managing fear and self-doubt, and wellbeing for working parents.



Optometry Today (OT)

OT online launched an Education Library for members, featuring a clinical archive of more than 400 articles and videos.

3490 EXAMS TAKEN MONTHLY

46 CET ARTICLES PUBLISHED

12 CET VIDEOS RELEASED

2 CPD GUIDES PUBLISHED



New Locum optometrist guide

Our new guide was free for all practising locums. From financial planning to health and wellbeing, the guide was part of a broader initiative by the AOP and Johnson & Johnson Vision to ensure locums received the support they needed during an unprecedented year.



The AOP Peer Support Line saw a **64% increase in calls during 2020**

For free, confidential emotional support at any stage of your career, call **0800 870 8401**



Keeping your practice safe



New COVID-19 practice resources for members

To help reduce the spread of COVID-19, the UK Government has advised that face coverings should be worn whenever social distancing can't be maintained.

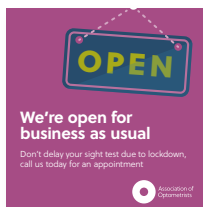
Our online guidance and practice resources include what reasonable adjustments you could make for patients who are unable to wear a face covering, and a template door poster so you can set out your practice policy on face coverings.

To read the guidance and download the poster visit www.aop.org.uk/faccoversing



Practice resources

We produced a range of resources to assist members facing some of the challenges raised by practising during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Events and education

9570 VISITORS TO 100% OPTICAL

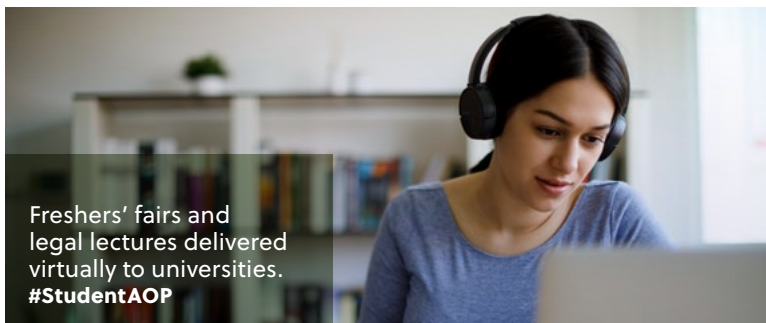
41 WEBINARS HOSTED

13 PEER DISCUSSIONS FACILITATED

31,682 BOOKINGS FOR AOP EVENTS

61,592 CET POINTS UPLOADED TO THE GOC

95% OF DELEGATES RATED ACTIVITIES GOOD OR EXCELLENT



Freshers' fairs and legal lectures delivered virtually to universities.
#StudentAOP



It was very comfortable discussing the different cases, and felt very relaxed. I picked up lots of pointers and liked the small groups per table.

LOCUM EVENT DELEGATE

Representing our members



COVID-19 support

From the start of the first lockdown, we worked intensively with other Optometric Fees Negotiating Committee (OFNC) members, NHS England and the DHSC on service delivery arrangements and financial support for GOS contractors in England.

We also liaised with the national optometry bodies across the UK on similar issues. The OFNC secured COVID payments in England to the end of September, and additional help for domiciliary providers and some fixed practices.

The UK Government support for self-employed workers affected by the pandemic left some AOP members with no financial help. The evidence our members provided informed our evidence to a Treasury Select Committee inquiry, which agreed that the gaps in support should be filled.



Regulation

Before COVID-19 struck, the GOC published its new guidance on patient confidentiality and the public interest.

The final version included suggestions we made in our 2019 consultation response, to give registrants more clarity and bring the GOC's approach into line with that of the General Medical Council.

From March onwards the focus was on the pandemic. We prompted the GOC to clarify draft statements on remote fitness to practise hearings and on verifying contact lens specifications. And we publicly criticised the GOC's June 2020 statement on resuming routine care, which caused confusion across the sector.



Council, Policy Committee and member feedback

As always, the AOP's Council and Policy Committee played a vital role in informing our policy and representational work during 2020. The first planned Council meeting of the year in March fell victim to lockdown, but for the rest of the year the Council and AOP committees met virtually to advise on how COVID-19 was affecting members and what the AOP could do to support them.

This prompted the AOP to produce new guidance and member resources on issues including infection prevention and control, how to resume routine care safely after the first lockdown, and how to manage changing lockdown requirements.

Our Policy Committee guided our response to the GOC's major consultation on its Education Strategic Review (ESR) in the second half of the year. Our response highlighted the significant risks attached to the GOC's policy approach, including funding uncertainties and potential disruption for universities and placement providers. We emphasised the need for trainees' clinical experience to be properly funded and supervised, drawing on the findings of a survey of AOP pre-registration trainees and supervisors, which showed that many members felt the support they were given was not always adequate:

While 54.5% of trainees found the support they received adequate or more than adequate, a total of 45.5% found it to be either 'sometimes adequate and sometimes less than adequate' or 'less than adequate most of the time'

54% of supervisors feel that the support they are given to supervise their trainees is 'sometimes adequate', 'sometimes less than adequate' or 'less than adequate most of the time'

Our consultation response on the ESR also suggested solutions to some of the problems with the draft new education framework, and we were pleased to see the GOC adopt many of these.

During 2020 the AOP Board and Council agreed changes to the structure of Council, to better reflect the wide range of roles our members have across the sector, and encourage members to take part. The changes came into effect in 2021.



We continued to have positive media exposure on a national level throughout the COVID-19 pandemic — achieving high-profile coverage on diverse topics

Representing you in the media

The media landscape shifted dramatically in 2020 — curtailing much of the planned PR activity for the year. Despite that, we continued to have positive media exposure on a national level throughout 2020 — achieving high-profile coverage on diverse topics including calling on the Government for more financial and job support schemes, illegal practice, contact lens advice and returning to practice.

Our campaigns included spectacle anti-fogging tips covered by the *Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Times* and online portals such as *Yahoo*, and our *Driving in the dark* campaign, coinciding with the clocks changing, was picked up by the BBC and lifestyle publications *My Weekly*, *The People's Friend* and regionals. Reactive work included a Sky News interview and national press coverage such as *The Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* in response to Dominic Cummings' visit to Barnard Castle, summer eyecare in *Daily Mirror*, cosmetic contact lenses for Halloween in *The Sun* and comment on the vaccination roll-out in the *The Daily Telegraph*.



Over 70 pieces of coverage had an audience reach of 100,000+



Three releases a week on coronavirus-related issues at the height of the pandemic

Don't swerve a sight test

And other tips for driving in the dark



Association of
Optometrists

Membership

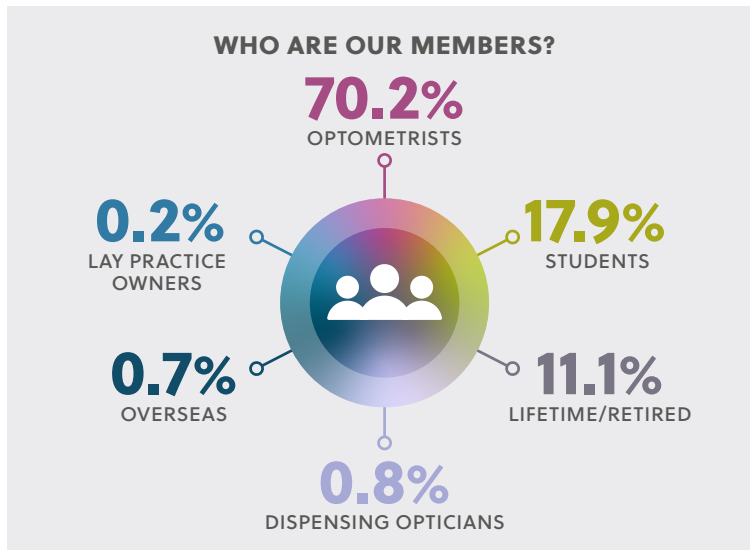


Our offering of the career break and parental leave grades became a valued option for members during 2020

2020 has been a difficult year for all businesses. Despite the impact of the pandemic, our members demonstrated how much they value their membership, with an annual renewal retention of 97%. Membership grew in 2020 with an increase in qualified members of 1.0%.

During this period of uncertainty, our Career break and Parental leave grades became a valued option, providing flexibility for those members who needed it, while offering continued access to our support and updates.

The pandemic had a particular impact on pre-registration optometrists and with the suspension of OSCEs, less than half the usual number were able to move to our Newly-qualified grade. We look forward to welcoming more members onto this grade now that the OSCEs have recommenced.



The Board

Our Board sets the strategic direction of the AOP, overseeing the running of the organisation and responding to challenges faced by our members.



MICHAEL GEORGE
CHAIRMAN



JULIE-ANNE LITTLE
DEPUTY CHAIRMAN



KEVIN THOMPSON
PAST CHAIRMAN



MICHAEL FEGAN
CHAIRMAN OF FINANCE



GORDON ILETT
ELECTED BY AOP COUNCIL



EMMA SPOFFORTH
ELECTED BY AOP COUNCIL



TUSHAR MAJITHIA
ELECTED BY AOP COUNCIL



VIVIAN BUSH
APPOINTED DIRECTOR



JEREMY HOLMES
LAY MEMBER

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

Promoting the profession,
protecting the professional

