

HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

DATE: 09 JULY 2026

ALL-AGE AUTISM STRATEGY AGREEMENT

Report by Karen Fuller, Director of Adult Social Care

1. RECOMMENDATION

The Board is **RECOMMENDED** to:

- 1.1 Endorse the Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031, approve its publication and implementation, and agree the contents and principles set out in the strategy. (**Annex 1**)
- 1.2 Note that LGR may affect delivery of the Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031 by changing system-wide governance, leadership and funding arrangements. While this may cause delays, it also provides an opportunity to strengthen partnership working and improve service alignment.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031 has been developed and shaped through wide consultation and co-design with autistic individuals, families, professionals and experts by experience. It was developed in response to national policy and statutory requirements. Local evidence and needs assessments for autistic people across the county also informed the content of the strategy.
- 2.2 The strategy responds to a range of long-standing issues affecting autistic people and their families, including long waits for diagnosis, fragmented and overstretched voluntary and community sector support, limited awareness of available provision among the public and professionals, barriers to education, employment and community life, and inconsistent understanding of autism across sectors. Needs analysis undertaken in 2024 and 2025 confirmed continued health inequalities, poor coordination between services, and difficulties for families and autistic adults in navigating available support.
- 2.3 To create meaningful change, the strategy commits to reducing diagnostic waits, expanding employment pathways, strengthening education and SEND practice, preventing unnecessary hospital admissions, and improving housing and transitions. It also emphasises the importance of reasonable adjustments that respond to each person's individual needs, helping autistic people to access services, take part in their communities, and get on with everyday life with greater independence, dignity and confidence. The strategy will be delivered through

existing and developing partnerships across Oxfordshire County Council, the NHS, education providers, voluntary groups, and organisations representing autistic people and families.

- 2.4 Oversight is provided by a countywide Autism Improvement Board, co-chaired by the Head of Joint Commissioning – Live Well and an Expert-by-Experience. The Board brings together autistic people, families, health, education, social care, voluntary and community sector partners to oversee delivery, monitor progress and risks, and provide shared accountability for the six thematic subgroups responsible for taking forward the strategy’s priority areas.
- 2.5 The strategy recognises that progress will require long-term commitment, cultural change, sustained partnership working and shared responsibility across all sectors supporting autistic people in Oxfordshire. It has been co-designed over several months, with the voices of autistic people central to its development, and shaped by input from more than 200 professionals, autistic individuals, experts by experience, family members and sector leaders.
- 2.6 The Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the Strategy on 16 April 2026 and made recommendations to strengthen the final document and delivery arrangements. Officers have prepared a formal written response setting out how each recommendation has been addressed, including amendments to the strategy and actions to be taken forward through implementation. This provides assurance that scrutiny feedback has informed the final strategy and is attached at **Annex 2**.

3. Background

Policy and Evidence.

- 3.1 The Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031 has been developed in response to current national policy expectations and statutory requirements, alongside local needs and clear evidence of poorer outcomes for autistic people. The National Strategy ([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.
- 3.2 Earlier transformation work and pooled-budget arrangements have helped build an initial base for joint commissioning and closer working between social care and health. However, autistic people and families across Oxfordshire consistently highlight systemic issues such as:
 - Long waits, unclear pathways and inconsistent communication around diagnosis
 - Limited community understanding and persistent stigma or misconceptions
 - Overstretched or fragmented education, health and social care systems
 - Barriers to employment and risk of exclusion from the workforce
 - Poor accessibility in healthcare and inconsistent use of reasonable adjustments

- Poorly managed transitions, such as moving into adulthood or between services

3.3 Local evidence shows clear gaps in support, including long waits for diagnosis, fragmented services, poor access to support and limited autism awareness in the community. The SCIE needs assessment, undertaken between July 2024 and January 2025, confirmed these issues and identified the following key themes for autistic people and families in Oxfordshire (**Annex 3**):

- Autistic people experience health inequalities and poorer access to timely, coordinated support.
- Diagnosis pathways remain a key pressure, with long waits and inconsistent communication across age groups.
- Services are fragmented, making it difficult for autistic people and families to understand pathways and navigate support.
- Awareness and understanding of autism vary across services, highlighting the need for more consistent reasonable adjustments.
- Barriers remain in education, employment, housing, health and community participation.
- Transitions between services and life stages can increase risk and lead to poorer experiences.
- SCIE recommended embedding autism priorities across commissioning, care, housing, education and co-production, aligned with wider local plans.

Approach to strategy development and implementation

3.4 The strategy is grounded in neuro-affirmative, rights-based and strength-focused principles. It commits to:

- Co-design at all stages
- Trauma-aware practice
- Removing environmental barriers rather than expecting autistic people to change
- Using respectful, neuro-affirming language
- Moving away from functioning labels and deficit-based models. This approach recognises autism as a lifelong identity and emphasises autonomy, safety, belonging and dignity.

3.5 The strategy has been developed and will be delivered in partnership with Oxfordshire County Council, local NHS partners, education, children’s services, the voluntary and community sector, and groups representing autistic people, carers and families. Existing partnerships will be strengthened and new partnerships formed to support delivery and improve outcomes for autistic people across Oxfordshire.

3.6 Co-design has been central throughout the development of the strategy. Engagement activities have included:

- 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.
- A countywide event was held on 4 December 2025 to review the first draft. More than 100 participants provided detailed feedback on priorities, lived experience and barriers to support.
- Ongoing involvement through fortnightly working groups, including autistic adults, families, carers, professionals from children's and adult services, and provider organisations. Review sessions with working group members focused on specific areas to further refine the strategy, including positive reinforcement of the language, structure and accessibility of the strategy.

Strategic intentions.

3.7 The Oxfordshire strategy identifies six priority areas for improvement across all ages:

- Community awareness
- Housing and employment
- Health and social care
- CYP/Education-centred support
- Diagnosis
- Criminal justice systems

3.8 The strategy's key intention is to work with partners to influence and drive system-wide change, rather than create all services directly. It aims to make support for autistic people and their families clearer, more accessible and better coordinated across Oxfordshire. Through partnership working, it will support reductions in diagnostic delays, improve pathways, increase community awareness, strengthen reasonable adjustments, improve access to health and care, and promote better outcomes in employment, housing and life transitions. It will also ensure autistic people and families have a stronger voice in shaping services through ongoing co-design and representation.

3.9 Feedback from autistic people and families through engagement and consultation highlighted the need for clearer support pathways, better communication, stronger community inclusion, and practical guidance for organisations and staff.

Implementation and assurance for delivery.

3.10 Overall governance for delivery of the Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031 is provided through a countywide Autism Improvement Board, co-chaired by the Head of Joint Commissioning (Live Well) and an Expert by Experience, with representation from autistic people, families, health, education, social care, voluntary and community sector partners. This approach emphasises:

- Clear oversight of the strategy implementation and monitoring of progress
- Monitoring progress of wait times and service quality

- Evidence-informed priorities and shared leadership between key partners
- Stronger joint working across health, education, social care and community sectors
- Workforce training and confidence building
- Use of lived experience and data to drive continuous improvement

3.11 The governance approach is based on co-design, shared ownership and partnership delivery. Implementation must be managed within existing resources and the agreed financial envelope.

3.12 The strategy acknowledges that meaningful change requires long-term commitment, cultural transformation, and collective responsibility across all partners.

3.13 The Autism Improvement Board will oversee delivery, monitor progress and risks against a co-designed annual delivery plan (**Annex 4**) and support shared accountability across the system. This is complemented by thematic task-and-finish groups leading specific priority areas, ensuring that implementation remains co-designed, evidence-informed and aligned with wider partnership and integrated care arrangements.

3.14 Significant risks, delivery barriers or decisions that cannot be resolved by the Autism Improvement Board will be escalated through the Senior Responsible Officer, the Director of Adult Social Care, to the Joint Commissioning Executive and the Thames Valley Learning Disability and Autism Programme Oversight Board. These governance arrangements are being finalised and will be confirmed before the strategy is launched. Regular project management meetings and the Autism Strategy Working Group will support coordination. (**Annex 5**)

3.15 Updates may also be provided to the Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Place Based Partnership, as required during delivery of the strategy, through the Senior Responsible Officer.

4. Key Issues [Corporate Policies and Priorities]

4.1 The Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031 will help Oxfordshire County Council achieve the priorities set out in the council's Strategic Plan:

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

4.2 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.

4.3 In doing so, the local authority must have regard to several general principles set out in Section 1(3) of the Act, including the importance of beginning with the assumption that the individual is best placed to judge their own well-being. By encouraging engagement in its consultation and the development of the All-Age

Autism Strategy 2026-2031, Oxfordshire County Council is seeking to ensure that people who use services can contribute to decision-making in a meaningful way.

- 4.4** 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.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1** There are no financial implications that the Health and Wellbeing Board is asked to note in relation to this report, noting the effect LGR may have on the funding arrangements across the system.

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6. Legal Implications

- 6.1** The 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.
- 6.2** 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.

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7. Staff Implications

- 7.1** There are no Council staff implications arising from the implementation of the All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031.

8. Equality & Inclusion Implications

- 8.1** An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed for the Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031 (**Annex 6**) and approved by the Deputy Director of Joint Commissioning HESC. Regular reviews will be carried out to ensure that the plan continues to promote inclusivity and that equality is considered across all areas of life for autistic people.

9. Sustainability Implications

- 9.1 The All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031 is not expected to have any direct negative impact on Oxfordshire County Council's climate or ecological commitments. By improving access to local, coordinated and person-centred support, the strategy may contribute to wider social sustainability by helping autistic people and families access services more effectively, reduce avoidable crisis responses and support greater inclusion in community life.

10. Risk Management

- 10.1 Autistic people are at high risk of poor health and life outcomes, 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. The All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031 aims to mitigate these risks through:

10.1.1 Thematic task-and-finish groups will be established for the All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031. Experts by experience, organisations, service providers and other professionals will continue to be involved in delivering the plan. The groups will contribute to identifying and managing risks associated with implementation to support successful delivery.

10.1.2 The All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031 will be a standing agenda item for the Autism Improvement Board. A risk register will be managed and covered as part of updates provided to the Board, with escalations made as appropriate.

- 10.2 The strategy highlights several opportunities for positive change. Co-design with autistic individuals, families, and partners ensures that lived experience drives meaningful action, while a strengths-based, neuro-affirmative approach promotes belonging and empowerment. Prioritising inclusive education and employment practices, holistic and person-centred support, and improved autism-informed training for professionals can help address unmet needs and foster genuinely inclusive communities. Furthermore, increased community awareness, early identification and intervention, and strong governance—such as the establishment of an Autism Improvement Board—are expected to deliver continuous improvement, transparency, and better outcomes for autistic people across Oxfordshire.

11. Consultations/Communication

- 11.1 A Data Protection Impact Assessment was carried out prior to the engagement stage of the Oxfordshire All-Age Autism Strategy 2026-2031. **Annex 7**

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