

**Divisions Affected – N/A**

## **AUDIT & GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE**

**15 JULY 2026**

### **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 2025/26, 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 2025/26, reflecting on those complaints that were considered by the LGSCO up to 31 March 2026**

#### **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**.
6. In short, the council saw a small increase in the number of complaints upheld in 2025/26; 24 upheld in 2025/26 compared to 22 upheld in 2024/25.
7. For the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026, 80% of Oxfordshire cases considered by the LGSCO were upheld, compared with a national average of 89% for similar county authorities. When adjusted for population, this equates to 3.1 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents for Oxfordshire County Council in 2025/26 (2.9 in 2024/25), compared with 5.2 per 100,000 for similar authorities (5.3 in 2024/25).
8. In 8% of upheld cases, the LGSCO found that the council had already provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman. This equates to two of the 24 upheld decisions between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026, compared with an average of 10% in similar authorities. This is a slight increase on 2024/25, when the council provided a satisfactory remedy in 5% of upheld cases (one of 22). Securing remedies in-house and at the earliest opportunity will remain a focus in 2026/27.
9. Of the 24 upheld complaints decided on during 2025/26, the LGSCO proposed a remedy in 22 cases.
10. During 2025/26 the LGSCO recorded compliance outcomes in 23 cases and were satisfied with the actions taken for all, resulting in a 100% compliance rate with recommendations. This compares to an average of 100% in similar authorities
11. For 21 of the 23 cases compliance with recommendations was on time. Two remedies were recorded as completed late because the council did not meet the agreed deadlines for implementation; this compares with one late completion in 2024/25. This has been recorded as a 91% timely compliance rate which compares to an average of 86% in similar organisations<sup>1</sup>. Processes have been tightened up to ensure that timescales are met going forwards.

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<sup>1</sup> Compliance figures may exclude upheld cases from 2025/26 where the related actions were completed in the subsequent financial year and may include compliance data for cases determined in the previous financial year.

12. 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

13. A total of 126 complaints were received by the LGSCO about the council during 2024/25 (89 complaints received in 2024/25). The LGSCO records the subjects of county council complaints as follows – with Oxfordshire County Council's numbers for 2025/26.

<b>By LGSCO category</b>	<b>Number of complaints received by the LGSCO 2025/26</b>	<b>Number of complaints received by the LGSCO 2024/25</b>	<b>Number of complaints received by the LGSCO 2023/24</b>
Education and Children's services	74	56	75
Adult Care services	28	13	22
Highways and Transport	19	12	11
Corporate and other services	3	3	9
Environmental Services & Public Protection Regulation	1	2	0
Planning & Development	1	2	0
Other	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>118</b>

14. The LGSCO dealt with 92 of the 126 complaints received. Of these, 28 complaints were not for the LGSCO to deal with or were not ready to investigate, and a further 34 were assessed and closed. 30 complaints were investigated.

15. 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).

### Children, Education and Families

16. Patterns in LGSCO correspondence and complaints remain broadly consistent with previous years, although overall volumes have reduced slightly. Complaints relating to children's social care have increased modestly, but most have either not been taken forward by the LGSCO or have not been upheld.

17. In children's social care, this should be seen in the context of the service's annual involvement in approaching 45,000 contacts, referrals and other interactions with children and their families.
18. Most complaints continue to relate to SEND and education, in line with previous years and the national picture. In Oxfordshire, this sits against a backdrop of more than 9,000 children with an Education, Health and Care Plan and a further c.22,000 receiving SEN support.
19. Children's Services have a robust mechanism for learning lessons from complaints and review of quality assurance in practice and service delivery.

### **Adult Social Care**

20. In 2025/26, the LGSCO received 28 complaints relating to Adult Social Care. During the same period, 22 Adult Social Care cases were decided, of which 6 were upheld. In 2 of the upheld cases, the council had already remedied the matters identified before the Ombudsman reached its findings, and appropriate remedies were implemented within the required timescales in the remaining 4 cases. While no individual Adult Social Care service area gave rise to particular concern, the service will focus during 2026/27 on improving the timeliness and clarity of communication with the people it assesses and supports, as this emerged as a recurring theme in complaints.

### **Decisions made by LGSCO**

21. The LGSCO carried out 30 investigations, 24 of which were upheld.
22. The cases upheld are summarised 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**

23. The LGSCO launched new complaint handling guidance in February 2025 to support councils in implementing the [Complaint Handling Code](#). Work led by the Customer Feedback Team, with support from services, ensured the council was compliant ahead of the Code taking effect in April 2026.
24. Work is ongoing to embed the requirements of the Complaint Handling Code within operational practice. Whilst the core processes and governance arrangements are now in place, further activity is underway to support consistent application across all services, particularly in relation to response quality, timeliness and the effective handling of complaints.

25. Targeted training has been delivered to the Education service, with a particular focus on complaint handling, including SEND. This has supported improvements in the quality and consistency of responses. The approach will now be extended across other services over the coming months, with priority given to those generating the highest volume and most complex complaints.

## The Overall context of complaints received by the Council

26. The council received 838 complaints during 2025/26. These are broken down as follows, set against the numbers for recent years.

Type	2025/26	2024/25	2023/24
Corporate (i.e. non-social care)	530	482	328
Adults Social Care Complaints	144	114	127
Children's Social Care Complaints	164	129	141
	<b>838</b>	<b>725</b>	<b>596</b>

## Actions taken by the Council

27. The council presented its action plan for 2025/26 to the Committee as part of the 2024/25 LGSCO Annual Report. An update on these actions is reported below:

Action	Update
<p><b>a) Enhancing the Learning from Complaints Process</b></p> <p><b>Timescale – To be completed by December 2025</b></p> <p>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.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Customer Experience and Data Service teams both underwent restructuring in late 2025/early 2026, resulting in significant changes to their operating structures.</li> <li>• This has impacted the pace of developing complaints data reporting; however, the revised reporting is now scheduled to be completed and implemented in July 2026.</li> </ul>

<p>b) <b>Preparing for the New Complaint Handling Code</b></p> <p><b>Timescale – To be in place by March 2026</b></p> <p>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.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work is ongoing to further embed the requirements of the Complaint Handling Code within operational practice. While core processes and governance arrangements are in place, continued refinement is underway to ensure consistent application across all services, particularly in relation to scope-setting, response quality and timeliness</li> </ul>
<p>c) <b>Ongoing Support and Training for Services</b></p> <p><b>Timescale – Ongoing</b></p> <p>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.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targeted training has been delivered to the Education service, with a focus on improving complaint handling, including SEND.</li> <li>• This has supported improvements in response quality, scope-setting and consistency. The approach will be extended across other services over the coming months, with a continued focus on those areas generating the highest volume and complexity of complaints.</li> </ul>

## Areas of focus for 2026/27

28. Action being undertaken:

- a) **Embedding the Complaint Handling Code:** continuing to strengthen governance arrangements, including completion and publication of the annual self-assessment

**Timescale – 31 March 2027**

- b) **Improving Timeliness:** Work with those services which receive a high volume of complaints to improve response times and reduce delays.

**Timescale – 31 March 2027**

- c) **Strengthening Early Resolution:** Increase focus on resolving complaints at the earliest opportunity

**Timescale – 31 March 2027**

- d) **Enhancing Learning and Assurance:** Further development and expansion of “closing the loop” tracking to ensure all learning actions are completed and evidenced.

**Timescale – 31 March 2027**

## **Conclusion**

29. The LGSCO's Annual Review for 2025/26 confirms that, despite a small increase in upheld complaints, the council's performance remains stronger than the average for comparable county authorities when considered in the context of an increased number of complaints overall, and that all Ombudsman recommendations have been implemented. The report nevertheless highlights the need for continued management focus on early resolution, timeliness and consistency of complaint handling, particularly in those service areas generating the highest volume and complexity of complaints. The Committee is invited to note the position set out in this report and the actions being taken to strengthen assurance and oversight during 2026/27.

## **Financial implications**

30. This report sets out the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Annual Review of Oxfordshire County Council for 2025/26, and the work undertaken by the council regarding its handling of complaints. There is no direct financial impact from this report, but service areas have wider financial costs associated with the outcomes from this report.

Comments checked by:

Drew Hodgson, Strategic Finance Business Partner

## **Legal Implications**

31. There are no legal implications arising directly from this annual review report.

Comments checked by:

Jay Akbar, Head of Legal & Governance

## **Staff Implications**

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

## **Equality & Inclusion Implications**

33. There are no direct equality and inclusion implications arising from this report.

## **Sustainability Implications**

34. There are no direct sustainability implications arising from this report.

## **Risk Management**

35. There are no direct risk management implications arising from this report.

## **Consultation**

36. None directly arising from this report.

### **Anita Bradley**

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