

Local Government & Social Care OMBUDSMAN

9 July 2025

By email

Ms Wood
Chief Executive
Essex County Council

Dear Ms Wood

Annual Review letter 2024-25

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 2025. 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 the detail of the decisions we have made about your Council, read the public reports we have issued, and view the service improvements your Council 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 16 July 2025.

Your organisation's performance

During the year we received more complaints relating to your Council's provision of Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans than any other council. Even allowing for the size of the Council area the volumes were exceptional. Many of the complaints were about delay in either deciding to assess or producing a final EHC plan. The Council remedied just over half of the complaints by agreeing to make a payment for every month of delay. Where we completed an investigation, we commonly saw a failure to provide either the agreed Special Educational Needs provision or alternative education provision.

I am aware of the exacerbating factors affecting the Council, in particular the considerable increase in the number of assessment requests and the lack of Educational Psychologists to assess children. The Council has shared its plans to address the situation and I am generally satisfied with this. I note the Education Team operate a one-step complaint process and do not remedy any delay in EHC Plan assessments. From April 2026 we will be critical of councils that do not follow our Complaint Handling Code, which recommends a two stage internal complaint process. I know your Central Complaints Team is working with the Education Team on a two-stage pilot and look forward to receiving more details of this.

More generally, I am pleased to report we received most of your Council's responses to our investigation enquiries on time, and where an extension was needed you requested it ahead of the deadline. It is unfortunate that in two cases – an EHC plan complaint and a highways complaint - we did not receive a response until my officers took the unusual step of reminding the Council of our power to issue a witness summons. It is important we are provided with the information we have asked for promptly, and that,

where you anticipate delays, you communicate with us as soon as possible and keep us informed throughout.

Supporting complaint and service improvement

In February we published [good practice guides](#) to support councils to adopt our [Complaint Handling Code](#). The guides were developed in consultation with councils that have been piloting the Code and are based on the real-life, front-line experience of people handling complaints day-to-day, including their experience of reporting to senior leaders and elected members. We issued the guides alongside free [training resources](#) councils can use to make sure front line staff understand what to do when someone raises a complaint. We will be applying the Code in our casework from April 2026 and we know a large number of councils have already adopted it into their local policies with positive results.

This year we relaunched our popular [complaint handling training](#) programme. The training is now more interactive than ever, providing delegates with an opportunity to consider a complaint from receipt to resolution. Early feedback has been extremely positive with delegates reporting an increase in confidence in handling complaints after completing the training. To find out more contact training@lgo.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amerdeep Somal' followed by a horizontal line.

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