

Divisions Affected – N/A

AUDIT & GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

16 JULY 2025

LOCAL GOVERNMENT & SOCIAL CARE OMBUDSMAN – ANNUAL REVIEW REPORT

Report by the Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Committee is **RECOMMENDED** to receive and comment on the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Annual Review of Oxfordshire County Council for 2024/25, and the work undertaken by the Council regarding its handling of complaints.

Introduction

2. Each year, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) issues an Annual Review Report about each council. This relates to the complaints made to the LGSCO about the Council in the previous financial year. This report updates the Committee on this area of governance for the year 2024/25, reflecting on those complaints that were considered by the LGSCO up to 31 March 2025

Purpose of the LGSCO's Annual Letter

3. Under the Local Government Act 1974, the LGSCO has two main statutory functions:
 - To investigate complaints against councils (and some other authorities)
 - To provide advice and guidance on good administrative practice
4. The LGSCO records the following categories of information – which can be found contained within the Annual Review Letter:
 - a) Complaints and enquiries received - by subject area,

b) Decisions made (upheld, not upheld, advice given, closed after initial enquiries, incomplete/invalid and premature)

5. The purpose of the Annual Letter is to reflect to councils the number and nature of the LGSCO's dealings with complaints about that authority. The Annual Letter is at **Annex 1**. In short, the Council saw a reduction in the number of complaints upheld in 2024/25; 22 upheld in 2024/25 compared to 34 upheld in 2023/24.
6. 100% of Oxfordshire cases considered by the LGSCO for the period between 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 were upheld, compared to a national average of 89% in similar authorities (County Councils). However, it is worth noting that based on Oxfordshire County Council's population, this is 2.9% upheld decisions per 100,000 residents (4.6% in 2023/24), with the average for similar authorities, recorded as 5.3% upheld decisions per 100,000 residents (4.5% in 2023/24).
7. In **100%** of cases upheld, the LGSCO was satisfied that the Council had successfully implemented its recommendations. This is in line with an average of 100% in similar authorities.
8. In **5%** of upheld cases the LGSCO found that the Council had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman. This relates to one satisfactory remedy decision out of a total of 22 upheld decisions for the period between 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025. This compares to an average of **10%** in similar authorities. This is a slight reduction on figures for 2023/24 where the Council provided a satisfactory remedy in 9% of upheld cases (3 out of 34 complaints upheld). Remedying complaints in house, and at the earliest opportunity will remain a point of focus in 2025/26.
9. Of the 22 upheld complaints remedy was proposed by the LGSCO for 18. In all 18 cases the LGSCO was satisfied with the actions taken, with the council's compliance rate with recommendations being recorded as 100%. one of these cases was recorded as remedy completed late. This is due to the council not meeting the deadlines for completion agreed between the council and the LGSCO. However, this is an improvement on 2023/24 where remedy compliance was recorded as completed late for 5 cases.
10. This report explores these findings in more detail and sets them in the national context for county councils.

Summary of Complaints and enquiries received by the LGSCO

11. A total of 89 complaints were received by the LGSCO about the Council during 2024/25 (118 complaints received in 2023/24). The LGSCO records the subjects of county council complaints as follows – with Oxfordshire County Council's numbers for 2024/25.

By LGSCO category	Number of complaints received by the LGSCO 2024/25	Number of complaints received by the LGSCO 2023/24
Education and Children's services	56	75
Adult Care services	13	22
Highways and Transport	12	11
Corporate and other services	3	9
Environmental Services & Public Protection Regulation	2	0
Planning & Development	2	0
Other	1	1
Total	89	118

12. The LGSCO dealt with 84 of the 89 complaints received. Of these, 29 complaints were not for the LGSCO to deal with or were not ready to investigate, and a further 33 were assessed and closed. 22 complaints were investigated.
13. The Council's Children's services remain the highest service area receiving complaints with most relating to special educational needs and disability (SEND) and the handling and issuing of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP). However, the number of complaints received by the LGSCO for the service fell in 2024/25; 56 compared to 75 complaints received in 2023/24.
14. In February 2025, the Council received a directive from the LGSCO expressing concerns about 13 cases related to the local authority's 'Section 19 duty'. The Council as the local authority has statutory duties under section 19 of the Education Act 1996. The s.19(1) duty states that local authorities are responsible for arranging suitable and (usually) full-time education for children of compulsory school age who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not receive suitable education without such provision. This duty is referred to as 'the s.19 duty'.
15. Following receipt of the directive, decisive and immediate action was taken. The LGSCO requested that the council review these 13 cases and draw up an action plan to be submitted to Scrutiny. This was presented at the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee on [13 June 2025](#). Additional resources have been allocated for this work, including the appointment of an

interim S19 officer and the development of a new process in collaboration with health colleagues.

Decisions made by LGSCO

16. The LGSCO carried out 22 investigations, all of which were upheld.
17. The cases upheld are summarised below in **Annex 2** with an indication of the outcomes in each case. All the remedies have been implemented. Where a financial remedy was recommended by the LGSCO, this was in accordance with its own published guidance on the circumstances in which a financial remedy may be appropriate (e.g. for time and trouble, delay or distress, or lost service provision).

Supporting complaint and service improvement

18. The LGSCO launched its new complaint handling guidance in February 2025, which is aimed to help councils adopt the [Complaint Handling Code](#) (the Code). The LGSCO has advised that they are likely to start considering the Code as part of their processes from April 2026.
19. The council has engaged with other local authorities and discussed the Code and best practice implementation. The Council's complaints policy has been assessed against the proposed criteria and is in a good position having already incorporated some of the changes in its recent complaints policy update.
20. Work is ongoing to address the remaining changes, and the Customer Feedback Team will continue to work with services throughout 2025/26 to ensure full compliance by April 2026.
21. Key changes in the code that the council will need to consider include:
 - a) Comprehensive corporate annual and quarterly complaints reports and automation.
 - b) Annual self-assessment in collaboration with the Internal LGO team to be submitted to the LGSCO. Feedback may be sought from individual service areas.
 - c) Redefinition of a service request and changes to how service requests are addressed. There could be an increase in formal complaints as customers can submit a formal complaint if dissatisfied with the handling of their service request, even if it is not yet fully completed.
 - d) Phasing out of "informal complaints" or "concerns," which may result in more formal complaints.

- e) The ability for a customer to be able to progress to stage 2 of the corporate process without providing a reason.

The Overall context of complaints received by the Council

22. The Council received 725 complaints during 2024/25. These are broken down as follows, set against the numbers for recent years.

Type	2024/25	2023/24	2022/23
Corporate (i.e. non-social care)	482	328	379
Adults Social Care Complaints	114	127	134
Children's Social Care Complaints	129	141	144
	725	596	657

Actions taken by the Council

23. The Council presented its action plan for 2024/25 to the Committee as part of the 2023/24 LGSCO Annual Report. An update on these actions is reported below:

Action	Update	Timescale
a) The transfer of MP enquiries to the Customer Feedback team is now live. This provides a central contact point for MPs with constituents' enquiries. The focus now is around the process and data that can be provided to SLT on these enquiries;	The centralisation of MP enquiries has positively affected the correspondence received from MPs. Having a single point of contact has allowed the council to develop a dashboard for tracking enquiries and identifying key constituent issues, facilitating quicker responses. MPs have noted that their requests are now handled more swiftly and efficiently. The Customer Feedback team will continue to work with services to improve response times.	Implemented in June 2024, & ongoing
b) Continue to work with services, including training and support;	The Customer Feedback team continues to collaborate with teams to deliver training and support on complaints	

	<p>handling, process adherence, and the quality of responses.</p> <p>The Customer Feedback team has recently commenced training sessions focused on writing effective complaint responses, with the intention of extending this support to the wider organisation soon. Furthermore, the team has conducted training for managers across the council on managing difficult behaviour; enhancing the council's strategies for addressing and mitigating challenging situations.</p>	<p>Response training throughout 2024/25 - ongoing.</p> <p>Managing difficult behaviour – completed March 25</p>
c) Explore the implementation of a new digitised system for recording complaints and MP enquiries.	<p>The council is currently exploring in-house alternative solutions to optimise the use of resources and budget. As part of this, data has been reviewed and improvements implemented, including the automation and updating of all complaints reporting. This now features comprehensive dashboards to support better oversight and decision-making.</p>	<p>Dashboard enhancements are ongoing, with further development contingent on the restructuring of the Transformation, Digital and Customer Experience service.</p> <p>Internal solutions are under review for this system and are initially being tested elsewhere within another service area.</p>

Areas of focus for 2025/26

24. Action being undertaken:

a) Enhancing the Learning from Complaints Process

Timescale – To be completed by Dec 2025

The Transformation, Digital and Customer Experience Service is developing a Power BI dashboard to capture and share learning from complaints across all services. This will provide visibility into the improvements implemented by different teams, enabling services to adopt relevant learning from one another. Learning themes have already been defined to support consistency and clarity.

b) Preparing for the New Complaint Handling Code

Timescale – To be in place by March 2026

Over the coming year, there will be a review of the council's current processes to ensure compliance with the new Complaint Handling Code, which comes into effect in April 2026. This includes preparing for the introduction of annual corporate complaints reporting and a new self-assessment on complaint governance, which has not previously been required.

c) Ongoing Support and Training for Services

Timescale – Ongoing

The Transformation, Digital and Customer Experience Service will continue to provide support to services involved in the complaints process, including training and guidance to strengthen complaint handling and response quality.

Conclusion

25. The Council has taken steps to address the complaints raised by the LGSCO. Through actions such as appointing an interim S19 officer and working with health colleagues, the Council aims to enhance service delivery and compliance.
26. Despite facing challenges, there has been a reduction in the number of complaints received compared to previous years.
27. The Council is working to align with new complaint handling guidance and adopt the Complaint Handling Code to improve transparency and accountability.
28. The Council will maintain support for services involved in the complaints process and enhance training and guidance to improve complaint handling and response quality.

Financial implications

29. This report sets out the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Annual Review of Oxfordshire County Council for 2024/25, and the work undertaken by the Council regarding its handling of complaints.

30. There are no financial implications arising directly from the report. Where there were any financial impacts as a result of complaints in 2024/25 these were incorporated into the year-end position considered by Cabinet in June 2025.

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

31. There are no legal implications arising directly from the report.

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Staff Implications

32. There are no staff implications arising directly from the report.

Anita Bradley

Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer

Annex: Annex 1: Annual Review letter 2024-25
Annex 2: Cases Upheld by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

Background papers: None

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