

Briefing Report to Full Council

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman: Annual Review of Complaints 2025/26

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Reason for Decision

To share with Group Leaders and Governance, Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board Oldham Council's overall performance in respect of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and our performance with comparable neighboring authorities.

Executive Summary

This report incorporates the LGSCO's final 2025/26 publications, which the Ombudsman releases in two parts: (1) the Annual Review letter to the Chief Executive setting out the Council's overall performance, and (2) the national Annual Review and datasets/interactive performance map.

At the conclusion of the Council's corporate, Adult Social Care, and Children's Social Care complaint processes, residents may approach the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) if they remain dissatisfied with the outcome. In line with our commitment to being a resident-focused Council, we use the LGSCO's findings each year to strengthen early resolution, learn from feedback, and drive improvements in service quality.

In 2025/26, the LGSCO received 82 complaints and enquiries relating to Oldham Council, an increase from 56 in 2024/25. This is in line with the national trend where complaints and enquiries to the Ombudsman rose by 33%. Despite the rise in complaints and enquiries to the Ombudsman in respect of Oldham Council, the overall figure for Oldham remains relatively low when compared to the scale of contact handled directly by the Council's Complaints Team.

A total of 57 decisions were issued by the Ombudsman concerning Oldham Council. Of these, 1 was closed after advice was given, 27 were referred back for local resolution, 21 were closed after initial enquiries, 2 were recorded as incomplete or invalid and 6 were upheld following investigation. Although the upheld rate increased to 100%, only six investigations were completed during the year, compared with eleven in 2024/25. Consequently, the actual number of upheld complaints reduced from eight to six. The Ombudsman has highlighted concerns regarding the timeliness of Council responses during investigations. This has been reviewed and learning implemented to ensure strengthened processes.

In 2 out of the 6 upheld cases (33%), the Council had already provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman. This is significantly higher than the national average for similar authorities (16%), demonstrating the Council's proactive approach to addressing and resolving issues at an early stage.

Adjusted for Oldham's population, the upheld decisions equate to 2.4 per 100,000 residents, compared to a national average of 4.6 per 100,000 for similar authorities. On a longer-term basis, Oldham continues to perform strongly. The Council's two-year average of 2.9 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents is the lowest amongst Greater Manchester authorities and remains significantly below national averages.

The Council achieved 100% compliance with the Ombudsman's recommendations, matching the high national compliance rate.

These figures, performing consistently within the top performing councils within Greater Manchester, reflect Oldham Council's continued commitment to resolving complaints efficiently, learning from outcomes, and working constructively with residents to deliver improvements in service quality.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Elected Members consider the report and comment as appropriate.

1 Background

- 1.1 Oldham Council manages complaints about its services in accordance with five separate legislative frameworks:
- The Local Government Act 1974 - Corporate complaints
 - The Children Act 1989 - Children's Social Care complaints
 - The Local Authority Social Services and NHS Complaints Regulations 2009 – Adult Social Care complaints
 - Housing complaints are managed under relevant housing legislation including the Housing Act 1996 and Localism Act 2011.
- 1.2 For Corporate, Adult Social Care, and Children's Social Care complaints, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) acts as the final stage in the process. The Ombudsman investigates complaints where residents remain dissatisfied after the Council has completed its internal complaints procedures.
- 1.3 Each year, the LGSCO publishes an Annual Review of Complaints, setting out the volume and outcomes of complaints received about each Local Authority. This report is submitted to the Governance, Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Committee for consideration to support oversight of the Council's complaint handling and responsiveness to external findings.
- 1.4 The LGSCO does not investigate complaints that are investigated under the Council's Housing Complaints policy. Such complaints are considered by the Housing Ombudsman and therefore, details of these complaints are not included within this report.

2 Background

- 2.1 The LGSCO's Annual Review of Local Government Complaints 2025/26, confirms that the number of complaints nationally rose more sharply than at any time over the past 10 years. The number of complaints rose by 33%, to 27,625. This follows a previous record setting year in 2024/25, in which complaints rose by 16%.
- 2.2 Nationally the Ombudsman completed 4,335 detailed investigations and upheld 86% of those cases, continuing a rising trend in both volumes and fault findings and signaling persistent challenges in local government service delivery and complaint resolution.
- 2.3 Ombudsman casework shows that there is sustained strain on services and a gap between what residents expect and what they are receiving. In particular, the Ombudsman references Special Educational Needs, Adult Social Care and Housing services.
- 2.4 The Ombudsman has welcomed the publication of "Set Up to Fail?", independent research examining how local authorities respond to service improvement recommendations in SEND. The research confirms that although many of the problems driving complaints to the Ombudsman are rooted in national systemic failures, the way local authorities respond to these pressures, and how seriously they engage with learning from complaints, makes a measurable difference to outcomes for residents.

- 2.5 The Ombudsman's Annual Review also highlights the significant financial impact of poor decision making, delayed action and inadequate services. It emphasizes that getting decisions right first time is both better for residents and more cost effective for the Council.
- 2.6 The highest proportion of complaints and enquiries received by the Ombudsman related to Education and Children's Services (7,773 contacts), followed by Housing (5,279) and Adult Social Care (3,429).
- 2.7 The Ombudsman upheld 91% of complaints it investigated in respect of Education and Children's Services, 90% of complaints about Housing and 78% of Adult Social Care complaints.
- 2.8 In addition to the Annual Review of Complaints, the LGSCO writes to each Local Authority's Chief Executive every year to set out the Council's performance in handling complaints. This letter is an important tool for Members in scrutinising complaint handling. An interactive map setting out each council's performance is also available on the LGSCO website. The letter sent to Oldham's Chief Executive is attached at *Appendix A* and can also be viewed on the LGSCO website at: <https://www.lgo.org.uk/your-councils-performance>.
- 2.9 The LGSCO is clear that the number of complaints and enquiries received should not be taken in isolation when reviewing a Local Authority's performance as this number can be affected by factors such as demographics, local conditions, the expectations of residents and the quality of signposting.
- 2.10 The number of upheld complaints, upheld rate (i.e. how often fault is found when a complaint is investigated), the proportion of suitable remedies identified, and compliance rates are all factors to take into consideration.
- 2.11 Looking ahead, the Ombudsman has identified local government reorganisation and devolution as a significant opportunity for councils to improve service delivery and strengthen public trust. The Ombudsman has stressed that effective complaint handling and organisational learning should be central to any future changes in governance or service arrangements, ensuring residents continue to have access to clear routes for redress and accountability.

Regional Perspective

- 2.12 Table 1 compares the number of complaints and enquiries received by the LGSCO relating to Oldham Council with those of the other Greater Manchester (GM) authorities in 2024/25 and 2025/26.
- 2.13 Tables 2 and 3 show a comparison of the number of upheld complaints and uphold rates for Greater Manchester Authorities.

Table 1 – GM Authorities: Total complaints and enquiries received by the LGSCO

**Green shading indicates top performers on the metric shown (lower is better for volumes and uphold measures).*

Authority	2024/25	2025/26	Two-year average
Oldham	56	82	69
Tameside	93	78	85.5
Bolton	73	84	78.5

Rochdale	55	64	59.5
Wigan	59	98	78.5
Trafford	68	101	84.5
Stockport	70	111	90.5
Salford	70	122	96
Bury	100	97	98.5
Manchester	188	300	244
Total	832	1137	98.5

Table 2 – GM Authorities - Upheld cases 2025/26

Authority	Number investigated	Not upheld	Upheld
Oldham	6	0	6
Rochdale	7	2	5
Wigan	12	3	9
Trafford	11	2	9
Bolton	13	2	11
Tameside	19	2	17
Salford	15	3	12
Stockport	17	3	14
Bury	21	3	18
Manchester	40	6	34
Total	161	26	135

Table 3 – GM Authorities - Upheld rates 2025/26 and 2 year averages

Authority	2025/26 upheld rate (%)	Two-year average upheld rate (%)	2025/26 upheld per 100,000	Two-year average upheld per 100,000
Oldham	100	86.4	2.4	2.9
Trafford	82	81	3.7	4.4
Stockport	82	77.9	4.6	4.7
Manchester	85	81.8	5.8	4.8
Rochdale	71	77.8	2.1	3.5
Tameside	89	86.6	7.1	7
Bury	86	78.7	9	7
Bolton	82	82.5	3.5	3

Wigan	75	87.5	2.6	3.2
Salford	80	80.9	3.2	3.7
Average	83.2	82.1	4.4	4.4

- 1.1 8 of the 10 Greater Manchester authorities saw an increase in the number of complaints and enquiries made to the LGSCO in 2025/26 compared to 2024/25. The remaining two (Tameside and Bury) recorded decreases.
- 1.2 The LGSCO receives and decides cases across different business years. Therefore, the decisions issued in 2025/26 relate to a mix of complaints received in that year and some carried over from previous years.
- 1.3 Across Greater Manchester, 135 complaints were upheld in 2025/26 out of 161 investigations (see Table 2). Individual uphold rates vary by authority (Table 3), reflecting differences in case mix and local service pressures.
- 1.4 The average uphold rate across Greater Manchester authorities in 2024/25 was 82.1% (a slight increase from the previous two-year average of 80.7%).
- 1.5 The LGSCO's "upheld cases per 100,000 residents" continues to provide a useful proportional performance measure. In 2025/26, the Greater Manchester average was 4.4 upheld cases per 100,000, broadly in line with last year's 4.3.

Local Perspective

- 1.6 The number of complaints and enquiries received by the Ombudsman regarding Oldham Council increased from 56 to 82 in 2025/26. Regionally, 8 Greater Manchester authorities saw increases this year, while two (Tameside and Bury) saw decreases.
- 1.7 The distribution of Ombudsman contacts about Oldham by service area in 2025/26 was as follows in Table 4 below:

Service	Total
Environmental Services, Public Protection and Regulation	15
Education and Children's Services	14
Housing	12
Adult Social Care	11
Benefits and Council Tax	9
Corporate and Other Services	9
Planning and Development	7
Highways and Transport	5
Total	82

- 1.8 With the exception of Adult Social Care, all service areas saw an increase in the number of complaints and enquiries raised with the Ombudsman.
- 1.9 Although the upheld rate increased to 100% in 2025/26, only 6 investigations were completed during the year, compared with 11 in 2024/25. Consequently, the actual number of upheld complaints reduced from 8 to 6, representing the second lowest number

of upheld decisions across Greater Manchester authorities. When viewed over a two-year period, Oldham's average uphold rate of 86.4% is much closer to the Greater Manchester average of 82.1%.

- 1.10 The number of upheld decisions per 100,000 population in Oldham was 2.4 in 2025/26, which is below the national and Greater Manchester average for similar authorities (4.6 and 4.4 respectively). Oldham's two-year average stands at 2.9 upheld cases per 100,000, which is the lowest across Greater Manchester authorities.
- 1.11 The LGSCO monitors how often councils identify a suitable remedy before the Ombudsman intervenes. In 2025/26, 33% of Oldham's upheld decisions had a suitable remedy already in place, which is significantly higher than both the Greater Manchester and national average for similar authorities (16%). This indicates a strong early-resolution approach locally.
- 1.12 Oldham Council continues to prioritise early and effective resolution of complaints. The relatively low proportion of LGSCO investigations, and the frequency with which appropriate remedies are already in place before Ombudsman involvement, suggest a strong commitment to learning from complaints and working constructively with residents to resolve concerns.
- 1.13 Further information on the upheld cases can be found in the table below.

Table 5 – Issues identified as part of LGSCO investigations

Service	Decision	Summary
Corporate and Other Services	Upheld	Complains the Council has not responded to his complaint which he submitted in 2024. He wants the Council to investigate and respond to the matter.
Adult Care Services	Upheld	Complains about delays in allocating a worker and undertaking a review of care and support needs.
Planning & Development	Upheld	Complains the Council failed to properly investigate and enforce breaches of planning control he reported on a site near his home.
Adult Care Services	Upheld	Complains about the care provided in a Council commissioned care home.
Corporate and Other Services	Upheld	Complains about burial arrangements for a family member.
Corporate and Other Services	Upheld	Complains that a Stage 3 panel did not make findings on all points and that there were delays in the complaints process.

- 1.14 The Ombudsman made recommendations in respect of 4 upheld cases in 2025/26. Whilst all Ombudsman recommendations were implemented, one personal remedy was completed outside the agreed timescale. No cases were recorded as non-compliant.
- 1.15 Following the outcomes of the Ombudsman investigations and through the Council's own complaints learning process, a number of service improvements have been agreed or are in progress to help prevent recurrence of the issues identified, including:
- Sharing upheld decisions with individual services to aid learning

- Reviewing the process for handling complaints from elected members regarding senior officers
- Reminding relevant staff of the importance of record keeping, timeliness of enforcement investigations and explaining decision reasons/ outcomes
- Producing a policy and procedure for dealing with the probate of estates in which looked after children have an interest
- Reviewing its practice where a looked after child or young person experiences a bereavement to ensure that they are engaged in considering support options

- 1.16 Table 6 sets out the total number of complaints received by Oldham Council and the number of complaints and enquiries that were received by the Ombudsman in 2025/26. It should be noted that not all complaints and enquiries received by the Ombudsman progressed to the detailed investigation stage.

Table 6 - The number of LGSCO enquiries and Oldham Council complaints 2025/26

Oldham Council Complaints	Complaints received by Oldham Council in 2025/26	Complaints/enquiries received by the LGSCO	Upheld decisions by the LGSCO
Number	718	82	6
Percentage	100%	11%	0.8%

- 1.17 A snapshot of the decisions made by the LGSCO in respect of Oldham Council is set out at Table 7.

Table 7 - LGSCO decisions made concerning Oldham Council

Invalid or incomplete	Advice given	Referred back for local resolution	Closed after initial enquiries	Not upheld	Upheld	Total	Upheld rate (%)	Average upheld rate (%) of similar Authorities (nationally)
2	1	27	21	0	6	57	100%	83%

- 1.18 The Ombudsman has highlighted in the letter issued to the Chief Executive in *Appendix A* concerns regarding the timeliness of Council responses to requests for information during investigations. In one case the delay was sufficiently serious that the Ombudsman advised it was considering formal powers to secure the information. Each case has been investigated to understand the reasons for delay. Process and technical improvements have been put in place to ensure timely review and allocation alongside strengthened monitoring and escalation arrangements.
- 1.19 All customer feedback is important to the Council as part of our commitment to maintain a resident-focused approach. In addition to 718 complaints, the Council's Complaints Team also recorded 231 compliments.
- 1.20 Furthermore, the Complaints Team recorded 1,395 service requests and 120 Children's Services representations; the Complaints Team works with services to help resolve such contacts to residents' satisfaction at the earliest opportunity to prevent escalation.

3 2026/27 Priorities

- 3.1 In order to maintain and further develop Ombudsman performance, the Complaints Team is looking to prioritise:
- Recruitment to its vacant Complaints Officer position
 - Implementation of a new complaint management system
 - Further provision of staff training in relation to complaint investigations, complaint responses and the handling of Ombudsman enquiries
- 3.2 It is hoped that the above will create capacity for the Complaints Team in order for it to have increased oversight of complex cases that are likely to escalate to the Ombudsman and ensure it can continue to complete robust quality checks on responses that are due to be issued at the final stage of the Council's complaints process.
- 3.3 Provision of additional staff training will help responding managers to complete high quality complaint responses and understand the importance of timely replies to Ombudsman enquiries.

4 Further information

- 4.1 The LGSCO has moved away from a focus on the volume of complaints and pays more attention to the lessons that can be learned from complaints and the wider improvements that can be achieved for residents and this is now more widely publicised.
- 4.2 The LGSCO is keen that scrutiny Members play an active role in holding their Local Authority to account on complaints and has created a wide range of information to support scrutiny Members to carry out the scrutiny function for complaints handling. This can be found at <https://www.lgo.org.uk/for-advisors/scrutiny>.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 While Oldham Council saw an increase in its upheld rate, performance against other key Ombudsman measures places Oldham among the best in Greater Manchester. Oldham recorded the second lowest upheld case numbers across Greater Manchester authorities (6); in addition, it had the second lowest upheld cases per 100,000 residents (2.4), which is significantly below the national average for similar authorities (4.4) for 2025/26. When looking at the 2 year average, performance remains consistent, with lower than average upheld cases per 100,000 for similar authorities both nationally and across Greater Manchester.
- 5.2 Importantly, in a third of the upheld cases this year, the Council had already identified a suitable remedy before the Ombudsman became involved. This is above national and Greater Manchester average for similar authorities. It is an encouraging indication that services are taking responsibility early and making efforts to resolve complaints fairly and appropriately.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 It is recommended that Elected Members consider the report and comment as appropriate.

7 Appendices

Appendix A - LGSCO Letter to Chief Executive

Local Government & Social Care OMBUDSMAN

8 July 2026

By email

Mrs Kipling
Chief Executive
Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council

Dear Mrs Kipling

Annual Review Letter 2025–26

I wrote to you in May with your annual summary of complaint statistics from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman for the year ending 31 March 2026. In that letter, I explained that where we had concerns about your organisation's complaint handling, or to highlight exceptional performance, I would write again, and I have set out our experience of your organisation's complaint handling below.

As a reminder, [your annual statistics are available here](#).

In addition, you can find details of the decisions we have made about your organisation, read the reports we have issued, and view the service improvements your organisation has agreed to make as a result of our investigations, as well as previous annual review letters.

This letter will be published on our website on 15 July 2026.

Your organisation's performance

There were several occasions during the year when our investigations were delayed by your Council's failure to respond to our requests for information on time. This prevented us from progressing our investigations and is likely to have caused further frustration and distress to complainants. In one instance, the delay was such that we had to take the unusual step of threatening to issue a witness summons before the information was provided.

Please take action to improve the timeliness of your Council's responses. It is important that we receive requested information promptly and that any delays are clearly communicated. If there is any support my office can provide, please let me know.

Supporting complaints and service improvement

We remain committed to supporting the sector to embed effective systems of redress. Where authorities are navigating reorganisation and devolution, we are ready to help ensure that robust complaint handling is built into new arrangements from the outset. Please do get in touch if your organisation would benefit from our advice and guidance.

Our [Complaint Handling Code](#), in force since April 2025, is now applied in our casework and offers structure and support to your local complaint system. Our training programme provides a flexible, expert-led route to building complaints capability across your teams, with courses open for individual delegates to book. Contact training@lgo.org.uk for more information.

Our Annual Review of Local Government Complaints will be published next week, setting out the national picture of complaints, trends across service areas, and emerging systemic issues. We encourage you to read it alongside your own organisation's data.

Yours sincerely,

A. K. Clarke

Amerdeep Clarke
Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
Chair, Commission for Local Administration in England