

Minutes of the Forty-fourth Annual General Meeting of The College of Optometrists

Monday 29 April 2024 at 2:45pm

Ironbridge 1 & 2, Telford International Centre, St Quentin Gate, Telford, TF3 4JH and online.

The Chair of the Board of Trustees, Dr Mary-Ann Sherratt, was in the Chair.

Ian Humphreys, Chief Executive; Michael Bowen, Director of Knowledge and Research; Sarah Cant, Director of Policy and Strategy; Lizzy Ostler, Director of Education; Bill Scott, Director of Finance; Juliet Leach, Director of Marketing and Communications; Sue Haydon, Director of people were in attendance.

The Chair of the Board of Trustees, Dr Mary-Ann Sherratt welcomed Members of Council and Members and Fellows to the 44th Annual General Meeting of The College of Optometrists. She explained that while this AGM was being held face to face, Members and Fellows also had the option to join virtually. She advised that questions would be answered at the end of the meeting.

She invited Professor Leon Davies to give the President's address.

1 Presidential welcome and address

The President welcomed Members and Fellows to the Annual General Meeting, which marked the end of his term as College President.

The President reflected on the progress the profession had made and the challenges it had overcome since the beginning of his term when the country was still emerging from lockdown.

At the heart of change had been the College's Workforce Vision, which the President had been proud to champion, not only to College members and to stakeholders in the sector, but to the very heart of government. The Vision outlined the College's approach to ensure that optometrists remain at the forefront of eye care provision in the UK, and continued to be valued and recognised as key healthcare professionals.

A key activity of the Workforce Vision had been the development of a UK-wide multi-professional eye care workforce supply and demand data modelling tool. The College had led this major project along with an Advisory Group which had included all the professionals engaged in eyecare alongside optometry – Dispensing Opticians, Ophthalmologists, Orthoptists, and Nurses – plus all the UK government health services, the regulator, and patient representatives.

A dashboard would be published later in the year to help inform future eye care workforce planning in each of the four UK nations.

As part of workforce activities, the College briefed the Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Eye Health and Visual Impairment, Marsha de Cordova MP, on workforce and eye care transformation, and eye care research, ahead of a Westminster debate on a National Eye Health Strategy.

Additionally, the College was invited to provide written and oral evidence to the House of Lords Integration of Primary and Community Care Committee inquiry. The College reiterated the main recommendations that health services should establish optometrists as first contact practitioners in order to take the pressure off hospital eye care services, and that better digital connectivity would be key to improving patient outcomes.

The President highlighted how this year had seen great advancements in collaborative working between the College and other main partners in the eye care sector.

Over the last year the College had worked to develop an updated joint vision with The Royal College of Ophthalmologists, to support the delivery of safe and sustainable eye care services across the UK. This was published in February and re-emphasised the guidance for the integration of services and multidisciplinary working. It would help commissioners and clinicians design eye care services that ensure patients would be prioritised based on their clinical need and receive care that is appropriate and accessible.

There was also significant sector-wide collaboration in the production of the Eye Care Support Pathway. The Pathway, developed by the RNIB, aims to ensure patients with eye care needs and sight loss have timely access to information, and practical and emotional advice and support throughout their eye care journey.

Last autumn, the then Minister for Primary Care approached the whole sector - via LOCSU and the Clinical Council for Eye Health Commissioning - to develop a Standard Clinical Specification for Community Minor and Urgent Eye Care in England. This had now been published, and it would help to achieve one of the College's aims of establishing optometrists as first contact practitioners for eye care, something which is already well-established in the other UK nations.

The President reported that the College had also continued to work in partnership with the optometric bodies and government advisors in the devolved nations to ensure a greater recognition of the profession and its important role in protecting the eye health of patients. The College had collaborated on the new optometry contract in Wales, the rollout of the Community Glaucoma Service in Scotland, and had worked to improve access to eye care services for those on low incomes in Northern Ireland.

The College continued its work with the GOC as part of their review of the Opticians Act. The GOC were in agreement with many of the College's recommendations in their response to the call for evidence, and the College would, as always, ensure that any regulatory changes support the development of the profession.

The President observed that the College was on a strong footing to build on its successes, and particularly the links that had been built with government and parliaments across the UK.

Looking ahead, the President highlighted two key areas where further progress was needed: better and more consistent commissioning of primary eye care services, and improved digital connectivity.

Without the commissioning and proper funding of eye care services across the whole of the UK, optometrists would not be able to utilise their full skills and higher qualifications for benefit of the patients they serve. The publication of the Standard Clinical Specification was a major step forward in England, as was the College's workforce data modelling project, both of which would provide great tools to enable change to happen. But more work needed to be done with commissioners and those planning eye care services to see real change.

A lack of consistent IT and digital connectivity remained a significant barrier to effective primary and secondary care integration, and to multidisciplinary working.

The President was pleased to report that the College was co-chairing a working group with The Royal College of Ophthalmologists to establish a common imaging file standard. This DICOM standard would allow eye health professionals to effectively share and open patients' records and diagnostic images digitally across primary and secondary care.

The President thanked Council members and the Board of Trustees, Chief Executive and the College team for their hard work and dedication over the past year. He thanked the members for their ongoing support which has enabled him to represent and champion optometry across the UK over the past two years. The President reflected that the College had a unique opportunity to shape the future of optometry, and will continue to support its members by championing and expanding the role of the profession.

2 Deceased Fellows and Members

The President announced the names of the 16 Members and Fellows whose deaths had been notified to the College since the previous AGM. There was special mention for Frank Barraclough, appointed as a Life Fellow in 2002 for services to the heritage of the sector, who helped to establish and subsequently Chair the Ophthalmic Antiques International Collectors' Club, and played a key part in the reopening of the College museum in Craven Street, and Helen Stanforth, appointed as Honorary Member of the College in 2008, who served the College in a variety of senior staff roles from 1990 until 2003 including as Assistant Secretary (Professional), with responsibility for the College's work in the field of professional and practice standards.

There was a one-minute silence in remembrance of colleagues and friends.

3 Treasurer's report

The College Treasurer, Dr Tony Gibson delivered his report. He reported that the meeting marked the end of his term as Treasurer.

Education income had continued its recovery from the dip in 2020 caused by the lack of trainee progression due to the pandemic. The 2023 level is slightly lower than last year as the 4th OSCE of the year had moved to October 2023 and so was outside of the year being reported on.

While the number of trainees was similar to 22-23, Education turnover was expected to increase slightly at the end of the year, due to a proposed 4% fee increase which had been necessary to cover the increasing costs of delivery.

During the year to September 2023, membership income increased by around £80,000 due to an increased number of members. Last October the College raised its membership fees for the first time in 13 years. The Treasurer reported that this increase did not affect member recruitment or retention. The College expected to continue to raise fees by a small amount annually to cover increasing costs, ongoing investment in systems, and as part of the plan to rebuild the reserves used to maintain College services during the pandemic.

The Treasurer reported that the past few years had been a key period to support members who needed financial help and advice. The College remained a significant contributor to the Benevolent Fund and passed £25,134 to the Fund during the year. The College also continued to provide pro-bono accounting services to the Fund.

The Membership surplus had decreased due to increased staffing to improve member services and the consequent increase in central overhead allocation.

The Policy and Research deficit remained constant reflecting the continued activity to promote the role of optometrists at the forefront of eye care provision in the UK, as already outlined by the President.

The College's investments showed an improved performance, generating an unrealised surplus of £260,000 compared to last year's unrealised loss of £504,000. The investments were currently delivering a surplus of £367,000.

Overall, the year ended with a deficit of £359,329 compared to a deficit of £763,255 in 2021-22. This improvement was in line with the Trustees' objective to return the College to a surplus position by 2025-26 to start the process of re-establishing the College's reserves.

Reserves as at 30 September 2023 were £7.1 million compared to £7.4 million last year. Of the reserves total, £925,000 were free reserves and this amount needed to increase to enable the College to invest in the future and to have the resilience to accommodate unexpected events like the pandemic. The Reserves Policy, which establishes the level of reserves for the College, was under review by the Audit Committee.

As with last year, there was one unusual number in the balance sheet reported by the Treasurer. This was the net current liabilities figure of £2.6 million as at 30th September 2023. Current liabilities can be an indicator of an issue, however this is not so in the College's case, as the liability reflects the difference between the fees paid by trainees (or their employer) when they enrol in the Scheme for Registration, and the income earned, which is based on the progression of the individual trainees.

The auditors were content with the accounts, and the College had received an unqualified auditor's report.

The Treasurer thanked the College's staff, particularly the Director of Finance, Bill Scott, the Head of Finance, Zorica Nikolic-Parry, and the Finance Team, for all their efforts to deliver the College's services during the year. The Treasurer also thanked Andrew Kitchen, Lay Trustee and Chair of the Audit Committee, whose financial expertise and sound judgement had been invaluable.

4 Report from the Chief Executive

Ian Humphreys, Chief Executive began his report by noting some key accomplishments and the progress that has been made in continuing to deliver against the College's 5 year strategy.

The Chief Executive highlighted the work undertaken by the College to ensure that optometrists have the support they needed to achieve their full potential. The College strengthened the profession by providing up to date and evidence-based clinical advice and guidance. The College had updated 29 Clinical Management Guidelines, and responded to over 830 clinical enquiries.

The new fourth edition of the Guidance for Professional Practice had been published online and via the College App and enabled all optometrists to put the GOC standards into practice. Each section of the Guidance was evidence-based and reflected current legislation, and provided optometrists with the up-to-date assistance needed to make good clinical decisions and ensure patient care is always paramount.

The Guidance now had new sections that enabled optometrists to innovate the ways in which eye care could be delivered, specifically covering remote consultations and the delivery of virtual care, assessment and management of children with myopia, and collaborative care pathways.

More widely, the College's expertise and Guidance continued to influence national policy. Over the last year, the College had responded to consultations in a variety of related areas of optometry, from integrated care systems and the all Wales Common Ailments Service Formulary, to reforming the healthcare regulatory framework, and child safeguarding.

The College had been extensively quoted in Health Technology Wales' report on myopia management interventions. The report was consistent with College guidance throughout and provided one of the first independent economic evaluations of interventions for a UK population.

The College's response to NHS Scotland's consultation on new standards for cataract surgery focused on the essential role that optometrists play in providing safe care for cataract patients (pre and post treatment) closer to home.

The Chief Executive indicated that the College's CPD widened and deepened members' clinical and professional knowledge, and the College's higher qualifications equipped optometrists for new challenges and responsibilities. The College had awarded over 6,600 higher qualifications since launch.

The vibrant CPD programme of events, webinars, podcasts, peer review sessions and online courses, were greatly valued by members and were now much easier to access through the College website. In 2022-23, the College saw over 20,000 online course completions and 3,600 members attending College events. The College also provided guidance for members on navigating and meeting the GOC CPD requirements. Whilst under the Docet brand, the College continued to secure funding from the departments of health in all four nations, and recorded over 12,000 course completions.

The Chief Executive recognised the College's Clinical Advisers who have been especially busy raising public awareness in the media about the importance of eye health and the vital role optometrists play.

In the Autumn, the College shared advice on night driving, and featured on top TV and radio shows. The College also continued to contribute to the debate on headlight glare, and worked alongside Baroness Hayter to highlight the message in Parliament. The latest campaign had been picked up extensively by the media, with recent features including BBC Morning Live, ITV This Morning, BBC Radio 4 World At One, and an article in Daily Mail online.

The research from the College's 'Cost of Living' campaign demonstrated the potential damage increased costs could have on eye health. The College encouraged the public to prioritise their eye health and raised awareness of NHS funded eye tests and optical vouchers. This campaign reached more than 1.3million people via national and regional media.

On the education front, the Chief Executive was pleased to report partnerships with 12 universities to deliver Clinical Learning in Practice (CLiP) placements as part of the GOC's new route to qualification. Through significant and ongoing work by all those involved in the education of the next generation of optometrists, the new Masters' programmes were now being offered by eight universities across the UK, with the College working in partnership to deliver CLiP. The College had also facilitated knowledge-led collaborations via the GOC funded Sector Partnership for Optical Knowledge and Education (SPOKE).

Looking ahead, the College would continue working with others across the sector to ensure optometrists remain at the heart of patient centred eye care.

The Chief Executive concluded by thanking College staff, the Board and Council and the members for their inspiration, support, and hard work. Special thanks were given to Dr Mary-Ann Sherratt who would be stepping down at the end of the AGM after 6 years as Chair of the Board of Trustees.

5 Election of members to the new council and the board of trustees

The President announced the results of the Council elections, which had resulted in 14 vacancies being filled over 9 regions, and welcomed the new members to Council.

The results were:

David Hill	Eastern	(re-elected)
Keziah Latham	Eastern	(re-elected)

Seema Rauniar	Eastern	(new representative)
Irene Ctori	London	(re-elected)
Jay Varia	London	(re-elected)
Yuan Gao	London	(new representative)
Christopher Froment	North East	(new representative)
Katie Curran	Northern Ireland	(re-elected)
Janis Orr	Scotland	(new representative)
Kirendeeep Hayre	South East	(new representative)
Lewes Hambrey	South West	(re-elected)
Irfan Razvi	West Midlands	(new representative)
Angela Whitaker	Wales	(new representative)
Nkosi Yearwood	Wales	(re-elected)

The President announced that in accordance with the College rules, Council members confirmed the election of Dr Gillian Rudduck as President, Professor Irene Ctori as Vice President and Dr Aleksandra Mankowska as Treasurer.

The President reported that Professor Joy Myint, Hassnain Safdar and Kathryn Trimmer had been elected to the Board of Trustees. It was announced that Council had also agreed to the continued co-option of Andrew Kitchen to the Board of Trustees for one year.

The President thanked outgoing Council members and Trustees for their contributions, particularly Colin Davidson as he stepped down from Board and Council after 13 years, Johnathan Waugh after 12 years and Mary-Ann Sherratt who stepped down from her role as Chair of the Board of Trustees after 6 years, and 16 years since joining Council.

6 Inauguration of new officers

The President invited Dr Gillian Rudduck to receive the President's Medal.

The new President thanked Professor Leon Davies for his hard work and achievements during his two-year presidency and presented him with his Past President's Medal.

The President invited Professor Irene Ctori to receive the Vice President's Medal and Dr Aleksandra Mankowska to receive the Treasurer's medal.

7 Any other business

The Chair reported that no questions had been received during the AGM.

There was no other business.

8 Close of meeting

The Chair thanked all Members and Fellows for attending the AGM both in person and virtually, and formally closed the meeting.

Attendance List

** Members of Council*

In person attendees

Muhammad Asghar
Bruce Avery
Clare Awonuga
Mary Bairstow
Ruth Bennett
Insiyah Bharmal
Ravi Bhojwani
Paramdeep Bilkhu
Kyla Black *
Brian Boomer
Roisin Carruthers
Stephen Clark *
Andrea Clerk *
Denise Connor
Niamh Coyle *
Irene Ctori*
Katie Curran *
Ruth Cuthbert
Colin Davidson *
Leon Davies *
Sara Dos Santos
Maio
Debarun Dutta
David Ehrlich
Chris Froment *
Yuan Gao *
Sara Ghasem Khani
Tony Gibson *
William Gillan *
Rachel Greatorex-
Davies
Lewes Hambrey *
Daniel Hardiman-
McCartney

Tamara Hasan
Imogen Hawthorne
Michelle Hennelly
Sharifa Hirani
Haneen Iqbal
Heather Jameson
David Jameson *
Roshni Kanabar
Bejal Karavadra
Huzaifa Khambalia
Rebecca Lane
Alison Lask
Kez Latham *
Roger Lee
Sarah Loudon
Rupal Lovell-Patel
Malcolm Maciver
Edward Mallen
Aleksandra
Mankowska *
Marnie McGregor
Malcolm McPherson
Madeleine Mould *
Hamza Mussa *
Joy Myint *
Alexandra Nielson
Nita Odedra
Janis Orr *
Deepali Poorjara
Seema Rauniar *
Irfan Razvi *
Sean Rock
Matt Roney *

Gillian Rudduck *
Hassnain Safdar *
Maya Sapir
Kathryn Saunders *
Sanjiv Sethi
Mili Shah
Meera Shah *
Payal Shah
Mary-Ann Sherratt *
Jagdeep Singh *
Kiki Soteri
Rebekah Stevens
Chris Taliotis
Eleftheria
Thanawalla
Duncan Trew
Kathryn Trimmer *
Simranjeet Uppal
Jay Varia *
Jane Veys
Catherine Viner
Jordan Stuart Knox
Watson
Hannah Welling
Angela Whitaker *
Kevin Woodbridge
Catherine
Wooldridge
Nkosi Yearwood *
Elaine Yorwarth
Sanna Younis