



ANNUAL REPORT

THE INDEPENDENT COMPLAINTS
ADJUDICATION SERVICE FOR OFSTED



INTRODUCTION

I am pleased to present the Annual Report of the Independent Complaints Adjudication Service for Ofsted (ICASO) for 2025. This is our fifteenth report as the adjudication service provider for the Department for Education.

The previous Chief Adjudicator, Graham Massie, moved on to new challenges at the close of 2025. I would like to thank Graham for the significant contributions he made to ICASO over the years.

The Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution (CEDR) has operated this service for Ofsted since January 2009. Following a competitive tender process in late 2025, in which the Department for Education reviewed and tested dispute resolution providers' ability to carry out complaint review work, CEDR was very pleased to be awarded the contract to continue operating the ICASO for a further three years.

The purpose of the ICASO is to review the way in which Ofsted has responded to complaints made by members of the public who have engaged with Ofsted for a wide range of reasons. We are contracted by the Department for Education and our service runs completely independently of Ofsted. Our role is to provide recommendations, advice and guidance to Ofsted with a view to improving its complaints handling procedures.

It is important to note that we cannot investigate complaints into issues relating to government policy or legislation; or issues where there are clear rights of appeal through a Court or Tribunal. Nor can we overturn individual Ofsted inspectors' professional judgements. Nevertheless, a high proportion of the complaints that do reach us include concerns about judgements and other information included within inspection reports. Whilst such matters fall outside our remit, we are able to consider the quality of Ofsted's complaint-handling responses, including the clarity of explanations provided.

This past year has seen an increase in our workload, with 47 reports issued as compared to 40 last year. This report sets out many of the underlying details relating to these reports, but our primary conclusion is that we did not identify any significant matters of concern, and our overall view is that Ofsted's complaints handling demonstrates a thorough consideration of concerns, and their responses set out clear analyses of the evidence and Ofsted's approach to the underlying issues. This is reflected in the lower numbers of recommendations made by the Independent Reviewers this year.

The new education inspection framework that Ofsted introduced for inspections from 10 November 2025 is noted by the ICASO, but it has not had an impact on the cases seen in this reporting period. However, we look forward to observing how the new framework may impact case volumes and outcomes next year.

My thanks and congratulations go to all those involved in complaints handling work as well as to His Majesty's Chief Inspector, Sir Martyn Oliver. The reduced number of recommendations made by the Independent Reviewers this year are testament to Ofsted's efforts. I would also like to thank the Department for Education for its part in overseeing the service and ensuring that it is running smoothly and effectively.

Tom Earley - Chief Adjudicator

ABOUT INDEPENDENT REVIEW

In the first instance, concerns about Ofsted's service should be raised directly with the individuals involved. If concerns cannot be resolved informally, a formal complaint can be raised. In the event that a complainant remains dissatisfied after Ofsted's formal response, they can refer the matter directly to our Independent Review service. This must be done within 3 months of the date of Ofsted's formal complaint response letter.

Our role is to investigate the manner in which Ofsted has dealt with a complaint, and we can provide advice and recommendations to improve Ofsted's systems and practices for dealing with complaints. These may include methods for addressing failings particular to a complaint or generally to improve complaint handling procedures.

The ICASO adjudicators can investigate complaints into:

- alleged failure to follow Ofsted's complaints procedures;
- alleged failure to respond to complaints in a timely manner;
- alleged discrimination in complaints handling;
- alleged discourtesy in complaints handling;
- alleged failure to apologise or accept mistakes in complaint responses; and
- alleged failure to handle concerns about inspector/staff conduct.

We cannot investigate complaints into issues relating to government policy or legislation; or issues where there are clear rights of appeal through a Court or Tribunal. We cannot overturn individual Ofsted inspectors' professional judgements, nor can we award any financial damages or compensation.

CASELOAD

During the 2025 calendar year, the ICASO issued 47 reports (noting that some were for complaints received in 2024). This is an increase on the 40 reports issued in the previous year.

The table below gives a breakdown of the settings to which complaints have related in recent years.

	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
Childminders	6	6	5	5	2	5
Childcare on non-domestic premises	25	17	23	2	0	4
Children's homes	3	0	2	1	0	1
Fostering service	0	1	0	1	0	0
Independent schools	0	6	8	3	2	3
Primary schools	4	7	9	1	0	1
Secondary schools	7	0	1	2	0	1
Other	2	0	2	0	0	1
Further education colleges	0	3	2	3	2	1
TOTAL	47	40	52	18	6	17



We have analysed the geographic spread of settings across Ofsted's various regions.

	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
East Midlands	8	6	1	0	0	1
East of England	3	3	3	2	1	2
London	7	9	16	0	0	2
North East, Yorkshire and Humber	6	4	4	3	0	1
North West	8	6	13	2	0	3
South East	10	7	8	4	3	2
South West	2	2	1	4	1	2
West Midlands	3	3	6	3	1	4
TOTAL	47	40	52	18	6	17

The number of cases referred to the ICASO remains very small in the context of Ofsted's considerable workload.

The majority of this year's complaints (24) came from representatives of inspected institutions (owner, manager, governing body or headteacher). This year we also received one complaint raised by an individual parent of a child attending a school or provider. Ofsted will not normally investigate a complaint about an inspection that is received from a third party not directly linked to the inspected provision. This is for reasons of confidentiality as Ofsted cannot provide third parties with any further explanation of findings beyond what is already in the published inspection report. Nevertheless, Independent Reviewers remain able to review the way in which Ofsted handled the complaint, as in this case.

As the table below shows, there has been no significant change in the subject matter of complaints raised.

TYPES OF COMPLAINTS

Consistent with previous reporting periods, the most common issue referred to the ICASO is that the complainant does not agree with the outcome of an inspection. Of the 47 cases on which we reported this year, 36 included a complaint about the inspection judgement awarded or statements contained within the inspection report. This is a similar proportion to last year's experience (2024: 27 such complaints within 40 reports). These are not matters on which we can comment.

Other matters raised with us which fell outside our scope included:

- Seven complainants raised concerns about the nature and scope of Ofsted's complaints policy. Of these, two had objections to the tight timescale for raising complaints, two to the absence of a right of complainants to challenge or refute evidence, one to the fact that engaging the complaints policy does not automatically result in an inspection judgement being overturned, one to Ofsted considering any third party complaints at all, and one to the broader concern that the complaints process as a whole is not independent.
- Five complaints relating to the handling of requests for disclosure of information held by Ofsted under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 or the Data Protection Act 2018. The appropriate body for such complaints is the Information Commissioner's Office.
- Three complaints related to concerns about Ofsted's policies more generally, including around a perceived disproportionate number of inspections carried out, the timing and frequency of inspections, and the evidence required to support a welfare requirements notice.

Amongst complaints that did fall within our terms of reference, the following table shows the number of times each type of complaint was raised:

	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
Alleged failure to follow procedures	21	17	31	13	1	4
Alleged failure to respond in a timely manner	7	0	0	0	0	1
Alleged discrimination	2	1	2	1	1	2
Alleged discourtesy	6	0	0	0	0	5
Alleged failure to apologise or accept mistakes	0	0	0	0	0	0
Inspector/staff conduct	28	23	24	13	5	6
Alleged failure in complaint investigation	33	28	38	23	5	14

**There can be several grounds of complaint in any given case*

As is evident from the above table, the overall profile of the nature of the complaints remains broadly consistent with previous years, with some increases commensurate with the increased number of referrals for Independent Review this year. Notably, complaints were made for alleged failures to respond in a timely manner and for alleged discourtesy, which have not been raised in several years. However, in all of those complaints, they were minor elements of complaints that focused on other areas, most commonly alleged failures in the complaint investigation. The overall number of referrals for Independent Review has increased this year, but the overall profile of the nature of those complaints remains broadly consistent with previous years.

As with last year, the most frequent heading of complaint is about alleged failures in the complaint investigation process. It is important to emphasise that this figure does not indicate a particular concern in this area, but rather that complainants generally appreciate that they can only come to the ICASO once Ofsted's internal complaints handling processes are exhausted.

This does not, however, appear to prevent people from still complaining about matters that are outside our remit, but it does mean that, if they are minded to come to the ICASO, they bring us not only their original complaint but also their concern that the Ofsted complaints process did not address it to their satisfaction. Thus, for example, of the above-mentioned 36 cases that contained a complaint about an Ofsted professional judgement (outside our scope), 32 also included a complaint that Ofsted's complaint investigation had been insufficient insofar as it had not resulted in a correction of that judgement. This potentially brings the decision within our scope, at least as far as requiring us to consider whether or not the Ofsted complaints process has been properly completed, including the provision of clear explanations for the professional judgements which were reached. Again, however, it is not our role to question those judgements.



RECOMMENDATIONS & OFSTED'S RESPONSES

The remit of the ICASO is to investigate the manner in which Ofsted has dealt with a complaint, and to provide advice and make recommendations to improve Ofsted's systems and policies, either to address failings particular to a complaint or generally to improve complaint handling procedures.

We do not, therefore, regard our role as being able to make a choice about whether to uphold or reject a complaint. Nevertheless, it is appropriate for us to report that, across the 47 cases on which we reported, we did not encounter any serious failings.

In 40 cases, our adjudicators found that Ofsted had dealt with the complaint in accordance with its published complaints procedure and we did not have any advice or recommendations to make about improving the service.

We are pleased to report that every one of our adjudication reports was responded to personally by His Majesty's Chief Inspector, Sir Martyn Oliver. Every response included a specific comment and, where Ofsted accepted our recommendation, a commitment to action, or, if Ofsted did not agree, a full explanation of their analysis.

This level of attention to complaints and what can be learned from them at the highest level within Ofsted is, in our view, very welcome.

As for the specific details of our recommendations and Ofsted's responses, we made a total of seven recommendations, one in each of the seven cases, which is a decrease from the ten recommendations made last year. Of these recommendations, five were case-specific recommended actions and two were suggestions for general procedural improvements:

- The five case-specific recommendations each related to points of detail within a complaint which our adjudicators considered had not been fully considered by Ofsted, or where findings on particular heads of complaint were not made clear by Ofsted in outcome letters. In these cases, the Independent Reviewers recommended that Ofsted provide further written explanations to complainants and/or apologise for a lack of clarity in responses.

- In each of these instances, Ofsted considered our recommendations and accepted them either fully or partly. Where Ofsted partly accepted such recommendations, it maintained that it did not fail to meet its complaint handling standards but acknowledged that the complainant did not feel there to be sufficient clarity. In all of these cases, Ofsted showed a clear willingness to take on board the feedback from the Independent Reviewers with a view to supporting and improving best practice.
- The two general recommendations for procedural improvements related to the same issue, which was that, when responding to a complaint about an individual inspector's conduct, Ofsted should consider providing enhanced clarity and transparency to complainants as to the investigation findings and any resultant action taken.

In both of these instances, Ofsted considered the recommendations but declined to accept them, on the basis that they do not consider it appropriate to disclose to complainants the outcome of internal discussions. In both explanations, Ofsted gave assurances that it has reviewed how it responds to concerns about conduct matters, and that any conduct-related matters are now discussed directly with an inspector's line manager or regional business manager, with responses to complaints now reflecting this process – and often including a response from the inspector themselves.

In the two instances in which our recommendations were not accepted, Ofsted provided a detailed explanation for their decision. These explanations provide a fuller understanding of the situation than may have been available from the previous correspondence between Ofsted and the complainant. We have reviewed Ofsted's responses in detail and are satisfied that all of our recommendations have been thoroughly and properly considered.

The following table provides a historic summary of our reports, recommendations and Ofsted’s responses.

	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
Reports with no recommendations required	40	33	31	14	6	13
Reports issued containing recommendations	7	7	21	4	0	4
	47	40	52	18	6	17
Case-specific recommendations made	5	3	11	3	0	6
General recommendations made	2	7	10	1	0	2
	7	10	21	4	0	8
Case-specific recommendations accepted	5	0	2	2	n/a	4
General recommendations accepted	0	5	5	1	n/a	2
	5	10	7	3	n/a	6



OFSTED'S COMPLAINTS PROCESS

The following is the text of the latest Complain about Ofsted (for events that took place after 4 April 2024) document. It is available on the Ofsted website at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/complain-about-ofsted>.

1. We will follow this process for complaints linked to inspections or other events that took place after 4 April 2024.
2. We welcome comments and suggestions about our work. We will use feedback to improve what we do and how our representatives carry out their roles. If you complain to us, we will:
 - deal with your complaint fairly, thoroughly and efficiently
 - if we have made a mistake, acknowledge it and take steps to put matters right
 - learn from complaints to improve the way we work.
3. Our complaints process is clear and simple to use. It is designed to enable all types of providers to access it easily, without the need for professional assistance. We handle all complaints on their merits, in line with this policy.

Resolving concerns quickly and informally

4. We expect that, where possible, you will raise any concerns about our work as soon as they arise and directly with the individuals involved.
5. If senior leaders in a provision have concerns about inspections or regulatory events, they should raise them with inspectors during the on-site visit. If it is not possible to resolve concerns with the lead inspector, senior leaders can telephone Ofsted during or after an inspection to speak with a senior inspector. This gives us an opportunity to clarify any misunderstanding or to resolve matters of concern quickly and informally.
6. If you want to raise a complaint about the behaviour of an inspector with regard to safeguarding, please telephone Ofsted as soon as possible to speak with a senior inspector about your concerns.

Making a formal complaint

7. If your concerns about Ofsted's work have not been resolved informally, you can raise a formal complaint using our online form. We will base our handling of your complaint on what is submitted in the form. If you cannot access the form, we will make reasonable adjustments to enable you to do so.

The process for those we have inspected recently

8. In most cases, if we have recently inspected your provision, you can seek a review of the inspection process, including inspector conduct and the judgements made, by submitting a formal complaint when you receive the draft inspection report. We will not normally accept a formal complaint before we send you the draft report.
9. We will only accept complaints about an inspection from the most senior leader in your provision, or the individual named in the inspection report as the responsible person, or their representative. We will ensure that those raising complaints have the authority to do so on behalf of the organisation. If you work at a provision, please raise any concerns about an inspection directly to your senior leader in the first instance.
10. You should submit any formal complaint within 5 working days of us issuing the draft report (we define a 'working day' as any weekday other than a public holiday, not the days that an inspected provider might operate). We will not normally consider any complaint submitted after this deadline.
11. We will withhold publication of an inspection report while we consider your complaint, if you have submitted it within this deadline.
12. If you have previously chosen to highlight minor points of clarity or factual accuracy when you received your draft inspection report, we will not normally accept any formal complaint or challenge later.

The process for all others

13. If you are complaining about a regulatory event or a joint inspection we have carried out with other agencies, you should submit your online complaint within 5 working days (unless a different deadline is stipulated in the relevant inspection handbook or framework) of either:
 - the outcome of the event being published (if there is one)
 - the date of the regulatory event (if there is no published outcome)
14. If you are complaining about anything else (such as the conduct of an Ofsted representative), you should submit your online complaint within 5 working days following the incident of concern.
15. We will not normally consider any complaint submitted after these deadlines.
16. We will not normally consider a complaint about an inspection (or any other action we have taken) from a third party who is not directly involved, such as a parent or other user of the service. This is for reasons of confidentiality towards those who have participated in the inspection and because we would not provide any further explanation of our inspection or regulatory findings to a third party, other than what is already in the published inspection report or outcome. If you are a third party, you should raise any queries about an inspection or regulatory event directly with the provider. Those directly involved in the inspection or regulatory event are best placed to explain the process, the inspectors' findings and any action that the provider intends to take as a result.

What to expect from us

17. You will receive a formal acknowledgement from us when we receive your complaint. This will confirm when we aim to respond to your complaint and who to contact if you have any queries. If we receive multiple complaints about the same issue, we may consider these together and provide a single response.
18. An investigating officer will attempt to contact you by telephone to discuss your concerns. Wherever possible, we will attempt to resolve complaints through professional dialogue as part of this telephone discussion. The investigating officer will explore the scope of your complaint during this discussion and will agree with you the key aspects for investigation. We will not normally accept further information about the complaint or enter into further dialogue with you once this conversation has taken place. This is to ensure that we consider and respond to your concerns in a timely way.

19. We will provide a written response to your formal complaint as quickly as possible, and normally within 30 working days of receiving your online form.
20. The response will link together similar issues for conciseness and clarity, and will provide a conclusion on whether each main aspect of your complaint has been upheld. If it has not been possible to reach a firm decision on an issue, we will explain the reasons for this. The response will also include an explanation of any steps that we will take as a result of your complaint.
21. If we withheld publication of an inspection report while considering your complaint, we will normally issue you with a final version soon after sending you the response letter. The final inspection report will be published on our website 5 working days later.

How this process works alongside other procedures

22. Our complaints process sits outside the public's right under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000 or Data Protection Act 2018 to access information held by Ofsted. The FOI Act solely concerns information being disclosed to the public. This is not an appropriate mechanism to consider requests from providers alone, as it can lead to the public obtaining inspection evidence before the report itself is published. However, complaint responses to providers themselves may refer to evidence or include extracts from the evidence itself, when appropriate, to explain the inspection or regulatory outcomes.
23. Our complaints process also sits outside the procedures for appeals against Ofsted's regulatory decisions to the First-tier Tribunal (Care Standards). We will not normally accept a complaint while an appeal is ongoing and we will not consider issues previously settled by a tribunal.

Independent and external review

24. If you remain dissatisfied after our formal response to your complaint, you can refer the complaint to the Independent Complaints Adjudication Service for Ofsted (ICASO). The adjudication service is provided by an external organisation. It will review our handling of your complaint, but cannot consider or overturn Ofsted's inspection or regulatory findings. You must refer any case to the ICASO within 3 months of the date of the formal complaint response letter.
25. If you are not satisfied with the outcome of the review by the ICASO, you can refer your concerns to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

Panels

26. We will provide a sample of closed complaints to a panel for review. The panel will include external representatives from the sectors we inspect to provide challenge and transparency on how we have handled complaints about our work.

Complaints feedback

27. If you want to give feedback on how we handled your complaint, please refer to the details provided at the end of our complaint response letters.

Privacy notice

28. We will use the personal data you give us to handle your complaint. We will share information from your complaint with the people whose actions you have complained about, relevant Ofsted staff who need it to do their job and other Ofsted teams and/or external agencies as appropriate. Apart from these exceptions, the complaints process is regarded as private and Ofsted will maintain the privacy of anyone who makes or is referred to in a complaint as far as possible.

29. For more information on how we use personal data and our data retention policy, see our privacy notice.



ABOUT THE ICASO

Full details about ICASO and an application form can be obtained from its website at: <https://www.cedr.com/consumer/education/overview/>

Remit

The ICASO is entirely independent of Ofsted and our contract for this service is with the Department for Education. The service is available to anyone who has previously made a complaint to Ofsted and is dissatisfied with the response.

We can investigate the manner in which Ofsted has dealt with a complaint, and we can provide advice and recommendations to improve Ofsted's systems and practices for dealing with complaints. These may include methods for addressing failings particular to a complaint or generally to improve complaint handling procedures.

The ICASO adjudicators can investigate complaints into:

- alleged failure to follow Ofsted's complaints procedures;
- alleged failure to respond to complaints in a timely manner;
- alleged discrimination in complaints handling;
- alleged discourtesy in complaints handling;
- alleged failure to apologise or accept mistakes in complaint responses; and
- alleged failure to handle concerns about inspector/staff conduct.

We cannot investigate complaints into issues relating to government policy or legislation; or issues where there are clear rights of appeal through a Court or Tribunal.

Powers

The ICASO cannot overturn individual Ofsted inspectors' professional judgements, nor can we award any financial damages or compensation.

Our recommendations are not binding upon Ofsted. However, if Ofsted decides not to comply with any recommendation, it must state publicly the reasons for doing so.

The procedure

The ICASO can only look at complaints which have first been through all stages of the internal complaints process operated by Ofsted.

People may contact the ICASO by telephone, e-mail or letter, but are required to complete the prescribed application form in order to begin the process. The application form asks them to set out full details of their complaint and requests that they supply us with all supporting information.

Upon receipt of a completed application form, the ICASO administrator will contact Ofsted to ensure that the complainant has exhausted the internal complaints process. Once this confirmation is received, an ICASO Adjudicator will be appointed by the ICASO administrator and details of the appointment will be confirmed to both Ofsted and the complainant.

Our initial contact with Ofsted will include a copy of the application and a request that Ofsted supply a summary of what has happened so far in the complaint process within 20 working days.

The Ofsted summary will be sent by ICASO to the complainant, who will then have five working days to submit any comments on the Ofsted summary. Comments must be limited to observations about the summary and cannot include any new information.

Upon receipt of the comments, if any, the ICASO Adjudicator will consider all documentation and in doing so decide if further information is required from the parties.

The ICASO Adjudicator will issue their report and brief written recommendations. These will be sent to both Ofsted and the complainant within 25 working days of Ofsted's complaint summary being received by the ICASO.

Provider organisation

ICASO is run by CEDR, the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution.

CEDR is an independent, non-profit organisation with a mission to cut the cost of conflict and create choice and capability in dispute prevention and resolution. Since its founding in 1990, CEDR has worked with 300,000 parties in commercial disputes and helped resolve over 100,000 consumer complaints across 30 sectors.

It operates a number of mediation and adjudicative processes for local and national government, and for other public sector parties, as well as those in the commercial sectors. It also provides training and consultancy in mediation, conflict management and negotiations skills.

The ICASO adjudication team is:

- Claire Andrews
- Tamsin Gill
- Graham Massie
- Joanne O'Rourke
- Peter Sansom
- Gerhardt Will

Key performance indicators

CEDR's contract with the Department for Education contains a number of Key Performance Indicators relating to its operation of ICASO; these cover such matters as our speed of response to correspondence and enquiries, and the length of time taken by our adjudicators to issue their report once all relevant information has been provided to them. Overall, we are pleased to note that the team met the Key Performance Indicators during the period.



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