

Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview Scrutiny Committee
– 16 April 2026

An All-Age Autism Strategy for Oxfordshire

Report by Karen Fuller

RECOMMENDATION

1. Oxford Joint Health Overview Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to

- a. agree to the content and principles outlined in the draft Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026.
- b. Note that the implementation plan for the draft Strategy continues to be developed through a co-produced approach
- c. Note that the financial implications of the draft Strategy have not yet been confirmed and will need to be assured prior to finalisation as part of the approval process
- d. Endorse the progression of the strategy and implementation plan for finalisation and approval at Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing board in July 2026.

Executive Summary

2. The draft Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026 has been developed and shaped through wide public consultation and co-production with autistic individuals, families, professionals, and experts by experience. It was developed in response to national policy statutory requirements and local evidence and needs assessment.
 - a. The draft Strategy aims to address key issues for people living with autism such as long waits for diagnosis, fragmented and overstretched services, limited awareness, barriers to education, employment, and community life, and inconsistent understanding of autism across sectors. A needs analysis in 2024 and 2025 confirmed continued health inequalities, lack of coordination between services, and challenges for families and autistic adults navigating available support.
 - b. To create meaningful change, commitments include reducing diagnostic waits, expanding employment pathways, strengthening education and SEND practices, ensuring reasonable adjustments, preventing unnecessary hospital admissions, and improving housing and transitions. The draft Strategy has been developed and will need to be delivered through strong partnerships between Oxfordshire County Council, the NHS, education providers, voluntary groups, and organisations representing autistic people and families.

- c. Oversight of the development of the draft Strategy has been provided by a countywide Autism Improvement Board co-chaired by the Head of Joint Commissioning – Live Well and an Expert-by-Experience, which brings together autistic people, health, education, social care, and community stakeholders.
 - d. Central to the draft Strategy is the recognition that effective progress requires long-term commitment, cultural transformation, and collective responsibility from all sectors involved in supporting autistic people in Oxfordshire. This is a co-produced draft Strategy where the voice of the autistic individual has been heard. It has been developed over several months with involvement from over 200 professionals, autistic individuals, experts by experience, family members and leaders within their field.
3. The draft Strategy is Annexe 1 to this report. It sets out the key principles developed by the Autism Improvement Board and those 6 priority areas that have been identified that will evidence its impact:
 - a. **Community awareness:** Promoting understanding and acceptance of autism throughout Oxfordshire, reducing stigma and building inclusive, welcoming environments for all.
 - b. **Supporting autistic children and young people in education, and positive transition to adulthood:** Ensuring autistic people can access the right learning pathways and are supported with the opportunities, adjustments and environments needed to thrive in education.
 - a. **Health and care needs:** Providing responsive, person-centred health and social care that reflects the unique strengths, experiences and needs of autistic people across their lives.
 - b. **Autism Assessment and Support:** Providing accessible pathways for diagnosis/confirmation. Ensuring clear, concise and concrete information is available to support autistic people and their families.
 - c. **Housing and employment:** Providing information for employers to ensure autistic people can access opportunities, adjustments and are supported in environments to thrive in employment. Increasing knowledge and support for autistic people to have sustainable housing, to maintain tenancies, exit homelessness and have a safe home environment.
 - d. **Criminal Justice system:** Autistic people will be supported through the criminal justice system, by providing early identification for support.
4. The Autism Improvement Board has created working groups to develop these priorities and identify next steps which will form the draft Strategy implementation plan.
5. The final draft Strategy and implementation plan will be presented to Oxfordshire Health & Wellbeing Board for approval and adoption in July 2026.

Background

6. The draft Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026 has been developed in response to national policy statutory requirements, alongside understanding of local needs, and evidence of poorer outcomes for autistic people. The national strategy for autistic children, young people and adults [[National strategy for autistic children, young people and adults: 2021 to 2026 - GOV.UK](#)] sets out expectations for all local areas to improve support, reduce inequalities, and ensure more consistent pathways across health, education and social care. Locally, there is long-standing recognition of significant gaps, particularly in relation to diagnosis waiting times, fragmented support, accessibility of services, and inconsistent community awareness, which has been demonstrated through a needs assessment exercise through Social Care in Excellence (SCIE). Earlier transformation programmes and pooled-budget arrangements established the foundations for joint commissioning and a more integrated approaches between social care and health.
7. The draft Strategy is grounded in neuro-affirmative, rights-based and strength-focused principles. It commits to:
 - a. Co-production at all stages
 - b. Trauma-aware practice
 - c. Removing environmental barriers rather than expecting autistic people to change
 - d. Using respectful, neuro-affirming language
 - e. Moving away from functioning labels and deficit-based models
This approach recognises autism as a lifelong identity and emphasises autonomy, safety, belonging and dignity.
8. The needs analysis undertaken by SCIE during 2024 and 2025 confirmed issues around health inequalities, lack of coordination across services, and barriers to participation in education, employment and community life. Engagement with families and autistic adults also highlighted challenges navigating support, a lack of timely information, and variable understanding of autism across all sectors.
9. The draft Strategy identifies six priority areas for improvement across the lifespan:
 - a. Community awareness
 - b. Housing and employment
 - c. Health and social care
 - d. CYP/Education-centred support
 - e. Diagnosis
 - f. Criminal justice systems
10. Autistic people and families across Oxfordshire consistently highlight systemic issues:

- a. Long waits, unclear pathways and inconsistent communication around diagnosis
- b. Limited community understanding and persistent stigma or misconceptions
- c. Overstretched or fragmented education, health and social care systems
- d. Barriers to employment and risk of exclusion from the workforce
- e. Poor accessibility in healthcare and inconsistent use of reasonable adjustments
- f. Transitions (e.g. to adulthood or between services) that are poorly co-ordinated, these challenges create avoidable distress, crises led pathways and unequal outcomes.

11. The draft Strategy will aim to address these identified barriers by addressing the priority areas for improvement through agreed measurable improvement plans.

12. Development of the draft Strategy has highlighted that community awareness of autism remains low, with stigma persisting, and that co-production and autistic representation in shaping services remains insufficient. It has also highlighted that poor support during life transitions increases vulnerability.

13. The draft Strategy has been developed and will be delivered as a partnership between Oxfordshire County Council, local NHS partners, education, children's services, the voluntary and community sector, and groups representing autistic people, carers and families.

14. Co-production has been central throughout development. Engagement activities have included:

- a. Targeted engagement and wide public consultation, including surveys, events and the needs assessment led to the first draft of the strategy being reviewed and further developed
- b. A countywide event was held on the 4th of December 2025 to review the first draft, which had more than 100 participants, providing detailed feedback on priorities, lived experience, and barriers to support.
- c. Ongoing involvement through fortnightly working groups, which consist of autistic adults, families, carers, professionals (including children and adult services) and provider organisations. Weekly review sessions have been held to further refine the strategy, which includes the positive re-enforcement of the language, structure and accessibility of the strategy.

15. Feedback from the autistic community via the engagement activity highlighted above has consistently highlighted the need for clearer pathways, improved communication, a stronger focus on community inclusion, and more practical guidance for organisations and the workforce.

16. An Autism Improvement Board has been established and is held bi-monthly, including autistic people, experts by experience, health, education and care partners. The Board is developing implementation approaches through task-and-finish groups and will provide assurance for delivery of the strategy. This board is co-chaired between the Head of Joint Commissioning (Live Well) and an expert-by-experience. This approach emphasises:

- a. Transparent monitoring of progress, wait times and service quality
 - b. Evidence-informed priorities and shared leadership
 - c. Stronger joint working across health, education, social care and community sectors
 - d. Workforce training and confidence building
 - e. Use of lived experience and data to drive continuous improvement
17. The draft Strategy acknowledges that meaningful change requires long-term commitment, cultural transformation, and collective responsibility across the whole county.
18. The Improvement Board has established a set of thematic task-and-finish groups to lead on each workstream with representation from the autistic community, carers, family members, community and voluntary partners, children's social care, adults social care and health. These working groups will support the Improvement Board to develop an implementation plan for the draft Strategy which will highlight deliverables, timelines and any resource or policy barriers that need to be considered in the implementation.
19. The development of the draft Strategy has several key dependencies that will need to be considered to as part of assurance for effective implementation of the workstreams:
- a. Local Government Reorganisation
 - b. The Thames Valley Integrated Care Board operating model
 - c. The development and implementation of NHS neighbourhood models of care
 - d. The development and implementation of the SEND Reform Plan in 2026
 - e. The Oxford City-led consultation on the Oxfordshire Homelessness Strategy
 - f. The County Council-led Connect to Work programme
 - g. Oxfordshire Carers Strategy
20. These dependencies together with resource challenges across the wider system in terms of planning and delivery will be considered as part of the development of the implementation plan. There are opportunities to build the draft All Age Autism Strategy into these dependent structures and planning and delivery programmes.
21. The ambition of the draft Strategy is to be a system-wide plan and that has been endorsed through the system wide co-production of the Strategy to date. The implementation plan will identify those requirements of the partners which will need to be considered and adopted by partners as part of individual organisational plans
22. Partner organisations will be asked to confirm their commitment to the actions set out in the implementation plan prior to finalisation of the Strategy. The All-Age Autism Strategy will be presented for agreement and adoption at the Oxfordshire Health & Wellbeing Board in July 2026.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

23. The Oxfordshire all-age autism strategy 2026 will help Oxfordshire County Council achieve priorities of the council's Strategic Plan:

- a. Tackling inequalities in Oxfordshire
- b. Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents
- c. Support carers and the social care system

24. Oxfordshire County Council has a general responsibility when exercising its functions under the Care Act 2014 in respect of an individual, to promote that individual's 'well-being', as defined by Section 1 of the Act.

25. In doing so the local authority must have regard to several general principles set out in S1(3) of the Act which includes for example, the importance of beginning with the assumption that the individual is best placed to judge his or her well-being. By encouraging engagement in its consultation and the development of the all-age autism strategy 2026, Oxfordshire County Council is endeavouring to ensure that the recipients of services are able to contribute to decision making in a meaningful way.

26. The Act further requires that the authority meets the assessed eligible needs of those with care and support needs in its area, in the way that best promotes that individual's well-being and prevents or reduces the need for care and support. It is anticipated that the development of this strategy will ensure that the Council meets those statutory responsibilities in an effective and person-centred way.

Financial Implications

27. At this stage in the development of the draft strategy the financial implications have not been modelled. This will be vital to ensure that fully informed decisions can be made on the implementation. As part of the development of the final strategy and delivery plan further work will be completed to provide financial implications.

- a. Comments checked by: Thomas James, Head of Financial Services, thomas.james@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Legal Implications

28. The draft Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026 sets out the council's response to the National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults: 2021–2026, issued pursuant to the Autism Act 2009 and supporting statutory Guidance.

29. Oxfordshire's Strategy details how the council will exercise its responsibilities under relevant legislation, (such as the Care Act 2014, Children and Families Act 2014 and wider equality duties), with its partners, to provide a clear, lawful and

coordinated framework to meet the needs of autistic children, young people and adults, in its area.

- a. Comments checked by: Janice White, Principal Solicitor, ASC, SEND and Education Janice.white@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Staff Implications

30. There are no staff implications with this All-Age Autism strategy 2026 for the Council.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

31. An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed for the Oxfordshire all-age autism strategy 2026 (Appendix 2) and approved by the Deputy Director Joint Commissioning HESC. Regular reviews will be carried out to ensure that the Plan continues to promote inclusivity and ensures equality is considered in all parts of life for people with a learning disability.

Sustainability Implications

32. The All-Age Autism Strategy 2026 does not have any sustainability implications it is no way will impact on the ability of the council to meet climate or ecological commitments.

Risk Management

33. The Oxfordshire All Age Autism Strategy outlines the challenges for autistic people, including delays and inconsistencies in diagnosis, fragmented education and support systems, barriers to employment, overrepresentation among the homeless, difficulties in accessing health and social care, ongoing stigma, inconsistent use of neuro-affirming language, and inadequate support during life transitions. These risks are distributed across the health and care system and across several different providers. For the Council these risks will be clarified and mitigated through the development of an implementation plan which will be considered and approved by the Directors of Adult Services and Children, Education and Families prior to approval of the draft Strategy and recommendation to Oxfordshire Health & Wellbeing Board.

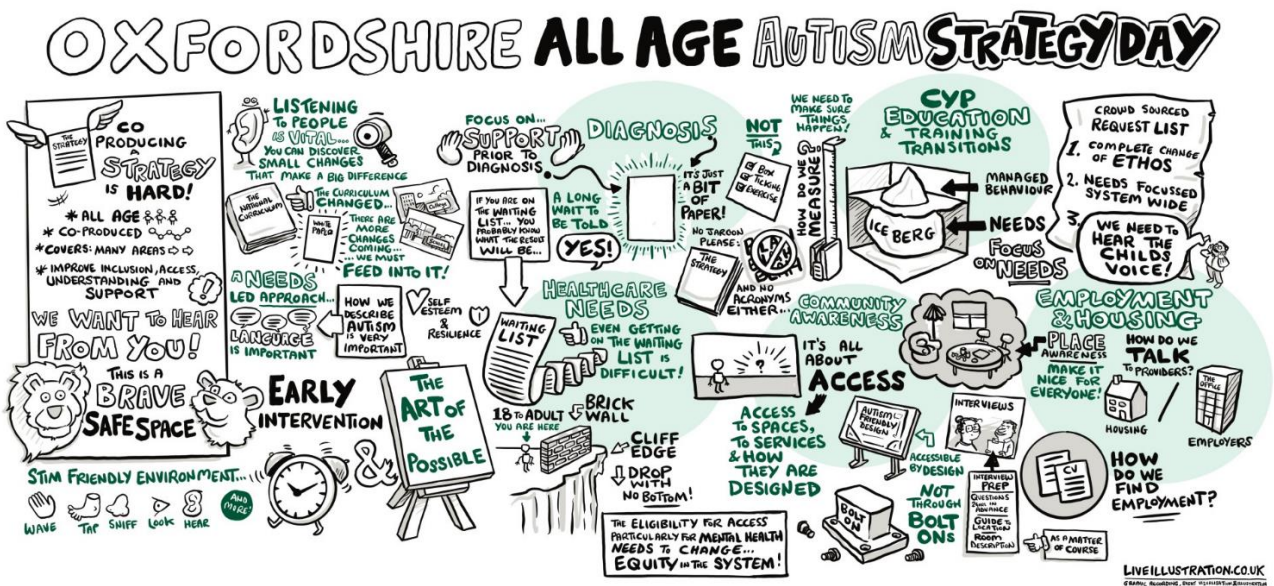
Consultations/Communication

34. A Data Protection Impact Assessment was carried out prior to the engagement stage of the Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy.

- a. The council's Engagement and Consultation Team has been actively involved in the development of the Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026. Consultation phases of the plan have been carefully planned to

ensure wider engagement with the public during the consultation period and wide co-production opportunities, prior to the proposed publication of the final Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026.

- b. A formal consultation for the strategy has been completed via Let's Talk Oxfordshire platform, and meetings held with Key Stakeholders. We had more than 100 online responses from that survey, we held 7 in person sessions across 4 different sites and a mixture of times these were attended by a mixture of autistic individuals or those that represented or worked with autistic people. We had a further event that was held on the 4th of December in Oxford that those that attended felt set new standards for inclusive events including a quiet space, fiddle equipment and a comprehensive pre attendance pack including images of what to expect.



NAME
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Annex: *Annex 1: Draft Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy March 2026*
Annex 2: Equality Impact Assessment

Background papers: NIL

[Other Documents:] NIL

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