

Chairman's Message

4 January 2016 - A New Year message from Alan Tinger, LOCSU Chairman

TIME FOR THE MOOD MUSIC TO CHANGE AND TO MAKE 2016 THE YEAR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

Pollsters did not have a good year in 2015 but, even allowing for a large margin of error, the results of the General Optical Council's consumer research, Public Perceptions of the Optical Professions, undertaken by ComRes and published in June 2015, were a stark reality check and particularly two key findings:

"Only one in five (19%) adults say they would go to the opticians first if they woke up with an eye problem tomorrow. UK adults are most likely to say that they would go to their GP in these circumstances (54%)."

"UK adults are most likely to say that their main association with opticians is providing sight tests (68%), rather than detecting any eye health problems (16%)."

If that is the perception now, what is it going to be when what are now innovative sight testing/scanning technologies become commonplace?

Time is not on our side but what are we doing about it?

If the optical press, forums, social media, etc, are a measure, many are still fighting the battles and ghosts of yesteryear: low GOS fees, free sight tests, two-for-one offers, commercial pressures, the internet, etc, and now a new one – multiples majoring on community services.

When I created the LOC Company model for LOCSU, I built into the concept two fundamental requirements for a LOC to be involved with a LOC company:

- i) Absolute transparency of all activities.
- ii) All local contractors who have the appropriate accreditation and equipment to be allowed to participate at the start of a community service or at any time in the future.

Local contractors from the smallest independent practice to the largest multiple practice that participate in LOC companies are not in competition with each other for community services. On the contrary they are equally important participators to show Commissioners and the public that such services are available in all parts of an area.

I cannot conceive that practices who do not wish to participate in community services will want to refer their patients to their competitors but that is what will happen in the future if all do not participate.

At the start of 2016 the mood music needs to change and to focus outwards not inwards. Why is there no minor eyecare service in XYZ area? Why are so few local contractors participating in XYZ service? Why are referrals still going direct to hospital even though XYZ scheme is in place?

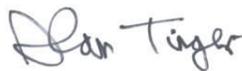
Only when optical community services are in place in all areas and with all local contractors involved will public perceptions fundamentally change and optical practices will become the first port of call for detecting and treating eye and eye-health problems.

This is not going to happen overnight and there are many stakeholders to involve but what could change quickly is the mood music in the sector. The sector is awash with leaders on the boards, councils, committees of optical bodies and on LOC committees. If all pull together in the same forward direction, we can have a fighting chance of positively changing the landscape.

Yes, some will point to the award of the DVLA contract and of contracts to provide sight tests for staff of government bodies but they are commercial contracts and not NHS contracts. I stress where LOC companies/LOC regional companies are in place, local contractors are not in competition for optical community services and rather all have the opportunity to participate to the full.

Changing the mood music in the sector is only the start and there is far more to be done locally and nationally. I am proud of what the LOCSU team has achieved for LOCs but history is littered with the pieces of organisations that have traded on past successes. LOCSU is working on a number of new initiatives to scale up its activities to assist LOCs to maximise community services in all respects and to enhance the voice of optics to its key targets to thereby ennoble the professions.

I sincerely hope that we can all pull together to make 2016 the year of community services and the year the public begins to seriously recognise optical practices as the first port of call for eye health.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alan Tinger". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Alan Tinger
Chairman
LOC Central Support Unit – LOCSU