



Optical Consumer Complaints Service

Resolving with Confidence

Annual Report 2025-26



Introduction

The 2025-26 reporting year has been one of significant growth, strengthened collaboration, and continued evolution for the Optical Consumer Complaints Service (OCCS). Complaint volumes increased from 1,679 to 2,201 cases, being a 31% rise reflecting both heightened consumer awareness of the OCCS and growing confidence among practices in the value of independent mediation. Despite this increase, the nature and tone of complaints remained broadly consistent, with clinical care, communication, aftercare, and cost-related concerns continuing to dominate.

+31% 
2201 TOTAL CASES

The OCCS maintained strong performance across all key indicators. Overall, 143 enquiries were redirected from the GOC, representing 23.6% of all enquiries received by the regulator. This was not only the highest number of referrals the OCCS has ever received from the GOC, but it also reflected a significant change in how referrals are now made.

The GOC has adopted a more proactive and agile direct referral pathway, enabling consumer concerns to be identified earlier and creating the best opportunity for them to be addressed at the earliest possible stage. This direct referral pathway now accounts for over 55% of the 143 referrals received by the OCCS, an increase of 15% compared with last year.

The remaining cases continue to be discussed at biweekly meetings between the GOC and the OCCS. In addition to improving the overall consumer journey, this approach has helped to ensure that regulatory resources are focused more effectively and proportionately.



+52%
MEDIATIONS

The year also saw a substantial increase in mediated cases, rising from 296 to 450, representing a 52% increase. This growth was driven by clearer consumer expectations alongside increasingly complex case presentations.

Despite this increase in both volume and complexity, additional staffing capacity enabled the OCCS to improve overall performance, reducing average resolution times from 19.2 to 15.5 days. Resolution times for mediated cases also fell significantly, from 70.6 to 60.7 days, demonstrating improved efficiency while maintaining service standards.

Insights from complaints continued to highlight the importance of clear communication, expectation setting, and robust record-keeping across the patient journey. Complaints about costs and charges rose from 4% to 7%, reflecting broader economic pressures and heightened consumer sensitivity to value.

Cases involving online suppliers increased by 47% during the year. While the vast majority of these cases related to UK-based companies, most did not have a GOC registrant linked to the business.

Sector-specific trends included an increase in concerns relating to laser and clear lens extraction outcomes, with around 30% of these cases requiring mediation. This rise is likely to reflect, at least in part, the strong





and trusted relationship the OCCS has developed with the sector.

Prevention and education remained central to the OCCS's mission. The service delivered 45 CPD sessions, reaching registrants across multiple, independent LOCs and locum networks. CPD focused on communication, record keeping, and insights drawn directly from OCCS casework. New upstream initiatives included developing a student webinar for launch in the 2026-27 academic year and new resources for front-of-house teams, recognising their critical role in early complaint management.

45 
CPD SESSIONS

Operationally, the OCCS continued to strengthen its infrastructure, invest in new systems, and refine internal processes to support efficiency and responsiveness. Collaboration with the GOC, professional bodies, and sector partners remained a defining feature of the year, underpinning improvements in signposting, insight sharing, and the culture of complaint handling across the profession.

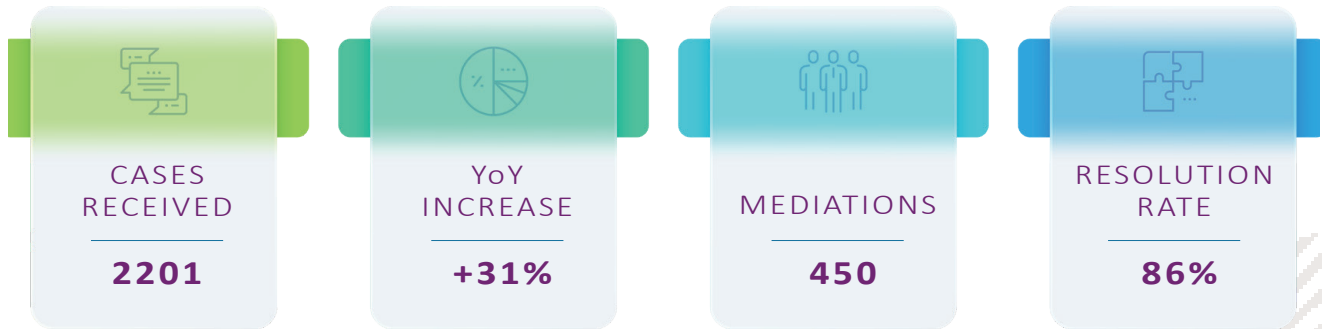
Looking ahead, the OCCS will focus on enhancing accessibility, expanding educational outreach, deepening collaboration with the GOC, and continuing to provide high-quality, timely mediation. The service remains committed to supporting both consumers and practitioners, promoting early resolution, and contributing to a more transparent, communicative, and patient-centred optical sector.





Executive Summary

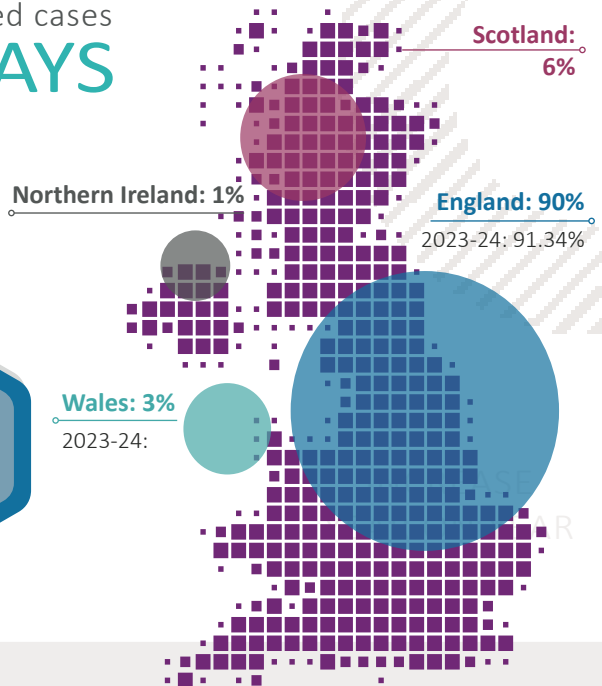
AN OVERVIEW OF THE OCCS ACTIVITY AND INSIGHT FROM 1 APRIL 2025 TO 31 MARCH 2026



Average resolution time | Average mediated cases
15.5 DAYS | **60.7 DAYS**

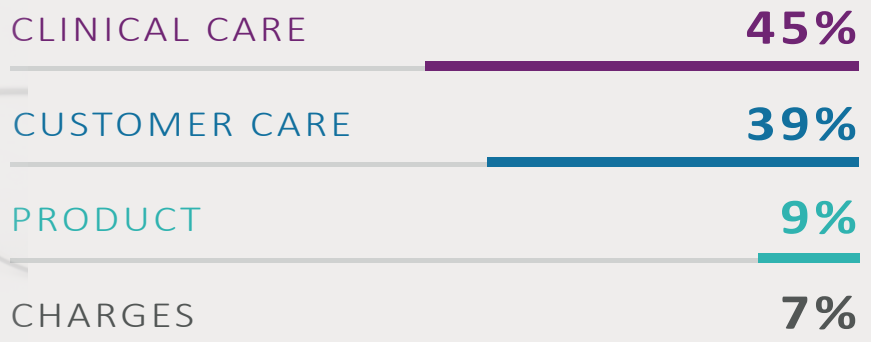
RESOLUTION PERFORMANCE

- 19%** Reduction in overall resolution time
- 22%** Reduction in mediation duration
- 3%** Cases ended without resolution



NATURE OF COMPLAINT

Clinical concerns remained the largest category, typically related to the examination process, perceived diagnostic issues, the communication of clinical findings, and situations in which no prescription was issued.





1. 31% INCREASE IN ACTIVITY

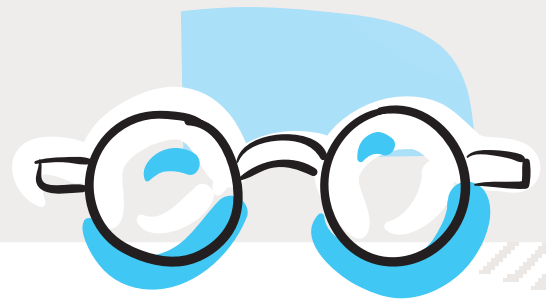
2025-26 was the busiest OCCS year to date, with much of the increase seen in full mediation support, where complaints had exhausted the local complaints process. The OCCS concluded 69% more mediations in the last 12 months than in 2024-25, whilst maintaining a resolution rate of 86%. This is consistent with complaint activity in other sectors. Mediation by the OCCS continues to be effective in resolving the concerns raised, making the insight captured even more valuable in supporting the consumer relationship between patients and optical teams.

2. INCREASE IN CUSTOMER CARE (+67%) AND COST RELATED COMPLAINTS (+210%)

The increase in complaints directly linked to the customer experience (appropriate selling, delays in supply, and after care) contributed to the overall increase in activity during 2025-26. This increase has been attributed to changing consumer expectations around how complaints are resolved and the use of AI to facilitate raising complaints and in deciding whether to accept a resolution proposed by the optical business.

3. LENS REPLACEMENT & CATARACTS

Complaints relating to lens replacement surgery and cataract issues accounted for the greater increase in clinical/goods & services-related issues referred to the OCCS, rising from 116 to 273, being a 135% increase).



FEEDBACK



High levels of consumer satisfaction during 2025-26 **reflect confidence** in OCCS support and resolution.

Feedback gathered during 2025-26 indicates that consumers continue to value the OCCS as a supportive, accessible and independent route to resolving disputes.



A recurring theme is that the OCCS is sometimes the only route consumers feel is available to make progress, particularly where provider responses are slow.





Economic Climate and Its Impact on Consumers

The economic environment throughout 2025 and into 2026 continued to present significant challenges for consumers across the UK. Although inflationary pressures eased compared with earlier periods, overall consumer confidence remained subdued. Rising living costs, ongoing concerns around household finances, and uncertainty about future economic conditions continued to influence consumer behaviour and decision-making.

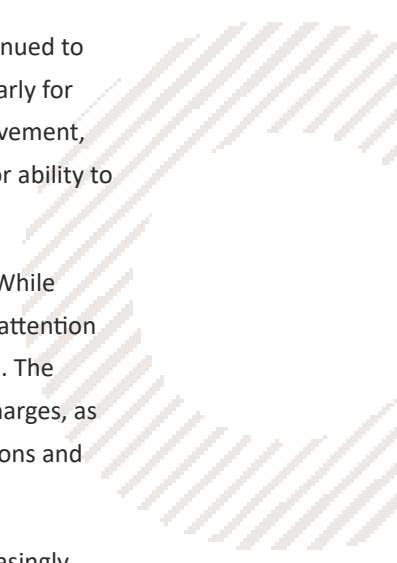
For many households, essential expenditure such as housing, energy, food, and transport continued to squeeze disposable income. As a result, discretionary spending remained constrained, particularly for lower and middle-income consumers. Even where economic indicators showed modest improvement, this was not consistently reflected in consumers' perceptions of their own financial resilience or ability to absorb unexpected costs.

In this context, affordability remained a key consideration for consumers seeking optical care. While eye examinations and clinical services are widely regarded as essential, consumers paid closer attention to the associated costs of spectacles, lenses, contact lenses, and optional or enhanced services. The OCCS observed increased sensitivity regarding pricing, value for money, and transparency of charges, as reflected in a rise in complaints about costs, fees, and perceived gaps between initial expectations and final prices.

At the same time, expectations of service quality remained consistently high. Consumers increasingly expect clear communication, transparent pricing, and reliable standards of care throughout the entire optical journey, from clinical assessment and dispensing through to aftercare and follow up. In a context of financial pressure, service dissatisfaction appeared to have a heightened impact; where outcomes fell short of expectations or communication was perceived as unclear, consumers were more likely to escalate their concerns.

This economic backdrop also contributed to a shift in how consumers articulate complaints. The OCCS observed more defined, specific expectations regarding resolution, including clearer views on remedies, refunds, and corrective action. While digital tools and increased access to information have supported consumer awareness of rights and redress options, they have also, at times, contributed to unrealistic expectations around outcomes, particularly in more complex or clinically nuanced cases.

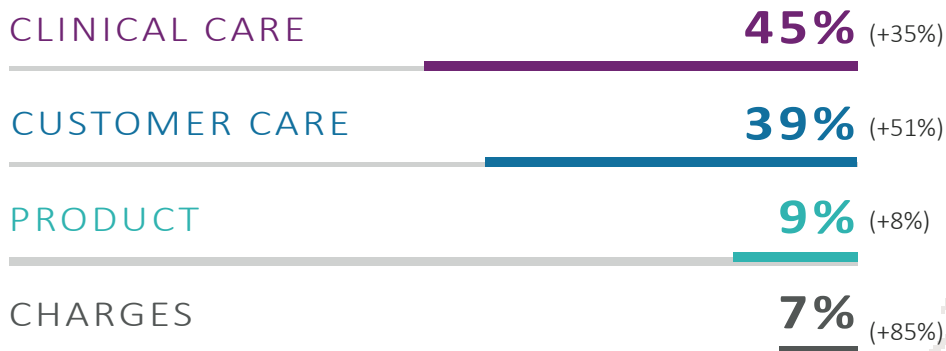
Overall, the economic climate during 2025-26 shaped not only the volume of complaints received by the OCCS but also their content and complexity. Affordability pressures, combined with high expectations of service quality and value, reinforced the importance of early communication, transparent pricing, and effective local complaint handling within optical practices. Against this backdrop, the OCCS continued to play a critical role in providing proportionate, independent support to both consumers and practices, helping to navigate disputes constructively and maintain confidence in the optical sector.





Complaint Themes and Insights

NATURE OF COMPLAINT



The complaints received by the Optical Consumer Complaints Service (OCCS) during 2025-26 highlight several consistent and emerging themes across clinical care, customer experience, cost and charging practices, and product-related issues. These patterns reflect both the pressures facing consumers in a challenging economic climate and the evolving expectations placed on optical practices.

CLINICAL CARE

45%

Clinical concerns remained the largest category, accounting for approximately 45% of all complaints. These cases are typically related to the examination process, perceived diagnostic issues, the communication of clinical findings, and situations in which no prescription was issued.

Around 23% of all complaints were directly linked to interactions with the optometrist, including concerns about the thoroughness of the examination, clarity of explanations, and the level of care provided.

We also saw continued issues when consumers obtained a prescription from one practice and sought spectacles elsewhere, accounting for 2.5% of all complaints. The OCCS supported resolution in over 90% of these cases.

Myopia management enquiries increased significantly, rising from 4 to 16 cases, with enquiries largely centred on consent, communication, and expectation setting rather than clinical outcomes.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND AFTERCARE

39%

Customer service and aftercare accounted for approximately 40% of complaints, reflecting the importance of communication, expectation management, and continuity of care throughout the consumer journey.

Common themes included delays in aftercare, dissatisfaction with the dispensing process, and concerns about how issues were handled once raised.



The proportion of complaints concerning customer care and service requiring full OCCS mediation input has increased compared with 2024-25. Some of this change in approach appears to be linked to consumers' ability to research and draft comprehensive complaint letters online. This means consumers contact the OCCS with clearer, more firmly defined expectations of the outcomes they seek, often requiring more active facilitation to resolve them.

PRODUCT-RELATED ISSUES



Product-related complaints decreased slightly from 11% to 9%, reflecting improvements in dispensing accuracy and product quality, as well as more effective local resolution within practices.

Where product issues did arise, they commonly concerned varifocal adaptation, lens performance, frame durability, or expectations regarding product guarantees.

Complaints involving online suppliers increased by 47% (from 36 to 53), with the majority involving UK-registered companies without an associated GOC registrant. These cases often centred on product quality, fulfilment issues, and difficulties accessing aftercare.

COST, CHARGES, AND COMMERCIAL TRANSPARENCY



Complaints relating to costs and charges rose significantly, increasing from 4% to 7% of all cases (from 73 to 158). This trend aligns with wider economic pressures and heightened consumer sensitivity to value, transparency, and perceived fairness. This is consistent with complaint activity in other sectors.

Concerns typically relate to unclear pricing structures, unexpected charges, refund policies, and the perceived value of products or services. The OCCS continues to play a key role in helping consumers understand the basis of charges and supporting practices to communicate more clearly and consistently.

SECTOR-SPECIFIC TRENDS

LASER AND CATARACT

Laser and Cataract issues saw a significant increase in concerns relating to both laser eye surgery and optical care associated with cataract diagnosis and treatment, with the doubling year on year. These cases are complex, with around 30% requiring mediation, substantially higher than the sector wide (20%). These complaints are more likely to involve communication explanation and consumer expectations than clinical concerns. Last year, the OCCS saw a 135% increase in complaint relating to laser and cataract. In 2024-5, any one time OCCS had 2.5 cases relating to laser eye surgery being mediated throughout the year, in 2025-26, this increased to 20. This increase is likely to be linked to greater awareness of the OCCS, practices having greater confidence in the OCCS to support complaints of this nature, and increases in procedures and more complex treatment types.

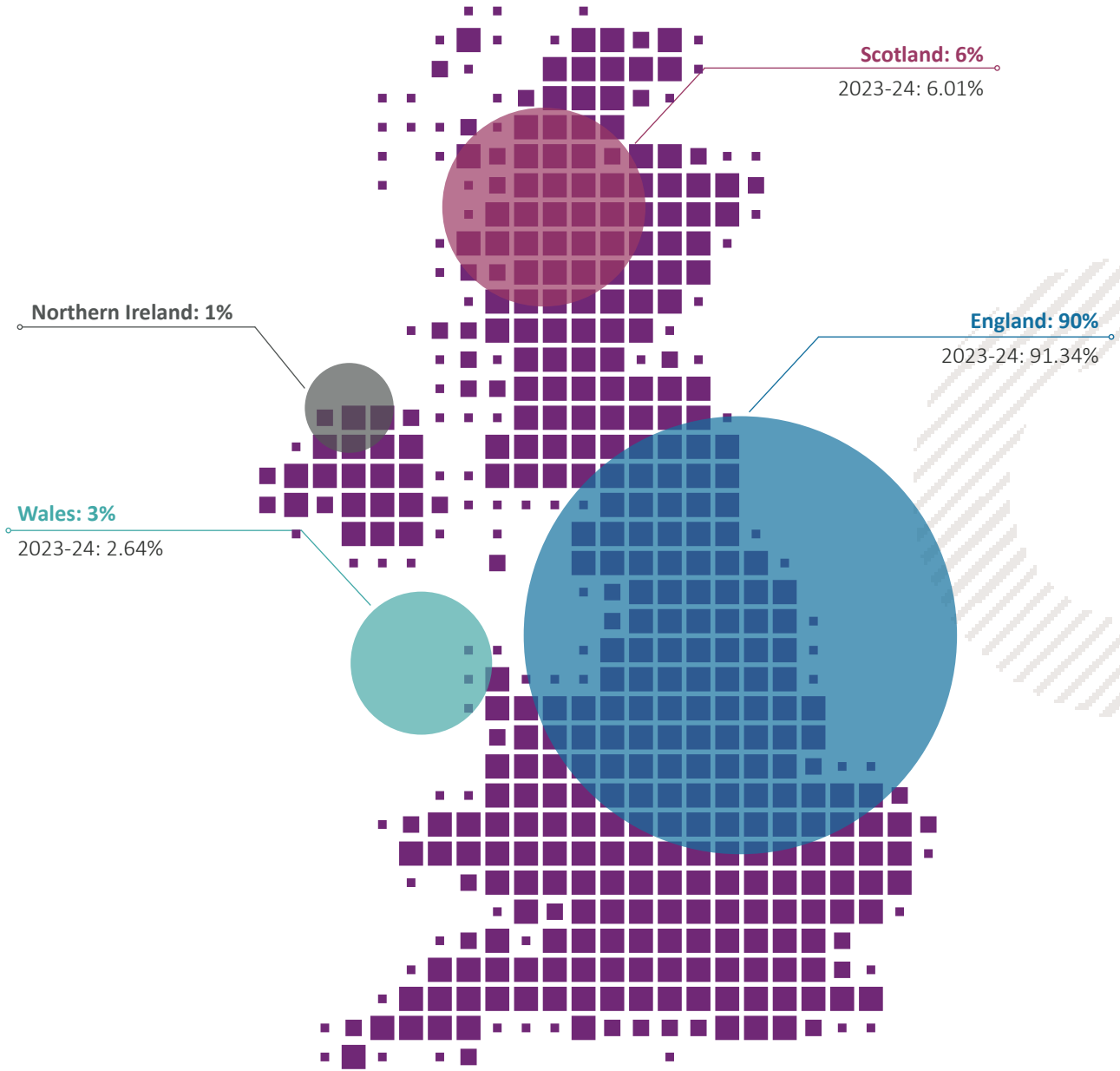
DOMICILIARY

Domiciliary complaints increased from 80 to 93 cases, though they fell proportionally from 4.8% to 4.2% of total complaints, remaining broadly aligned with the sector's size.





REGIONAL ACTIVITY





REFLECTIONS FROM THE OCCS TEAM

Paul Chapman Hatchett

Clinical Advisor



Having completed my first full year with the OCCS, it is clear that while the volume of complaints has increased, the tone and nature of the concerns raised have remained broadly consistent. What has changed, however, is patients' level of awareness of their ability to seek support through the OCCS. Consumers appear increasingly confident in raising concerns, and practices are more frequently recognising when they have reached the limits of their internal processes and would benefit from independent mediation.

This shift reflects the growing trust and value placed in the OCCS by both optical consumers and providers. The feedback received during CPD sessions reinforces this—registrants consistently express appreciation for the clarity, balance, and support the OCCS brings to complaint resolution.

From an optometric standpoint, a key insight this year has been the ongoing need to remind registrants of the importance of documenting clinical reasoning, clearly recording how advice was communicated, and ensuring that patients have genuinely understood the information provided. Thorough, contemporaneous records not only support registrants should a concern be raised—whether with the OCCS or the GOC—but also enable all members of the practice team to provide patients with consistent information. This continuity is essential for building and maintaining trust throughout the patient journey.

The year has also highlighted the value of broad and inclusive CPD engagement, to help ensure that we reach as wide a cross-section of registrants as possible. We have endeavoured to include locums, early-career practitioners, and those working in diverse practice settings, with the goal of driving improvement of standards across the profession. By sharing insights from complaints and emphasising the roles of communication, expectation setting, and record-keeping, CPD continues to play a central role in preventing complaints and supporting high-quality patient care.

Rachael Brennan

Complaints Resolution Manager



Reflecting on the past year with the OCCS, it is clear that the foundations of effective complaint prevention continue to lie in clear communication, early expectation setting, and transparency throughout the patient journey. Consumer feedback consistently highlights the importance of practices explaining, from the outset, what patients can expect in terms of processes, costs, aftercare, and what to do if something goes wrong. When patients understand how a practice will support them and feel confident they can return with concerns, trust is strengthened, satisfaction improves, and unnecessary escalation is avoided.





A notable development this year has been the increasing use of AI tools by consumers when raising complaints or seeking to understand their rights under consumer law. For many, this has lowered the barrier to expressing concerns, giving voice to individuals who may have previously struggled to articulate their issues. While this can be empowering, it also brings challenges. AI generated content is not always accurate, and it is essential that both consumers and practitioners treat such information as a starting point rather than definitive guidance. Ensuring that advice is verified and grounded in the realities of optical regulation and consumer law remains crucial.

Another continuing theme is the growing emphasis consumers place on value for money. Patients increasingly want to understand not only what they are paying for, but how the products and services they receive reflect that value. Expectations around what constitutes a reasonable offer to resolve a complaint have risen, and practices are under greater pressure to demonstrate fairness, transparency, and responsiveness.

In this context, maintaining high standards of customer care is more important than ever. Consumers expect attentive service, clear explanations, and timely responses when concerns arise. Practices that invest in communication and relationship building are better positioned to maintain trust and resolve issues quickly and constructively.

As complaint volumes continue to rise, these insights reinforce the importance of the OCCS's role in supporting both consumers and practices. By promoting clarity, empathy, and early engagement, we can help ensure that concerns are addressed promptly and that the patient–practice relationship remains strong.



Dawn Slocombe

Complaints Resolution Manager

2025-2026 has proved to be a busier year for the OCCS, with an increase in overall enquiries and in mediations assigned to the Resolution Managers, which has been challenging. Our days are extremely busy.

References to Consumer Law and its relation to bespoke products are becoming more frequent, with consumers often relying on information provided online about the product. These necessitate further discussions with the OCCS, for both consumers and practices given the bespoke nature of products supplied by practices.

It is a pleasure engaging with consumers and practices this year, and I have noticed an increase in practices contacting the OCCS to seek advice on resolving consumer issues before the mediation process. We have received very positive feedback from all sectors.





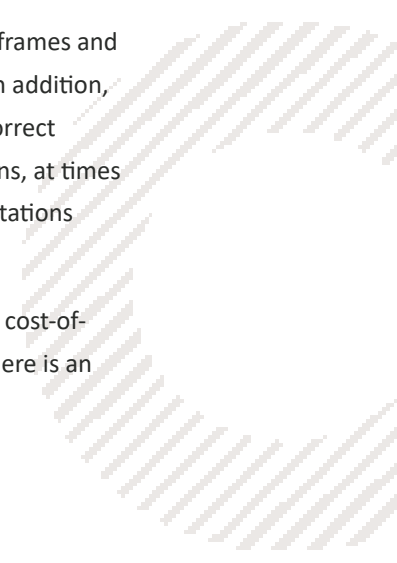
Kayleigh Turnbull

Complaints Resolution Manager

Over the past year, the OCCS has seen a noticeable increase in the need for direct intervention to support resolution between patients and practices. More consumers are returning to OCCS following initial advice, suggesting a shift away from issues being resolved at a local level. There has also been a rise in concerns relating to myopia management, particularly around informed consent, terms and conditions, and the consistency of communication at the front-of-house stage.

Customer expectations continue to evolve, with greater focus on the quality and longevity of frames and lenses, leading to more disputes around warranties, replacements, and multifocal products. In addition, complaints linked to external prescriptions have increased, often involving perceptions of incorrect outcomes. The growing use of AI-assisted complaint submissions is also influencing interactions, at times complicating communication, obscuring the root cause of issues, and raising unrealistic expectations regarding entitlement and outcomes.

These trends sit alongside wider cultural and economic pressures, including the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, which is placing additional strain on both consumers and providers. As a result, there is an increasing demand for support in complaint handling and resolution across both sides.





Working with the General Optical Council

The relationship between the OCCS and the General Optical Council (GOC) continues to strengthen, with 2025-26 marking a year of more proactive collaboration, earlier signposting, and improved alignment in triage and consumer guidance. This partnership remains central to directing consumers to the most appropriate route for their concern and to supporting the GOC in focusing its regulatory resources on matters relating to Fitness to Practise.

143
GOC Referrals to OCCS



REFERRAL ACTIVITY AND EARLY SIGNPOSTING

During the reporting period, the GOC referred 143 enquiries to the OCCS, a 6% increase from 135 the previous year. Although the GOC's overall enquiry volume rose from 464 to 607, the proportion directed to the OCCS remained significant at 23.6%, representing almost a quarter of all enquiries received by the regulator.

A notable development has been the shift toward earlier signposting. Historically, around two-thirds of referrals were passed to the OCCS during the fortnightly joint review meeting. This year, 55% of referrals were redirected at the earliest stage of GOC triage, enabling consumers to access mediation support more quickly and reducing unnecessary progression through regulatory pathways. This change reflects the GOC's growing confidence in the OCCS's ability to resolve consumer service issues efficiently and constructively.

IMPROVING CONSUMER UNDERSTANDING AND EXPECTATIONS

The OCCS has worked closely with the GOC triage team to ensure that consumers receive clear, consistent explanations of the respective roles of the OCCS and the regulator. This has been particularly important in cases where consumers initially approach the GOC with service-related concerns rather than regulatory ones.

Joint efforts have focused on:

- Clarifying the distinction between Fitness to Practise issues and consumer service concerns
- Ensuring consumers understand the scope and limitations of mediation
- Aligning messaging to prevent unrealistic expectations about compensation or regulatory outcomes





This collaborative approach has contributed to smoother consumer journeys and reduced frustration for individuals who may otherwise have been directed through inappropriate channels.

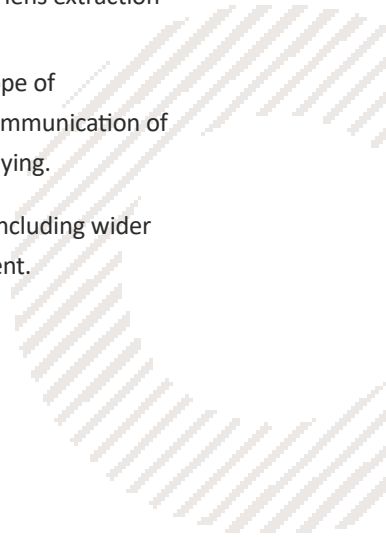
SUPPORTING THE GOC THROUGH INSIGHT AND FEEDBACK

Beyond case referrals, the OCCS continues to provide the GOC with valuable insights into emerging trends, consumer expectations, and areas where communication or practice behaviours may contribute to complaints.

This includes:

- Feedback on recurring themes such as cost transparency, aftercare, and communication
- Early identification of issues arising from online providers without GOC registrants
- Insight into sector specific challenges, including the rise in concerns relating to laser and lens extraction providers
- An insight-based session for GOC Triage & Investigation teams around the increasing scope of Optometric practice and insights we are seeing at the OCCS, particularly around clear communication of expectations and ensuring valid consent for treatments, which are predominately fee paying.

These insights support the GOC's strategic focus on prevention, and wider regulatory functions, including wider regulatory functions, including policy development, standards review, and stakeholder engagement.





Acknowledgements and Closing Remarks

As we conclude this year's Annual Report, the OCCS would like to extend sincere thanks to the many individuals and organisations who have contributed to another year of constructive, collaborative, and impactful work on behalf of optical consumers.

Our continued progress is only possible through the strong partnerships we maintain across the sector. We are grateful to the General Optical Council (GOC) for their ongoing engagement, early signposting, and shared commitment to ensuring that consumers are directed to the most appropriate route for their concerns. The strengthened relationship between our teams has played a vital role in improving the consumer journey and ensuring that regulatory and mediation pathways remain clear and effective.

We also thank the professional bodies, including the AOP, FODO, ABDO, and LOCs across the UK, for their willingness to share insight, participate in CPD activity, and support the wider culture of openness and learning that underpins effective complaint resolution. Their collaboration helps ensure that the lessons emerging from OCCS casework translate into meaningful improvements in practice.

Our appreciation extends to the optical practices, multiples, independents, and domiciliary providers who have engaged with the OCCS throughout the year. Their willingness to work constructively with us, often in challenging circumstances, demonstrates a shared commitment to maintaining trust, transparency, and high standards of care for patients. The growing number of practices proactively directing consumers to the OCCS reflects confidence in our service and the value of independent mediation.

We also acknowledge the contributions of registrants and front-of-house teams who have participated in CPD sessions, shared feedback, and embraced opportunities to strengthen communication and complaint-handling skills. Their engagement is essential to upstream work that helps prevent complaints and supports a more positive patient experience.

As the OCCS looks ahead, we remain committed to evolving in step with the sector, strengthening our role as a trusted, independent resource, and ensuring that every consumer has access to fair, timely, and constructive support. The insights gained this year will continue to shape our priorities, inform our educational work, and guide our contribution to improving the optical landscape for both patients and practitioners.

The OCCS thanks all who have supported, engaged with, and contributed to our work over the past year. We look forward to continuing this shared journey of learning, improvement, and collaboration.

