

GOC strategic plan
2011/12 – 2013/14

Chair's foreword

This is an exciting time to be Chair of the General Optical Council. It is true that anyone working in health or regulation will face some very significant challenges over the next period. Doing this in such a difficult and ever changing economic climate only adds to the issues we must all face.

We have started the journey already. This strategy describes where we want to get to and lays out some of the most important landmarks for the next three years. The associated business plan will describe the more detailed work that our staff and Chief Executive, Samantha Peters, will deliver. We hope you will find it helpful to have this map laid out. As ever, we look forward to your thoughts on this document and the details of its implementation.

Anna Bradley

Chair

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This document sets out the strategic aims of the General Optical Council and how these will be achieved over the three year period 2011/12–2013/14.



Background

The General Optical Council (GOC) is one of 13 health and social care regulators in the UK. We regulate around 24,000 optometrists, dispensing opticians, student opticians and optical businesses

According to statute the GOC sets standards for optical education and training, performance and conduct, approves qualifications leading to registration, maintains a register of individuals who are qualified and fit to practise, train or carry on business as optometrists and dispensing opticians, and investigates and acts where a registrants' fitness to practise, train or carry on business may be impaired.

The context

The GOC operates in an environment which provides a number of challenges as well as opportunities. In developing our strategy, we have sought to align our strengths to take advantage of the opportunities available, and develop plans to meet the challenges in the environment. Inherent in the strategy is the management of predictable risks.

The external environment is characterised by:

New political landscape

There are three different issues in this arena: the burden of regulation, restructuring of the NHS and Europe.

The Government is committed to reducing the burden of regulation, especially in the current harsh economic climate (see below). It has already cancelled the arrangements for a new adjudication system, merged some regulators and challenged the others to work more closely together. It is entirely possible that the Government may, in due course, encourage further mergers.

In this context it is imperative that we focus on our core business. This means having a strong and deep understanding of the sector we regulate, because it is this understanding that justifies the existence of a specialist regulator. It also means we must ensure we apply what our oversight body, the Council for Health Regulatory Excellence, call 'right touch' regulation.

Finally, where possible and appropriate, we are looking for synergies and opportunities to collaborate with others in the field of health regulation. This will help to ensure that we are cost-effective and efficient, and viewed as relevant by our key stakeholders.

The restructuring of the NHS in England is significant for the GOC because it changes the commissioning arrangement for optical services in England at the time of writing this plan. We need to ensure that we stay abreast of the changes and respond to and/or seek to shape them in ways that are most appropriate for the future of sectoral regulation.

Finally, Europe continues to be a major issue, especially given the increase in cross-border migration. It is important that we engage with the appropriate authorities in Europe about optical standards, and that we are able to influence and lead the development and implementation of these standards.

Harsh economic climate

The economic climate presents various challenges for the GOC, our stakeholders and our registrants. In particular there is the risk that safety issues will increase as a result of cost pressures, and that our income will decrease as a result of contraction in the market for optical services.

In relation to health and safety risk, there will be downward pressure on the costs of optical products and services, and the added dimension of the challenge of internet services. This might put pressure on our registrants, who could find it more difficult to provide their patients with such high quality eye care.

Additionally some patients may choose not to undergo sight tests or seek professional advice about sight problems because of affordability, which might result in more serious eye health issues arising.

There is a financial risk for the GOC that some registrants might find it difficult to remain in business, or optical businesses which have to merge or further consolidate. A contraction in the registrant base would inevitably result in a smaller job market for current and future registrants, leading to fewer students choosing to enter the profession because of reduced job opportunity and increased tuition fees.

Contraction and concentration in the market for optical services could also result in lack of choice for patients or a lower quality of service.

Ageing population

An ageing population is likely to increase the need for optical services and could result in more patients with higher risk eye health issues. This may result in calls to widen or otherwise change the scope of practice of optical professionals, for example with more optical services being delivered in the community or in domiciliary settings.

As the professions and their services change, the risks we manage will alter and our standards of registrant education, conduct and performance must adapt. In particular, the education of professionals would need to meet the changing demographic, and the standards of eye care would need adjustment to assure safe, high quality eye care is delivered to this more vulnerable group of patients.

Increased use of the internet and technology in service delivery

The increased use of technology may change the way in which services are delivered, including their delivery in an online environment. The use of the internet as a delivery channel raises new questions about how to assure public and patient safety. There may be a need to adapt our standards. There may also be a need for changes to legislation, and to ensure that only those properly trained and regulated deliver these services.

The internet may result in better informed and consequently more demanding patients and consumers. Better informed and more demanding patients will increase expectations of standards of care and service, and possibly higher levels of dissatisfaction, expressed through complaints.

The GOC can take advantage of the increased use of and requirement to deliver services electronically by having integrated systems in place and moving away from paper-based registration and communication methods.

This has the potential to enhance the quality and speed of service we offer registrants, and also ensure better tracking of registrants who have been deemed a risk to the public. Faster payment methods will also ensure that financial processes are accurate, and electronic delivery systems will keep costs and registration fees down.

Our mission

Our statutory function is 'to protect, promote and maintain the health and safety' of members of the public. We interpret this in our mission as:

Assuring the health and protection of those who use the services of optometrists and dispensing opticians

Our vision

...is to be seen as **Leading the way in regulation**

The GOC is determined to respond effectively to the considerable pressure for change in the way health professions are regulated.

We do not plan to wait to be told how and what to change. Instead we want to get there first, building on good practice around us and taking the initiative where we can, to become an example of good practice recognised by others in our field.

Strategic aims

Our strategic aims flow from our vision along with an assessment of our own strengths and weaknesses as an organisation. In the past the GOC, along with other health regulators, was not accustomed to having to adapt and change rapidly, but that has had to change particularly in the last two years.

We now have new and more strategic governance arrangements, stronger financial controls, enhanced stakeholder engagement, a restructured senior team and improved processes, through the introduction of such things as online retention.

The new environment presents us with some new challenges. We have identified four key strategic aims we believe will ensure that we address the internal and external challenges and opportunities and move closer to our vision over the next three years:

- **excellent strategic capacity**
- **strong stakeholder relationships**
- **integrated and streamlined processes**
- **shared culture and identity**

Over the following pages we explain why we have chosen these aims, where we are now and what we hope to achieve over the next three years. If we are to succeed there are certain things we will need to do. We call these critical success factors. They are identified in Figure 1 and described more fully in the accompanying text.



Relationship between strategic aims and critical success factors

The critical success factors are detailed in the circles orbiting the strategic aims. The centre colour of each circle is directly linked to its corresponding strategic aim, and the multiple colour-coding of each outer ring reflects the fact that the critical success factors relate to, and will help achieve, more than one strategic aim.

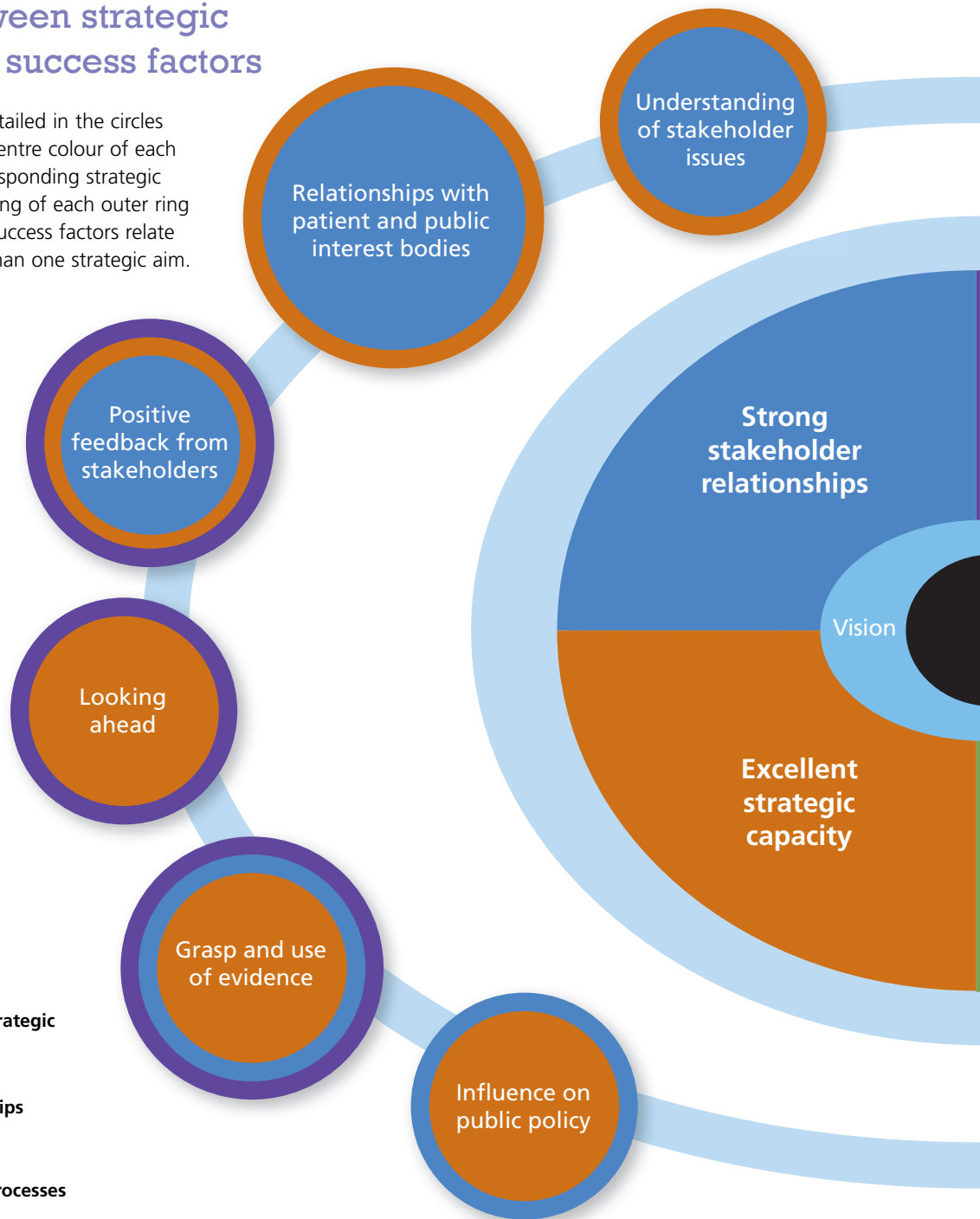
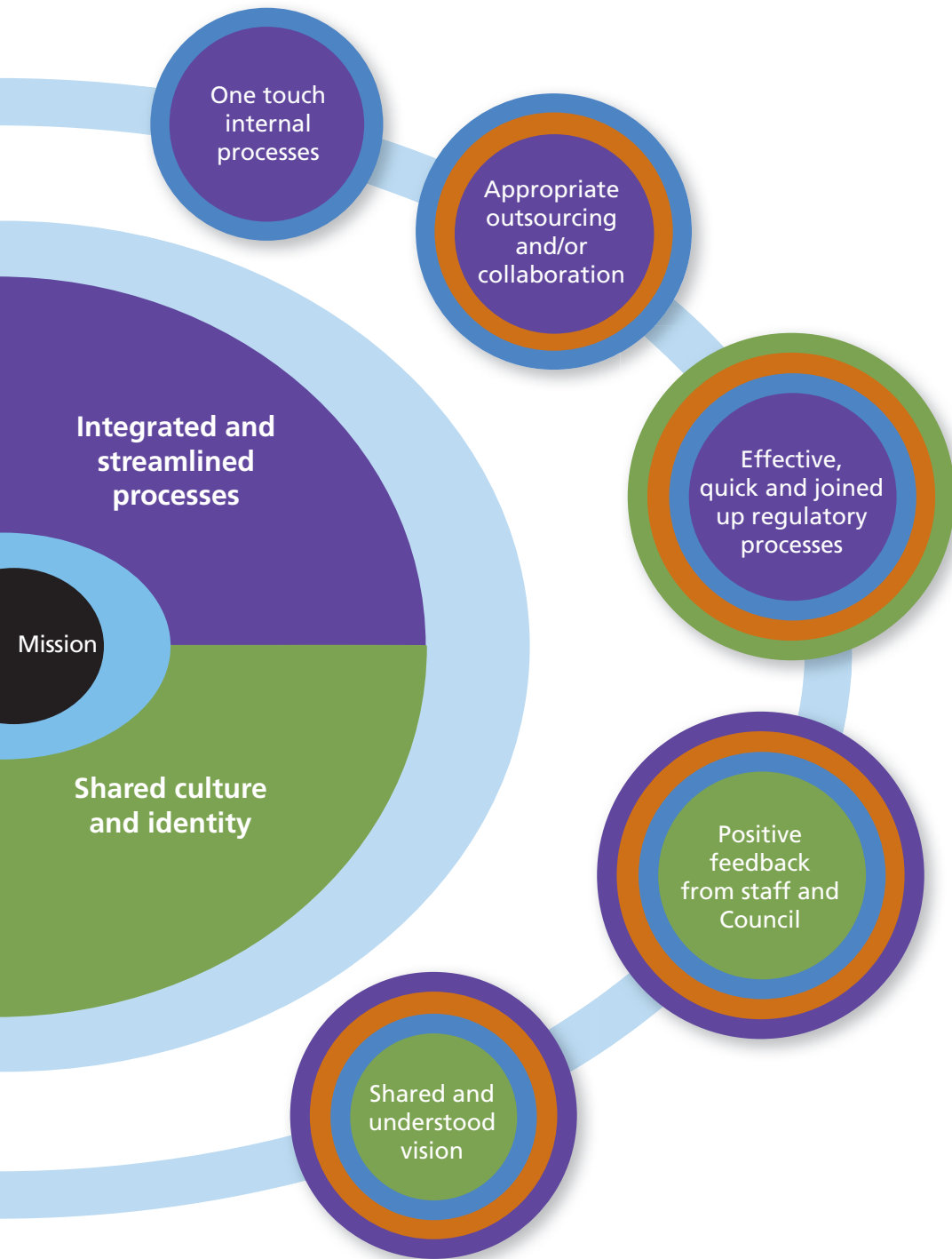


Figure 1: Relationship between strategic aims and critical success factors

- Strong stakeholder relationships
- Excellent strategic capacity
- Integrated and streamlined processes
- Shared culture and identity





1. Excellent strategic capacity

Why: The rationale for profession-specific health regulators is for regulation that is sensitive to the different needs of each health sector. Specialist regulators must understand and respond to the issues in their sector in a sensitive and appropriate way.

Where we are now: We believe we need to strengthen our capacity and our capability. We have created a focus for this work in the new CEO's Office, which reports directly to the CEO and informs the Council's strategic planning.

Where we want to be: We need to have a strong and constantly developing understanding of what is happening in the sector, of the pressures on it, of the demands of patients and customers and the problems faced by practitioners.

We need to be properly tuned into discussions about the future of health regulation and future delivery of optical care. We also need to understand how other health regulators operate in the UK and around the world. This understanding needs to be combined with a capacity to proactively analyse and respond to the key issues.

This depth of understanding and the ability to respond rapidly will permit the GOC to set the appropriate standards of care and behaviour and actively promote public policy changes where necessary.

Critical success factors are:

- looking ahead
- grasp and use of evidence
- influence on public policy

2. Strong stakeholder relationships

Why: We are a public interest body, accountable to Parliament and the public for delivery of our mission. It is essential for us to understand what it is that different stakeholder groups think about optical issues and their implications for regulation. Stakeholders' feel for the issues also provides insights and intelligence to inform our understanding of the sector. We will not always be able or willing to do what stakeholders want, but understanding and responding to those issues should inform our approach to regulation and will help to take our stakeholders with us, even where we agree to differ. Such engagement also forms the basis for alliances where they are appropriate.

Where we are now: Stakeholder engagement has been a focus for the last two years and significant advances have been made. We have established two Stakeholder Reference Groups (SRGs) – one for registrants and one for the public and patients.

These groups are already making a difference to our work through their insights and advice. We have established a wider portfolio of consultative arrangements, including during 2010 a roadshow on revalidation and CET.

Where we want to be: We want to have regular and appropriate engagement in ways that meet our needs and which are also fit for all our different stakeholders. We are particularly mindful of the time constraints of many third sector and generalist organisations, and of the need to engage people in ways that are consistent with the time they have to give.

We want to ensure there are no surprises for those who are interested in our work, through an improved programme of regular communications, in addition to engagement.

Ultimately, we want our stakeholders to feel appropriately involved and able to understand and respect, if not agree with, the decisions we have taken.

Critical success factors are:

- understanding of stakeholder issues
- relationships with patient and public interest bodies
- positive feedback from stakeholders

3. Integrated and streamlined processes

Why: The demand for efficiency and effectiveness in regulation and for improved customer service, all point to the need for the GOC to operate as efficiently and effectively as possible. We will deliver excellent service to our registrants and keep costs down.

Where we are now: The GOC has under-invested over many years. This is something we have begun to address, with developments such as online retention and more streamlined fitness to practise processes. We still have a variety of IT systems which have developed independently and currently do not communicate with each other.

Where we want to be: We are discussing plans for significant investment in new IT which will allow us to streamline our work and join up internal processes. This will reduce duplication and room for error and also produce significant cost reductions in future years.

As part of this programme we will acquire a case management system to make our operations more efficient and effective. The aim is to implement most of these systems during 2011/12.

Our ambition is not just to catch up but to lead the way. We will be implementing plans to make ourselves a 21st century regulator focusing on the work we can do best, sharing arrangements with other organisations where it makes sense to work together, and outsourcing where this can deliver what is required more efficiently and effectively.

Critical success factors are:

- one-touch internal processes
- appropriate outsourcing and/or collaboration
- efficient, quick and joined up regulatory processes

4. Shared culture and identity

Why: Achieving all of this will require staff, management and Council to work as one team, each playing their part. We will need to learn to work differently, combining behind our vision and strategic aims.

Where we are now: We have recently undertaken a review of our structures, procedures, policies, pay and conditions. The organisation is now structured into three directorates that group similar activities, creating the opportunity for increased efficiency and effectiveness:

- CEO's Office
- Regulatory Services Directorate
- Corporate Services Directorate

The working relationship between Council and the executive has been strengthened:

- through enhanced performance reporting and monitoring which will, in due course, flow through to individual staff objectives
- improved risk management which will be an integral part of day to day management and monitored by the Audit Committee on a regular basis
- clear Standing Orders and Standing Financial Instructions which have been agreed, ensuring probity in the way we undertake our work.

Where we want to be: Having laid out our new strategy and approach, we have some work to do to agree what this means for the way we will work together and with others. We need to develop a shared sense of values built on our mission and vision, and integrate this into appraisal, training and development.

We want staff to feel empowered to make decisions and/or recommendations in the work they are responsible for and Council to feel fully engaged with the work of the organisation. This will require us to identify and remove any obstacles.

Critical success factors are:

- shared and understood vision
- positive feedback from staff and Council

Financial strategy and plans

We aim to ensure that we undertake our operations efficiently. Almost all our income is derived from registrants' fees – professional, student and corporate. While certain expenditure such as salaries and fixed overheads is relatively predictable, other elements, eg legal fees, are difficult to forecast accurately. We strive to ensure they are controlled and minimised, and use external (more expensive) resources judiciously.

We have worked to cut costs and explore all opportunities for savings, while ensuring we carry out our statutory functions. The fee for 2011/12 is £270 for all fully-qualified registrants and bodies corporate. We have absorbed inflation and the VAT increase in this figure. In addition, recognising the difficult economic climate and its impact on some of our registrants, we have also reduced the fee to £170 for registrants with an income of £12,000 or less.

We believe that we have sufficient control over our costs to be able to keep the fees at the current levels for the duration of this plan. However, we cannot manage external events, and projected fees will need to be reviewed annually, based on the proposed costs for the year in question.

To manage the year-on-year fluctuations for unpredictable expenditure such as legal fees, we have a financial reserve. Our current reserves policy is to have three months' worth of annual expenditure. This is kept under careful review at all times to ensure its appropriateness.

We will augment existing core resources by the judicious use of external consultants for targeted and discrete projects where expertise is not available in-house. Opportunities for greater efficiencies including the use of outsourcing will be pursued, wherever appropriate.



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