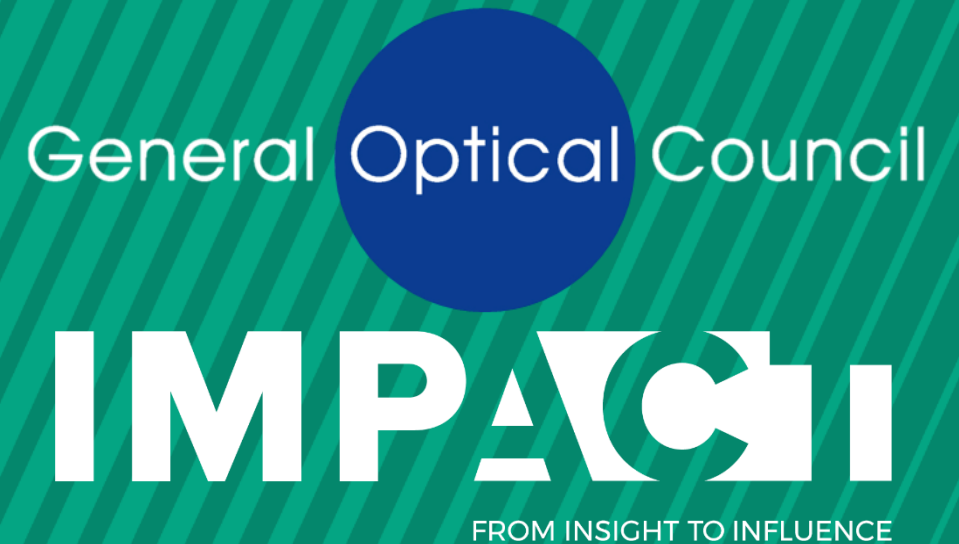


# PUBLIC AND PATIENT RESEARCH INTO REFORMING THE GOC'S SYSTEM OF OPTICAL BUSINESS REGULATION

## Research Report

Prepared for General Optical Council  
Prepared by Impact Health

April 2025  
Project No: 5326



# REPORTING STANDARDS AND GLOSSARY

- This market research was conducted by Impact Health, an independent market research agency (part of the Impact Research Group)
- All interviews were conducted confidentially, maintaining the anonymity of participants and with strict adherence to the BHBIA, ABPI, EphMRA and MRS guidelines
- All projects are carried out in compliance with the ISO 20252 international standard for market, opinion and social research and GDPR

**Note:** Due to the qualitative nature of this research, all numbers contained in this report are directional only and are not projectable to the overall population.



# CONTENTS

Background, objectives and methodology

[Page 4-6](#)

Executive summary

[Page 7](#)

Perceptions of visiting optical businesses and awareness of regulation

[Page 11](#)

Closing the regulatory gap

[Page 21](#)

Appointing a head of optical practice

[Page 24](#)

Improved access to consumer redress

[Page 27](#)

Enforcement powers – fines

[Page 30](#)

Enforcement powers – business visits

[Page 33](#)

Appendices

[Page 37](#)

# BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

The General Optical Council (GOC) regulates the optical professions in the UK, ensuring public health and safety. The GOC is reviewing the way it regulates optical businesses. It is seeking to modernise the system of business regulation to help strengthen public protection and remove unnecessary restrictions on businesses.

This research was commissioned to gather public and patient views on the GOC's proposed reforms, ensuring they align with public expectations, improve trust, confidence and transparency, and enhance public protection.

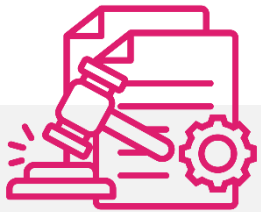


# ANSWERING YOUR OBJECTIVES

This study explored public awareness, trust, and expectations regarding optical business regulation. The research sought to understand how people perceived regulation, their experiences with optical services, and their reactions to proposed reforms aimed at improving public protection and confidence.

Specifically, our research provided insights across four broad areas of reform:

## Expanding regulation



Bringing all optical businesses under GOC regulation, including those currently unregistered, to close public protection gaps

## Head of optical practice



Introducing a designated person within each business responsible for ensuring compliance with regulatory standards

## Consumer redress



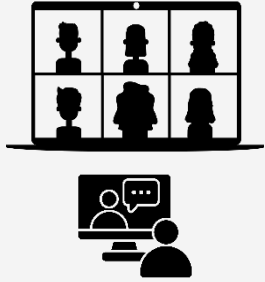
Requiring all businesses to participate in an independent consumer redress scheme

## Enforcement and fines



Granting the GOC greater powers to visit businesses and issue higher fines where necessary

# METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE



## Qualitative methodology

3x online focus groups (lasting 1.5 hours) each with n=8 members of the public

3x 60 minute web-assisted telephone depth interviews (WATDIs) with individuals who have experienced dissatisfaction with optical services in last two years

**Insights from a total of n=27 respondents**

The sample was broadly representative of the UK population, with some increases to statistically smaller groups, including those experiencing dissatisfaction with optical services, those representing global majorities and devolved nations. Further details on the sample can be found in the [appendix](#).

## Fieldwork dates

4 - 24 February 2025



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**IMPACT**

FROM INSIGHT TO INFLUENCE

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 1

The focus groups and interviews consistently highlighted a **strong consensus** on the need **for reform in the regulation of optical businesses**.

Many respondents were shocked to learn that not all optical businesses are currently regulated, expressing concerns that existing regulation does not adequately address their concerns. Participants emphasised the need for a fairer, clearer, and more supportive regulatory system whilst also being minded not to place too much burden/costs on businesses (especially smaller independents).





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2

There was strong agreement that all optical businesses should be regulated to ensure consistency, accountability, and public safety. They saw the GOC as an independent body that should hold all optical businesses accountable for the eye care services they provide.

Head of optical practice	Consumer redress	Tailoring fines	Power to visit
<p>Respondents felt their confidence and trust would increase with the appointment of a head of optical practice to ensure compliance with GOC standards.</p> <p>However, some sought clarity on how standards would be applied in daily practice and reassurance that this would not lead to increased costs. While there was overall support for this proposal, reassurances were needed.</p>	<p>Throughout the research there was widespread support for requiring all optical businesses to participate in a consumer redress scheme, believing trust and confidence would increase if everyone could access it.</p> <p>The majority were comfortable with a potentially slower but more formal complaints process, prioritising binding decisions over speed.</p>	<p>Respondents supported stronger enforcement powers, including the ability to issue fines tailored to the size and turnover of an optical business.</p> <p>However, many wanted the severity of impact on customers to be considered, rather than fines being based solely on business size.</p>	<p>Respondents supported the GOC's ability to visit optical businesses as part of an investigation into a complaint.</p> <p>However, respondents favoured 'inspections' as a term over 'visits' due to the sentiment of enforcement and accountability.</p> <p>Some volunteered 'routine inspections' upon registration to identify potential issues early, followed by additional 'inspections' triggered by complaints or self-referral.</p>

# DETAILED FINDINGS



# LEVELS OF TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN OPTICAL BUSINESSES



- Since many optical professionals can refer patients to hospitals, respondents felt they are as trustworthy as NHS clinicians
  - However, because people visit optical businesses less frequently than GPs or dentists, it is harder to assess trust
- Optical professionals were perceived as clinically trained and have a very specific role
  - Some felt the retail environment distinguished optical services from those of pharmacists, dentists, and doctors
  - Others compared it to private dentists offering cosmetic treatments (e.g. teeth whitening) or private doctors providing additional services
  - Some intentionally separate their sight test and consultation from the purchase of glasses, choosing to take their prescriptions elsewhere

# VERBATIM - LEVELS OF TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN OPTICAL BUSINESSES

*"I think you just automatically expect it [TRUST] because it's not like going to the shop, it's not like a shopkeeper. You're asking someone who's supposedly done years of training to diagnose things. So it is just like a doctor's really."*

Andrew

*"Obviously they are qualified. Do you know what I mean? I know they're kind of nestled in a retail operation, but they are qualified to get to that stage. So we're trusting them."*

Gary

*"I think it's actually changed now... Because you can now go to an optician and you don't have to buy your glasses from there. You can take the prescription away. Realistically, all you need is the prescription."*

Andrew

*"Think it's a bit dual sided because although I see the optician at the same level as a dentist or a doctor, the commercial aspect of it where they're selling you a product, it does feel different. A visit to the opticians feels different to me because it is monetary, you are paying for a product and it definitely changes things. And then there's also designers involved with you. So you can get Tommy Hilfiger, you can get your Calvin Klein, you don't go to the dentist or the GP and have that same experience."*

Krystal

*"I think they all have certificates up on the wall behind the counters, and things like that to say what they've done. So they've done qualifications. It's not like they're just employing someone out of school and letting them be an optician."*

Dave

*"You were saying that they're different to dentists and doctors, but actually an awful lot of dentists are private now and they can upsell themselves, teeth whitening."*

Suzie

# PERCEPTION OF IMPORTANCE OF REGULATION OF OPTICAL BUSINESSES

- Most people assumed that all optical businesses were regulated
  - This was due to the understanding that the professionals they employed must be qualified to treat patients and adhere to a code of conduct
  - However, some questioned whether the retail aspect of optical businesses was regulated
- Regulation was seen as essential
  - A poor experience could lead to sight loss or serious health issues
  - None had direct experience with the GOC but assumed they could find complaint procedures online if needed

***However, most realised they were assuming all optical businesses were regulated simply because they knew optical professionals were trained***

*"I would like to think they are [REGULATED] considering what I've said as there's so many of them out there, but your dentist and stuff you hear the British Dental Association, the Association of British Dentists, all that regulation stuff. I haven't heard of anything in all my years of a regulator for opticians, so I could be wrong, but I don't think so"*

Gary

*"I don't have any idea, but I would assume based on what they do for a living and what their business is, that I'd be very surprised if they weren't regulated. Are we making the assumption they're regulated because they're trained?"*

Lucy



# DIFFERING PERCEPTIONS OF OPTICAL BUSINESSES

- Most respondents had positive or at least acceptable experiences with optical businesses over the years
  - Those who were dissatisfied felt their prescribed glasses did not improve their vision or did not experience the level of service they expected

The importance placed on their relationship with the optical business varied:

Some, particularly those with long-term eye conditions or past eye trauma, valued trust and confidence in their optical professional highly, and by association the optical business they use

Others took a more practical approach, prioritising ease of booking and appointment availability. They often acknowledged they should visit more regularly, but sight tests remained on their 'to-do' list rather than a priority

Some assigned little value on their relationship with optical businesses, either because they had never required their services or had previously been disappointed by glasses that failed to improve their vision

*An independent took me right through having glasses, the contact lenses, the laser eye, and I've just stayed there ever since because the service is second to none, they know me well. They know my eyes, they know the whole history ... if I have to travel 20 to 30 miles to see them, I'll do it and I'll do it for the reason.*

*Lucy*

*I think it means if you can get an appointment fairly quickly, I can either go online or in the store itself or telephone them up and roughly I would say can get an appointment within at least a week to two weeks. Hayley*



# POSITIVE PERCEPTION OF THEIR OPTICAL BUSINESSES

## Convenience vs. personalised care:



- National chains are valued for their accessibility, often located in town centres with easy appointment availability. Non-users feel confident they can access these services when needed
- Independents are preferred by those with complex eye conditions, as they are seen as providing more personalised care, better understanding patient history, and allowing more time for consultations

## Trust in familiarity:



- Some are willing to travel further to receive a more personalised service, including detailed explanations and access to advanced technology not always available at national chains (e.g., prism lenses, which significantly improved one respondent's vision)
- Familiarity also plays a role in trust – optical businesses that are frequently advertised on TV may be perceived as more reliable

## Cost and ease of access:



- Supermarket optical services are popular due to their high appointment availability and acceptance of work vouchers for free sight tests and discounts on glasses. Their pricing is often seen as more competitive
- Some choose to have their sight tests at independent optical business, where they feel more confident in the service, but then purchase glasses from a national chain for better pricing

# CONCERNS WHEN VISITING OPTICAL BUSINESSES - 1

## Lack of personal care:



- Some patients felt they were treated like they were on a "conveyor belt", just another number to staff. National chains, in particular, were perceived as overly busy, rushed, and chaotic, with short appointment times
- There were concerns that conditions or issues might be missed or not explained thoroughly. One respondent felt they should have been referred to a specialist earlier for a chronic eye condition
- Some found they rarely saw the same optical professional year on year and felt some younger professionals lack experience. However, younger customers placed less importance on seeing the same professional every time

*My [BUSINESS X] is in [SUPERMARKET X] so I can get my eyes checked and get a chicken at the same time. it's a bit like conveyor belt. The service is not like you get at an independent.*

*Philip*

*I think the thought of them not getting it right and then you go to wait, you get new glasses and then if you get a set of glasses, that glasses don't really work correctly. You could end up with headaches*

*Gary*

## Fear of mistakes:



- There was a risk of optical businesses not dispensing the right glasses for you, trying to 'live with them' and the hassle of having to take them back

# CONCERNS WHEN VISITING OPTICAL BUSINESSES - 2

## Fear of less committed staff:



- While all optical professionals were known to be qualified, some felt that staff (often in larger chains) seemed less committed to patient care. There was a perception that they were using the role as a stepping-stone to another job, which was particularly concerning for those with complex eye conditions

*"It's not just a conveyor belt of customers, it's a conveyor belt of people that seem to work there as well. Look, I'm pretty sure they read the notes when you walk in, but it'd be nice to see the same person a couple of times at least. Maybe why you see new people all the time is that they might do a year, they might do two, but then they're moving on to an independent or they're setting up their own business."*

*Martin*

## Fear of upselling:



- Some businesses, both large and small, were seen as charging high prices for glasses or trying to "upsell" extras like lens coatings, making customers feel pressured to buy

Despite these concerns, overall trust and confidence in optical businesses remained relatively high. Independent businesses with long-standing reputations were rated slightly higher than national chains.

**Regulation, or the lack of it, was not spontaneously mentioned as a key concern**

# SPECIFIC CASES OF DISSATISFACTION

Specific incidences of dissatisfaction led to:

Reluctance to return to same provider

Increased caution and scepticism

Greater likelihood to seek second opinions

Since the incidents were considered one-off or infrequent, none of the respondents felt the need to formally complain or escalate the issue – which they believed they could have done by investigating how and who to complain to



Sources of dissatisfaction due to:

Poor service and lack of communication

Long wait times and inefficiency

Inexperience and inaccurate prescriptions

“Did not say a word to me... not one word. And that was it.” Hilary

“It’s like they forgot about me.” Jon

“I had to go back two or three times... it was just annoying.” Faz

# AWARENESS AND PERCEPTION OF GOC

- Most assumed there was a regulator but had no knowledge of who it was or what their specific powers and responsibilities were, beyond enforcing a general 'set of standards'
- Some believed regulations might cover areas such as keeping equipment up to date and setting service level agreements for appointment wait times
- Many assumed the GOC had the authority to remove optical businesses from the register
- There was some uncertainty about whether the GOC could regulate pricing, with little awareness of its actual limitations
- Those previously unaware of the GOC were relieved to learn an optical regulator existed but they:
  - immediately called for greater visibility of the GOC
  - suggested that retailers should prominently display the GOC regulator logo on promotional materials
- Only a small number of respondents had heard of the GOC, typically those in regulatory roles or with a history of complex eye conditions
- Very few had ever noticed the GOC being advertised within an optical business

*I think they will be able to strike them off the database. So they're no longer able to practise. They lose their license*

Andrew

*I would assume that they hold them to a certain standard that they have to meet a best practice standard*

Krystal

*I work for a professional body, so I've come across the General Optical Council before. They're the regulatory body for opticians in the UK. So they set the professional standards and make sure that people adhere to those professional standards*

Philip

# PARTIAL REGULATION OF OPTICAL BUSINESSES

Most respondents were surprised and concerned to learn that only half of optical businesses are registered, as they had assumed all should be regulated, leading to reduced trust and confidence in the system



One participant was **aware of regulatory gaps** due to business structures and had **specifically chosen a GOC-regulated provider** for assurance



Some assumed **online retailers might not be regulated**, particularly those selling **very cheap glasses**, raising concerns about **quality and oversight**

*“ I think that's shocking. As I know your eyesight is incredibly important and for many, many reasons, including driving a car and being able to see properly not having a crash ....I mean it can lead to blindness ”*

*Suzie*

*“ That's quite alarming because your eyes are something that shouldn't really be messed with. And it's a bit concerning that you've got doctors and surgeons and stuff and they're all under strict regulations, even pharmacies when you're dispensing medicine. So why your eyes not taken as seriously? Because if you are qualified and you've got a set of standards, you would be able to set the right standards or prescription of your glasses and you can even find out other conditions within an eye test like diabetes or glaucoma or something like that. So yeah, it's a bit alarming ”*

*Andrew*

*“ I am equally shocked with Susie. I would've thought that everyone would be regulated, like she said, it's medical. Why would it not be? You wouldn't find a doctor that is unregulated ”*

*Hilary*



# REACTIONS TO WHAT THE GOC IS SEEKING TO DO

## – MAKING REGISTRATION MANDATORY FOR ALL OPTICAL BUSINESSES

Respondents **strongly agreed** that **all optical businesses should be regulated** to maintain consistency, accountability, and public safety. They viewed the GOC as an independent body responsible for ensuring optical businesses are accountable for the eye care services they provide. They also believed that no businesses should be denied the opportunity to register based on flaws in the current system of regulation.

**No respondents identified disadvantages or exemptions to mandatory registration**, expressing full support for its implementation. They also felt that both the GOC and optical businesses should actively promote their registration and the regulations they adhere to in order to increase public trust and awareness.

*Absolutely shocking that you can operate an opticians and fiddle around with our eyes without being set to a certain standard. ”*

*Martin*

*“ But you would think across the board they (optical businesses) should all be signed up to this and I would hope that's what they're angling towards. ”*

*Gerard*



# MAKING REGISTRATION MANDATORY FOR ALL OPTICAL BUSINESSES

## POSITIVES

- Most respondents still felt confident in receiving good care because the optical professionals are required to be well trained even if the business might not be regulated
- Large national chains were perceived to be regulated and therefore trust was higher
- Large national chains could use regulation status as a selling point to reassure customers that standards are set and are high
- Most indicated they would feel more comfortable if all businesses are regulated, as they would be reassured on minimum standards being met and for many this also implied having access to a complaints scheme where penalties could be imposed if standards are not met

## CHALLENGES

- Concern that some optical businesses were deliberately avoiding registration so as not to be regulated
- The fact that some businesses wanted to be registered but couldn't due to business structure seemed 'ridiculous'
- Many felt they might be visiting optical businesses that aren't registered and became worried they would have no access to a complaints procedure
- Many viewed the lack of regulation in some businesses as placing them outside the higher rules and standards that should apply. This was often compared to other industries
- An unregulated optical business was felt to be able to set their own standards, which might be too low
- Concerns were raised that registration fees could increase costs for customers, but many were willing to pay more for a fully regulated and accountable industry

# VERBATIM - REACTIONS TO WHAT GOC IS SEEKING TO DO

*“What if something goes wrong and you need to complain? Who do you complain to if that branch isn't registered? Do you have a case even? I dunno.”*

Justine

*“It would be a bit of a postcode lottery. If you're in a rural area, you might not have much of a choice when it comes to opticians. And the one that you've got close to you might not be the case.”*

Gary

*“There must be a hell of a lot of people who don't know that these places are not regulated. In fact, the same problems actually happening with funeral services about regulated.”*

Andrew

*“(the benefits of all optical businesses being regulated)...that if someone can go wrong, you can go to them and you can complain if you want to complain, but it sets standards and to be honest, it's good for them because they can actually display it that they're actually regulated by GOC.”*

Andrew

*“It is a bit strange because if they're carrying out the same procedures, tests, whatever and advice as the registered people and they should be able to register. Simple as that. If they're doing the same job, they should be open to the same opportunities.”*

Dave

# APPOINTING A HEAD OF OPTICAL PRACTICE

Respondents felt their **confidence and trust would improve with the introduction of a head of optical practice** to ensure compliance with the GOC's business standards. However, they sought clarity on how these standards would be applied in daily practice and reassurance that small, independent optical businesses would not face excessive paperwork or administrative burdens.

While there was general support for this proposal, reassurances were needed, such as:

- ensuring the head of optical practice had the required support, training, authority and resources to adequately manage regulation and potentially report failures to meet standards
- this would not mean price increases although many felt they would be happy to pay more for a well-regulated business.



*“If there was someone clearly in charge, maybe you wouldn't feel like just a number”*

Gerard

*“...if I knew that I was getting something which was done by a professional who was regulated and has actually got to a certain standard and I can a hundred percent trust them and it's a little bit more expensive, I'd be happy with that.”*

Philip

# APPOINTING A HEAD OF OPTICAL PRACTICE

## POSITIVES

- Most saw this as a necessary step for accountability which lots of them had in their professional lives already
- Self-referring for potential breaches of standards was considered an effective regulatory approach, drawing comparisons to systems of accountability used by the police or within the teaching profession
- Many felt it would improve consistency in national chains
- The GOC's standards for optical business were well received, but many felt it simply outlined basic expectations that they had assumed all businesses were already following

## CHALLENGES

- Some were concerned that the head of optical practice might be 'marking their own homework' if they were responsible for referring their own optical business to the regulator
- Some thought the concept of the head of optical practice referring their own business was similar to whistleblowing which might be uncomfortable and ineffective. Instead, they preferred compulsory annual visits over self-referral, or an initial visit upon registration to flag any issues, followed by complaint-triggered visits
- There were also concerns on the pressure of small businesses having to pay someone to adopt a potentially new role
- Larger chains were seen as having a high staff turnover, raising concerns about whether maintaining continuity of a head of optical practice was realistic
- There was concern that creating a new role with additional responsibilities could increase costs, potentially impacting prices for customers. However, many were willing to pay more for a better-regulated industry



# VERBATIM - APPOINTING A HEAD OF OPTICAL PRACTICE

*"I don't think that will work. I don't see how that can work because in bigger places like [SUPERMARKETS] and [BUSINESS X], you have opticians coming in all the time. The move around, they're like freelance people, a lot of them"*

Andrew

*"At my work, we've got a compliance manager and she rips everyone into shape. We get weekly updates with what's missing. If there's a spreadsheet, something's wrong or someone might not be pulling their weight as much and she's just as much as a friend in the office to everyone"*

Lacey

*"Think it's general practice. In every walk of life you've got to have someone who's ultimately responsible for either the health or safety, finance, whatever it is in that whatever workplace you are in, someone who has to be responsible for the management of that place."*

William

*"Are they actually going to say something's gone wrong and the onus is on them and they're going to report it? I don't think it should be somebody inside the business. It should be somebody on the outside."*

Justine

*"I don't really see it as a concern if it's internal. Where I work, we are regulated very heavily because as pharmaceuticals and medicine we kind of, I guess, mark our own homework but at the same time discuss double check, triple checked again and get signed off. And then we have audits as well. And then we have unexpected visits as well where they just give us a few days in advance where they come to check the work that we're doing, making sure it is compliant."*

Faheema



# STRENGTHENING THE CONSUMER COMPLAINTS AND REDRESS SCHEME

There was **widespread support for requiring all optical businesses to participate in a redress scheme**, ensuring all consumers had access to a formal complaints process. They felt their trust and confidence would increase knowing that there was a complaints and redress service available if required.

All would **appreciate having the option to complain** and seek redress but many thought they would rarely use the service given their general satisfaction, and even those who had issues did not find them severe enough to warrant an official complaint.

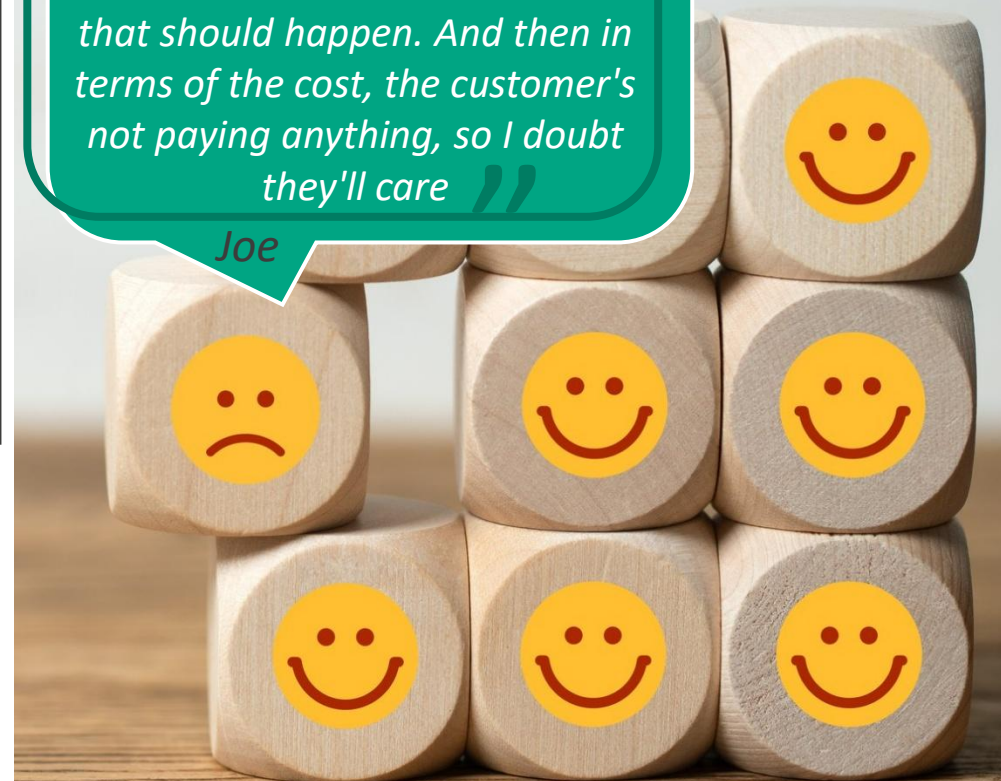
The majority were **happy with a potentially slower yet more formal complaints procedure that could make binding decisions**.

*Yeah, it almost shows that no matter where you go, you're going to get the same treatment and entitlements. The benefits to consumers is they could go anywhere for the same treatment to be treated the same and have the same comeback should they need it and it will open up market competition*

Dave

*I don't think there's anything wrong with a more formal complaint system that's standardised - that sounds like that should happen. And then in terms of the cost, the customer's not paying anything, so I doubt they'll care*

Joe



# STRENGTHENING CONSUMER COMPLAINTS AND REDRESS SCHEME

## POSITIVES

- Respondents agreed that all optical businesses should be part of a standard complaints process. They felt that the knock-on effect would be greater adherence to GOC standards and more consistent care across all optical businesses
- All respondents agreed they would be okay with slightly slower resolutions as that is the case for other areas too (28 days to hear back is normal), as they don't expect it to be a quick process
- None had ever needed to access a complaints procedure against an optical business but were pleased to know it might be there in the background if they needed it

## CHALLENGES

- Concern that cases are not always “black and white” and in many cases the redress scheme might favour the business
- Very small minority feel it would not impact on whether they went to the optical business or not

*“ I think the problem with this is until you actually need to use something like this, it doesn't really come up. So, if all swimming along and everything's going fine, you don't really care about this, it's when things go wrong and then you feel like you need somewhere to be able to go to actually sort this out. So again, similar like the financial services ombudsman. It's almost like being a mediator I think between the two, but it only comes into play when you need it. ”*

*Philip*

# VERBATIM - STRENGTHENING CONSUMER COMPLAINTS AND REDRESS SCHEME

Gerard

*"I think most of the time when you make a complaint you get that standardised reply back. It may take us 28 days to fully investigate a complaint. Nobody expects immediate resolutions to complaints these days. And if that's the price, you have to pay a hundred percent time"*

*"I think it is good. You never know where a situation can arise, where you want to raise a complaint and then you don't have any other option or who's going to listen to you. So it's something nice to have"*

Faheema

*"It seems to nail everything that we've been talking about to be fair. So yeah, no, I'm very happy. And I know it seems like you can't raise a complaint with the GOC, but you can vicariously through the OCCS, so providing a platform from which you can [complain]"*

Martin

*"I don't think it's about the quality of the service you get. I think it's more about consumer protection if you've got an issue or a problem"*

William

*"Not sure it would make much difference though. I didn't complain either way, whether they're regulated or not. So I'm not sure that it'd work that way with me."*

Lacey

*"I wouldn't be too fussed if that's not what was to happen if it wouldn't change my decision on going to the opticians either way."*

Lacey

# STRENGTHENING THE GOC'S ENFORCEMENT POWERS - FINES

There was **support for the GOC to have greater ability to fine registered optical businesses** as without the threat of fines, businesses could ignore the regulator.

There was also **support for the GOC to tailor the level of fine to the size and turnover** of the optical business although many wanted severity of impact on customer taken into consideration. However, there was again concern that small independent optical businesses may face high fines as a result of increased GOC powers which might mean they face bankruptcy, so they hoped the GOC would apply fairness in levels of fines.



*I like the idea to tailor the fines to the size of the business. Is that how they do it in Switzerland with speeding tickets and stuff? They charge it off income because that's what actually stops people doing it.*

Joe

*"I mean there's only so many threats you can give somebody before they don't believe the threat anymore. So you need to have that backup to be able to say, look, if this goes any further, you will get a hefty fine"*

Philip



# STRENGTHENING THE GOC'S ENFORCEMENT POWERS - FINES

## POSITIVES

- Most participants supported fines being scaled based on business size and turnover, believing this would improve compliance with the GOC's business standards. Larger companies were seen as having greater financial resources, so fines needed to be higher to have a meaningful impact
- There was concern that a standardised fine could disproportionately harm small independent practices, potentially forcing them into bankruptcy

*"I think it makes perfect sense for them to fine large companies more than your independent retailer because they've got more at their disposal. That's just my opinion"*

*Gerard*

## CHALLENGES

- Some argued that fines should be based on the severity and risk of the breach, rather than just the size of the business
- Others felt that fines should be more severe, with some suggesting harsher penalties or even custodial sentences in extreme cases, based on their professional experiences
- Many believed there should be clear guidance on compensation for patients who suffer physical harm due to negligence
- Some sought clarification on how the GOC would impose fines in cases involving medical negligence and court proceedings

# VERBATIM - STRENGTHENING THE GOC'S ENFORCEMENT POWERS - FINES

*I think it makes perfect sense for them to fine large companies more than your independent retailer because they've got more at their disposal. That's just my opinion*

Gerard

*If I knowingly sent a vehicle out on the road that didn't have an MOT and wasn't serviced, I could face a custodial. If you are going to mess around with my eyes, I also want you under the same caution*

Martin

*I think here what we've got to focus on is that this is a fine for the business, doesn't affect the liability insurance that you have as a patient. Yeah, that's two different things*

William

*I think it needs to be appropriate to the size of the business. I mean, if you just had a standardised fine across the board, I mean you could wipe a company out so easily, but I think it's important to have these fines because there is no point in giving the GOC these powers unless you give them the stick to beat them in some ways*

Philip

*...the LA fires and a lot of the private residences were having these private firemen and they were using water and they weren't meant to be using the water, but they were rich enough to pay those fines and so they didn't care. So you'd like to see a scale within that. So those larger businesses such as [BUSINESS X and Y], the fine needs to be an amount that is going to actually impact on them, but it's not also then bad for an independent. So I'd like to see that*

Krystal

*Think that's just complies with most other businesses. I mean you look at any other business depending on its size, its turnover, etc, it's got to have an impact. So if you are someone like [BUSINESS X or Y], £50,000 is a drop in the ocean*

William



# STRENGTHENING THE GOC'S ENFORCEMENT POWERS - BUSINESS VISITS

There was broad **support for the GOC to visit optical businesses as part of an investigation into a complaint**. However, **some favoured a stricter approach**, suggesting 'routine inspections' upon registration to identify any issues early, followed by additional visits triggered by complaints or self-referral.

Throughout the research, respondents predominantly used the term **'inspections' instead of 'visits'** when discussing regulatory oversight, even though the research materials and moderator framed the topic as business 'visits'. They favoured 'inspections' as it was more familiar (e.g. restaurant inspections) and conveyed a sense of accountability, enforcement and standardisation, whereas 'visits' felt less formal.

*I think there's a danger that if you just go in when there's only a problem that some of these organisations could fly under the radar a little bit and be still acting in maybe the not most professional manner. I think having a routine inspection, even though that sounds a lot more work and a lot more authoritative, it certainly focuses companies' minds, I think, and keeps standards to what they should be. I think if you just say I'm only going to come in when something's wrong, I think standards could slip from there*

*Philip*

*I like to think that when they become registered with GOC, there is an inspection and then a standard is set at that moment in time, a snapshot, and then if any complaints come in, they go back out again and they have a comparison to make*

*Krystal*

# STRENGTHENING THE GOC'S ENFORCEMENT POWERS – BUSINESS VISITS

## POSITIVES

- While business visits were viewed as a positive step by all respondents, many felt that stronger regulation was needed in this area
- Some were happy with proposed changes as customers complaining is a sure sign that an optical business might not be adhering to the GOC standards

*“If there's a minimum standard and the minimum standard is high enough and it's adhered to, then I would have a lot more confidence in going to [BUSINESS X] where I've previously said I don't feel very confident. But if I knew that there was a base level that they had to achieve and they get checked on it and there are penalties that if they miss it before it, I'd like to think that the quality of care was good enough not to get to a complaint. And a set of standards as the GOC clearly want to issue would help that ”*

Martin

## CHALLENGES

- Most respondents would prefer ‘routine inspections’ of businesses otherwise it might be too late “after the horse has bolted”
- There were fears that if customers did not complain then a poorly operated optical practice could operate ‘under the radar’ for many years without the GOC being aware
- Introducing ‘routine inspections’ would be comparable to food safety checks, but in this case for eye care—where malpractice is seen to carry greater risk
- Some advocated for ‘unannounced inspections’, arguing that prior warnings allow poorly run businesses to conceal issues and avoid scrutiny

# VERBATIM - STRENGTHENING THE GOC'S ENFORCEMENT POWERS - BUSINESS VISITS

*"I think these places that serve you food, they're allowed to be routinely inspected at any point in time and then the hygiene gets rated and then you have to improve. You're dealing with a much more serious issue which is somebody's eyes."*

Gerard

*"They're a member of the GOC...a safety measure, isn't it? And it helps maybe the person to feel a bit more secure about them. I don't know, but it's just like a safety net in a way."*

Justine

*"Well, to me it sounds a bit contradictory because they're saying that they will go in under certain circumstances if an investigation is open, but we're saying it's going to help better protect the patients. Well, it's not actually if it's just going as and when something happens because it could be multiple things that have"*

Andrew

*"It could have been that there might have been three or four people who haven't complained, but it's happened before. The same problem happened with schools didn't it? They've got as three-month warning that they were coming in and they actually improved everything brilliantly. They were preparing for it, and I don't think you can't have a prepared investigation like that."*

Andrew

*"So that sort of gives them a bit of an out because if there's no complaint then they wouldn't come in. So it makes me feel like the whole system's a little bit on shaky ground. If you don't do it sort of more thoroughly."*

Philip

# CONCLUSIONS

Overall, participants supported the GOC's proposed reforms, particularly in **expanding regulation** to cover all optical businesses, **introducing a head of optical practice** for accountability, and **implementing a universal redress process** to enhance consumer confidence.

Respondents expressed a preference for even greater regulatory oversight than those suggested, advocating for formal inspections rather than business visits, and greater reassurances over the role of head of optical practice.

There was general support for the GOC having stronger powers to fine businesses, though some participants felt the degree of fine should reflect the seriousness of the breach rather than just size and finances of the business.

Participants also highlighted potential challenges, including the regulatory burden on independent (smaller) businesses, the practicality of enforcement, and the need for clearer public communication to ensure consumers are aware of their rights and protections.



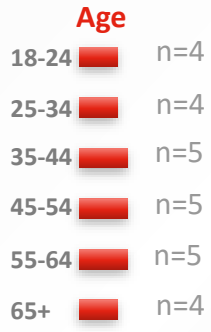
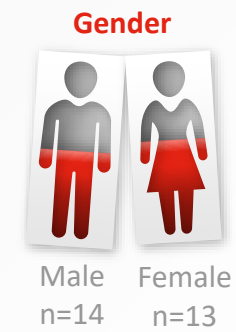
# APPENDICES





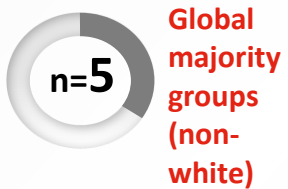
# SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

Overall sample n=27  
3 x 1.5 hr Focus Groups = 24  
3x 60 min WATDIs = n=3

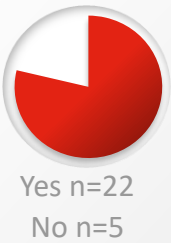


**Region**

North England	n=6
Central England	n=6
South England	n=9
Wales	n=2
Scotland	n=2
N. Ireland	n=2



**Sight test / Eye exam or visited optician/ optometrist in last 2 years**



**Household income**

Low household income (<£25k)	n=10
Mid household income (£25k-£60k)	n=9
High household income (>£60k)	n=8





# STIMULUS SLIDES (1+2)

About the stimulus: The following slides were presented as a stimulus during focus groups and in-depth interviews. Their purpose was to ensure that participants were adequately informed about the GOC's proposed reforms, which were the subject of the discussion. The content of the stimulus was agreed upon with the GOC in advance and provided an overview of the main proposed reforms. Please note that, for the purposes of this appendix, the slides have been reduced in size, whereas they were displayed in full-screen mode on PCs and iPads during the research sessions.

## What is the GOC?

- The regulator for the optical professions in the UK
- Regulates optometrists, dispensing opticians, students and around half of all optical businesses (e.g. Boots, Specsavers, Vision Express and other high street businesses)
- Protects the public by setting standards for education, training, performance and conduct amongst these professionals and businesses in the UK
- Can take action against its registrants when they fail to meet its standards

1

## Current system of business regulation

- Optical businesses are only required to register with the GOC if they meet certain legal requirements around their business structure and name
- This means that some businesses can choose not to register, and others want to be able to register but cannot do so
- This has resulted in only around half of businesses (2,800) being regulated

2

# STIMULUS SLIDES (3+4)

## What is the GOC seeking to do?

- Review its system of business regulation
- Bring all businesses into regulation
- All businesses will then have to comply with GOC standards
- Every time patients access an optical business they know it will be regulated by the GOC
- Improve the quality of care patients receive when they visit an optical business

3

## List of proposed changes

These are some of the changes the GOC wants to make:

- Introduce a new position within a business called a head of optical practice
- Change the system of consumer complaints
- Increase the amount it can fine a business when it fails to meet its standards
- A new power to visit a business if an investigation is opened when a concern is raised

4

# STIMULUS SLIDES (5+6)

## Head of optical practice

- The GOC is proposing that every business should have a head of optical practice
- This would be an employee within a business
- Their main responsibility would be to ensure the business meets the GOC's regulatory standards
- They would also tell the GOC when the business fails to meet any of the standards

5

## What are the GOC's standards for optical businesses?

Example standards include:

- Patients can expect to be safe
- Patient care is delivered in a suitable environment
- Patients can give valid consent to treatment
- Services provided are open and transparent
- Provides clear information to patients about costs of products and professional services
- Confidentiality is respected
- Staff are able to exercise their professional judgement
- Staff are suitably trained, qualified and registered
- Staff are adequately supervised and supported

6

# STIMULUS SLIDES (7+8)

## Consumer complaints

- The GOC deals with concerns about whether an individual or business is fit to provide a service (this is called 'fitness to practise')
- The GOC cannot deal with consumer complaints (e.g. if you have an issue with your glasses or contact lenses or the service you receive)

7

## Consumer complaints

- The GOC funds the Optical Consumer Complaints Service (OCCS) who can consider consumer complaints
- They will listen to the complaint, gather information and work with the consumer and the practitioner/business to reach a fair resolution
- The OCCS can provide a mediation service where complaints are difficult to resolve

8

## STIMULUS SLIDES (9+10)

### Consumer complaints

- But currently not all businesses are required to register with the GOC, so not all consumers are able to use the scheme
- The current consumer complaints service has no powers to force a business to:
  - participate in the scheme
  - agree to an outcome

9

### Consumer complaints

- The GOC would make it a requirement for all businesses to participate in the consumer complaints scheme
- This would mean *all* consumers would be able to use the scheme
- The GOC is considering whether businesses must comply with the outcome recommended by the OCCS

10



# STIMULUS SLIDES (11+12)

## Changes to how the GOC will fine a business

- Currently the GOC can fine businesses that fail to meet its standards up to a maximum of £50,000, but it would like the ability to impose an unlimited fine or set a new maximum limit
- The GOC would like to have the ability to tailor the fine to the size and finances of the business

11

## A new GOC power to visit

- The GOC would like a **new** power that would mean they could (in certain circumstances) visit a business if an investigation is opened following a concern raised about the business
- The GOC is not proposing to routinely inspect businesses
- This new power would help the GOC better protect patients and the public as they could go into a business to assess a concern in person

12

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

Below is the summarised topic guide utilised in this research, which aligns with the stimulus material. Please note that certain adaptations were made as necessary, depending on the format (interview or focus group). The guide embedded (.pdf) is the final version that was agreed upon with the GOC before the research commenced.

## 1. Research Introduction (5 mins)

- Welcome participants and set expectations
- Explain GDPR compliance, confidentiality, and research purpose
- Assure participants that findings will be anonymised

## 2. Participant Introductions (10 mins)

- Name, location, household details
- Hobbies and interests
- Description of the last visit to an optical business

## 3. Current Perceptions of Optical Businesses (15 mins)

- Experiences with optical businesses (positives and negatives)
- Satisfaction levels and areas for improvement
- Trust and concerns regarding optical businesses
- Comparisons with other healthcare services (GPs, dentists, etc.)
- Impact of negative experiences and how they were handled

## 4. Perceptions of Regulation of Optical Businesses (10 mins)

- Awareness of optical business regulation
- Views on whether businesses should be regulated
- Perceptions of unregulated vs. regulated businesses
- Awareness of the General Optical Council (GOC) and its role

## 5. What is GOC Seeking to Do? (10 mins)

- Explanation of proposed regulatory changes
- Participants' understanding of the reasons for reform
- Whether these changes would improve trust and confidence

## 6. Head of Optical Practice (10 mins)

- Reactions to the proposal of having a Head of Optical Practice in every business
- Perceived benefits or drawbacks of this role
- Whether it would improve consumer protection and governance

## 7. Consumer Complaints (10 mins)

- Awareness of how to complain about optical businesses
- Perceptions of current complaints processes
- Support for an independent redress scheme for consumers

## 8. Approach to Fines and Business Visits (10 mins)

- Views on GOC's power to issue fines for non-compliance
- Thoughts on allowing GOC to visit businesses
- Whether these measures would increase public confidence

## 9. Summary of Key Points (10 mins)

- Final thoughts on optical business regulation
- Key recommendations or concerns from participants
- Any areas needing further clarification



# THANK YOU

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All projects are carried out in compliance with the ISO 20252 international standard for market, opinion and social research and GDPR.

