Agenda Item No:

Report To: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 11th June 2026

Report Title: Annual Housing Complaints Performance Report

Report Author: Danny Regan
Job Title: Service Lead – Performance, Improvement and Engagement

Portfolio Holders: Cllr. Noel Ovenden (Housing) and Cllr. Heather Hayward (Performance)

Summary:

This is the third report presented to Cabinet that outlines the complaints received in relation to the Housing Service. It covers the financial year from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026 and evaluates the service's performance in handling those complaints.

The report details the number of complaints, the reasons for those complaints, the timescales for handling them, and the associated staff, financial costs and what we have learnt from those complaints. It is a requirement of the Housing Ombudsman that this information is published annually and is submitted as part of our Annual self assessment.

It will also set out the changes we will be making to the complaints service in 2026/27 to improve performance and resident satisfaction with complaint-handling and enhance links between service improvement and complaints.

Key Decision: YES

Significantly Affected Wards: All

Recommendations: **The Cabinet is recommended to:**

I. **Note the Housing Complaints Performance Report and approve it for publication.**
II. **Note and comment on the performance improvement actions in this report.**
III. **Note and approve our self-assessment form for publication and submission.**

Policy Overview: This report will be provided annually to ensure that there is Council oversight of the Housing Service's complaint performance. It allows Cabinet to understand the Housing

	Service's performance when handling complaints and make comments on the service improvements we plan to make as a direct consequence of the complaints received. As a requirement of the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, the annual Performance Report along with the annual Housing Complaints Self-Assessment, must be published on the Council website before the end of September.
Financial Implications:	Where there are upheld complaints, the Housing Ombudsman Service has clear expectations and guidance around the use of financial compensation to put things right. Work is focused within the Housing Service to improve service delivery to reduce upheld complaints and related compensation.
Legal Implications:	Not required as this is a monitoring report
Equalities Impact Assessment:	Not required as this is a monitoring report.
Data Protection Impact Assessment:	Not required as this is a monitoring report.
Risk Assessment (Risk Appetite Statement):	Non-compliance will risk intervention from the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS) in order to bring the Council back into compliance. In the event of ongoing failures with compliance, the HOS can issue a Complaint Handling Failure Order (CHFO) The HOS Self-Assessment Guidance states a landlord that fails to provide the submission may be issued with a Type 3 CHFO.
Sustainability Implications:	Not applicable
Other Material Implications:	No other implications
Exempt from Publication:	NO
Background Papers:	Not applicable
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Report Title: Annual Housing Complaints Performance Report

Introduction and Background

1. The Council's Housing Service manages a large number of complaints in line with both the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint-handling Code (for complaints from tenants in its role as social landlord) and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (complaints from non-tenants or in relation to homelessness services).

It is a requirement of both Codes that the Council produce an annual Complaints Performance Report and annual Complaints Self-Assessment to ensure that the Council is adhering to the Codes. The Housing Ombudsman Code requires that this be published on the landlord's website before the end of September.

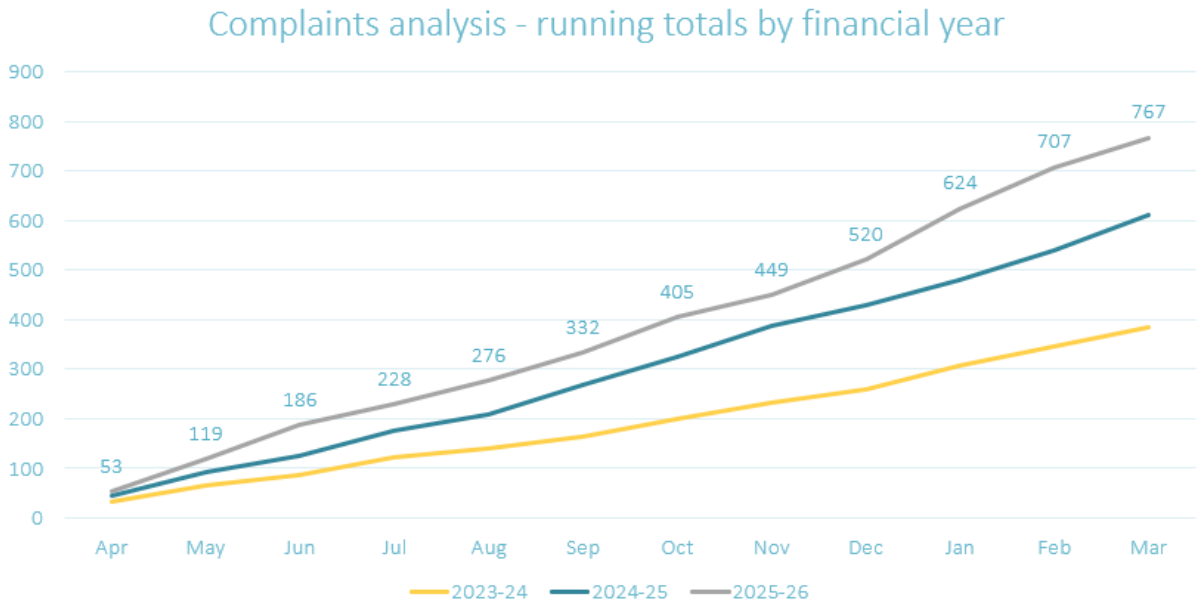
This report will cover all complaints received by the Housing Service and meets the reporting requirements of both Codes.

Complaint Handling Performance 2025/26

An overview of complaint-handling performance is set out below. The graphs for ease of viewing can be found at **Appendix A.**

Complaints Received

2. Between April 2025 and March 2026, the Housing Service received a total of 819 complaints. 767 of these were registered as formal complaints, accounting for 66% of all 1237 complaints received by the council for the financial year. With 52 being closed as "Not Complaints or Duplicate Complaints". The image beneath shows a year on year running total of the complaints received.



3. Improvements to the corporate complaint's tracker will enable clearer reporting on cases not accepted as formal complaints within future annual reports.

4. 767 complaints is a 12.4% increase on the number of complaints we received in 24/25 and is a 84% increase on the number of complaints we received in 23/24. This is following a national trend which has seen the awareness of making a complaint now widely advertised and the HO complaint handling code now make it much easier to make a complaint.

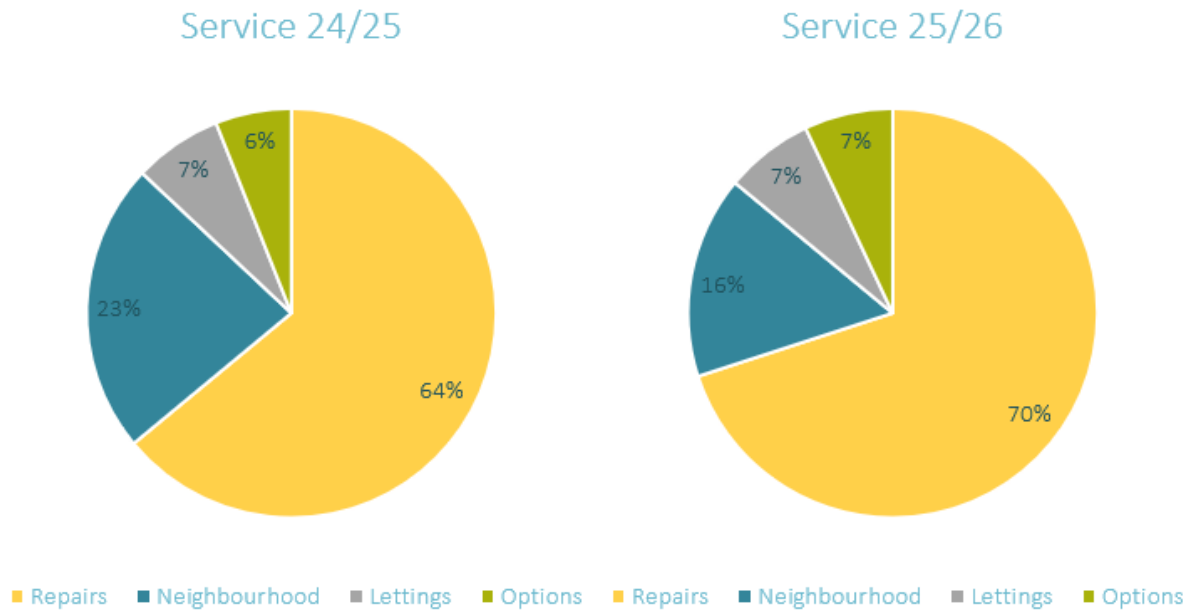
5. The table beneath shows a month-by-month breakdown of the number of complaints received.

Month	Number of Complaints
April	53
May	66
June	67
July	42
August	48
September	56
October	73
November	44
December	71
January	104
February	83
March	60

An incredibly high number of complaints were received in December and January with 80% of these complaints relating to our repairs service. This reflects seasonal trends with a lot of issues relating to heating and damp and mould.

25-26 Complaints Performance and Breakdown at Stage 1

6. The pie charts below illustrate the distribution of complaints received across all housing services at stage 1 for both 24/25 and 25/26. For reporting purposes, complaints are grouped into four service areas: **Repairs**, covering both responsive and planned works; **Neighbourhoods**, which includes tenancy-related matters such as anti-social behaviour (ASB) and rent issues; **Lettings**, relating to the Housing Register; and **Options**, covering all complaints associated with homelessness services.



7. Repairs account for 70% of the complaints to the Housing Service. The remaining 30% is split across Neighbourhoods, Lettings and Options. Repairs have seen a 6% increase in the number of complaints compared to 24/25, increasing from 311 complaints to 437 this year. In total we received 623 complaints at Stage 1. The table beneath shows the breakdown at Stage 1 by number of complaints received.

Housing Service	Number of Complaints at Stage 1
Repairs	437
Neighbourhoods	98
Lettings	43
Options	45

8. Attached as **Appendix B** is a detailed breakdown of the reasons for complaints about repairs . 34% of the complaints received at stage 1 relate to heating and hot water issues. With plumbing, windows and doors, roofing and damp and mould being the other main concerns.

9. Within the Neighbourhoods service, anti-social behaviour (ASB) was the most common reason for stage 1 complaints, accounting for 43% of complaints handled at this stage. The table below provides a more detailed breakdown.

Reason for Complaint	Number of Complaints
ASB	43
Service Standards	12
Officer	9
Rents	7
Policy	5
Other (all < than 2)	22

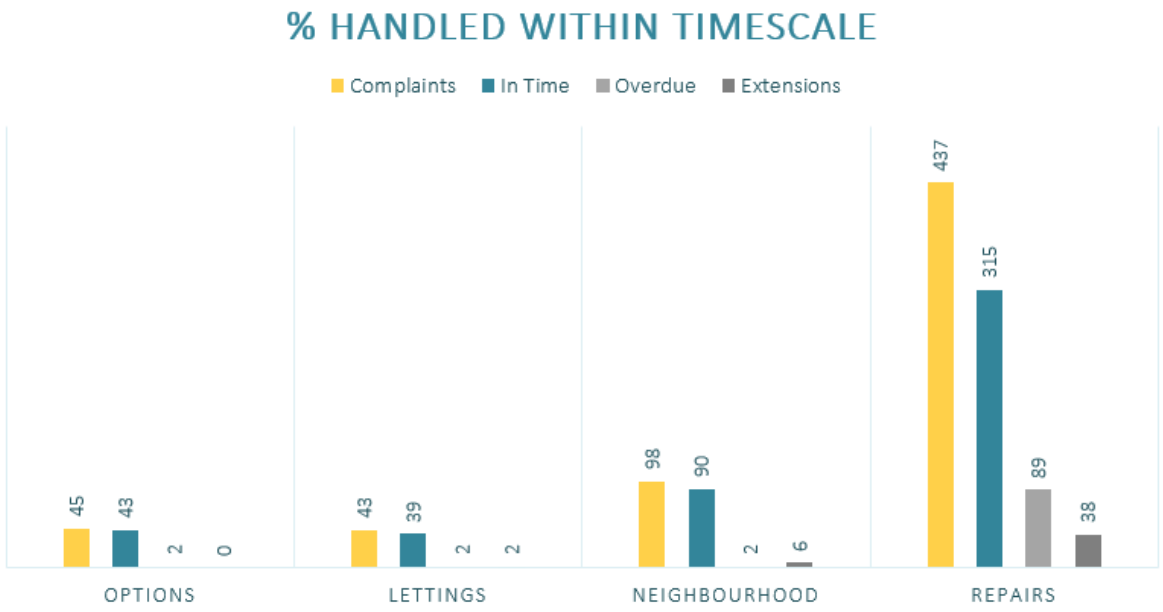
10. Within the Lettings service, complaints relating to Policy and Procedure were the most prevalent, accounting for 30% of all stage 1 complaints received. The table below provides a more detailed breakdown of these complaints.

Reason for Complaint	Number of Complaints
Policy and Procedures	13
Request to Move	12
Timescales	8
Temporary Accommodation Issues	7
Officer	1

11. Within the Options service, Service Standards were the most common reason for complaints, accounting for 35% of all stage 1 complaints received. The table below provides a more detailed breakdown of these complaints.

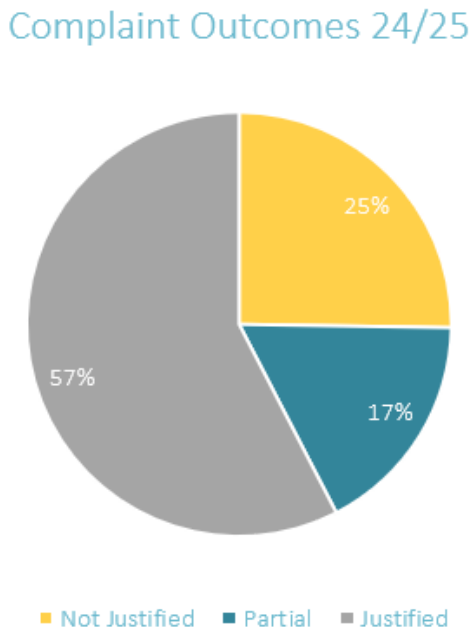
Reason for Complaint	Number of Complaints
Service Standards	16
Officer	12
Policies	9
Other (all < than 2)	8

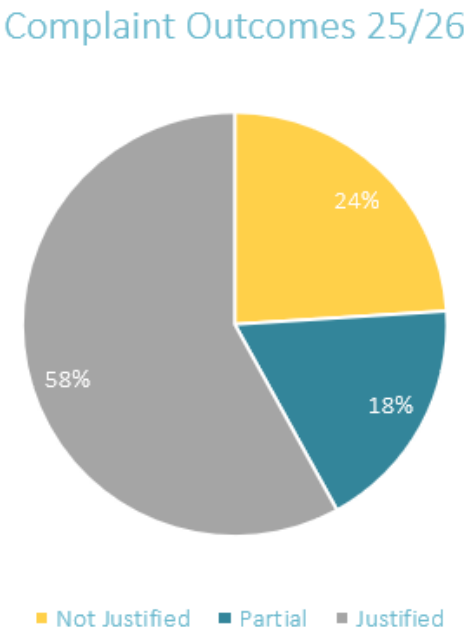
12. As a department 78% of complaints were handled at Stage 1 within the timescales set by the Housing Ombudsman this is a 3% increase on last year. The graph beneath shows service handling within timescale.



13. Repairs handled 72% of their Stage 1 complaints within timescale this is a significant increase on last year's 52%. This is a real positive and shows the introduction of a dedicated repairs Resolution Officer has been beneficial in handling complaints. The Neighbourhood, Lettings and Options team all responded to 90+% of their complaints within timescale.

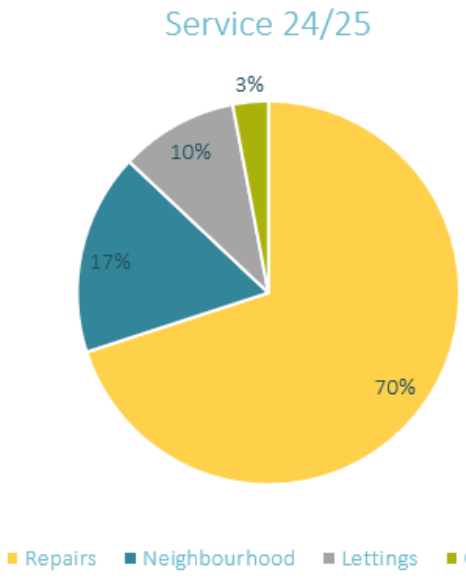
14. 58% of the complaints made at Stage 1 were justified complaints, with 18% partially justified and 24% not justified. The pie charts beneath show the comparison with last year. The percentage figures are very similar despite the significant increase in number of complaints received.

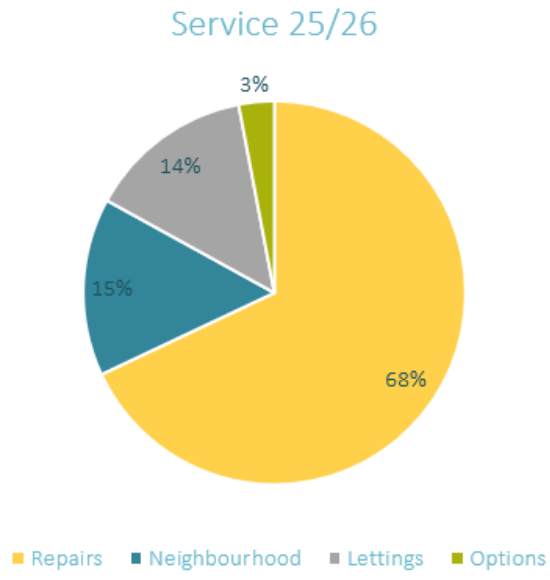




25-26 Complaints Performance & Breakdown at Stage 2

15. The charts below illustrate the distribution of complaints received across housing services at Stage 2 for both 24/25 and 25/26.





16. At Stage 2, Repairs issues accounted for 68% of all complaints. The remaining 32% were distributed across Neighbourhoods, Lettings and Housing Options services. While Repairs continues to represent the largest proportion of Stage 2 complaints, volumes decreased by 2% compared to the previous year. In contrast, Stage 2 complaints relating to Lettings increased by 4%, rising from 9 cases to 20.

17. Overall, 144 (23%) Stage 1 complaints progressed to Stage 2. This compares to 16% in the previous year, indicating an increase in the proportion of complaints being escalated. The table below provides a detailed breakdown of Stage 2 complaints by service area.

Housing Service	Number of Complaints at Stage 2
Repairs	98
Neighbourhoods	21
Lettings	20
Options	5

18. Of the 98 repairs cases that reached Stage 2, in addition to other outstanding issues, 42% were not happy with the amount of compensation offered at Stage 1. An additional piece of work was undertaken this year to deep dive into these issues which can be seen later in this report. The table below provides a detailed breakdown of reasons for Stage 2 complaints about repairs.

Reason for Complaint	Number of Complaints
Heating	14
Damp and Mould	14
Windows and Doors	12
Timescales	8
Service Standards	8
Plumbing	5
Other (all < than 3)	37

19. Within the Neighbourhoods service, ASB was again the most common reason for Stage 2 complaints, accounting for 38% of complaints handled at this stage. The table below provides a more detailed breakdown

Reason for Complaint	Number of Complaints
ASB	8
Policy and Procedures	4
Officers	3
Other (all < than 2)	6

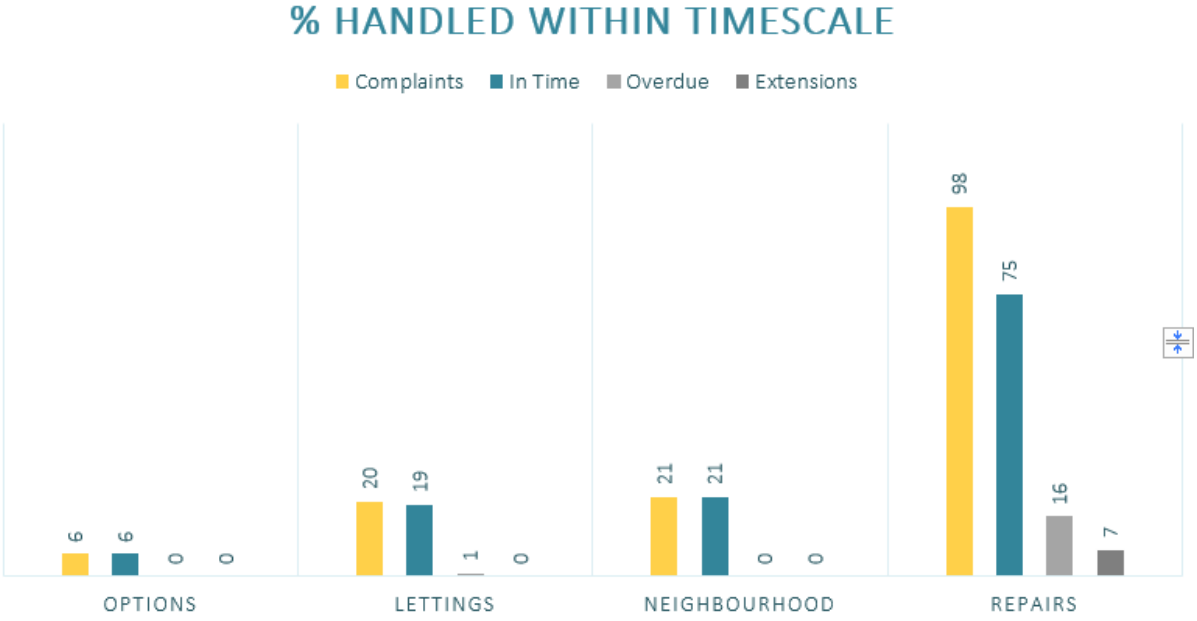
20. Within the Lettings service, complaints relating to Policy and Procedure remained the most prevalent, accounting for 30% of all complaints received. The table below provides a more detailed breakdown of these complaints.

Reason for Complaint	Number of Complaints
Policy and Procedures	5
Service Standards	4
Request to Move	3
Other (all < than 2)	8

21. Within the Options service, complaints relating to Policy and Officers were the most common reason each accounting for 33% of all complaints received. The table below provides a more detailed breakdown of these complaints.

Reason for Complaint	Number of Complaints
Policy	2
Officer	2
Homelessness Decision	1
ABC Lettings	1

22. As a department 83% of complaints were handled at Stage 2 within the timescales set by the Housing Ombudsman, this is a 6% increase on last year. The graph beneath shows service handling within timescale.



23. The Options and Neighbourhood services handled 100% of their Stage 2 complaints within timescale. Lettings responded to 95% and Repairs 77%. These are all increases on last year.

24. Analysis of complaint outcomes at Stage 2 shows that 76% of complaints upheld at Stage 1 remain justified at Stage 2. This indicates that, in a significant proportion of cases, the underlying service failure identified at Stage 1 has not been fully resolved or remedied to the resident's satisfaction.

25. Repairs-related complaints account for 96% of all justified Stage 2 complaints, demonstrating that repairs performance is the principal driver of complaint escalation. The primary reasons complaints remain justified at Stage 2 are:

    a) Failure to complete works promised at Stage 1, including delays or non-delivery of agreed remedial actions.

    b) Resident dissatisfaction with compensation offered at Stage 1, where compensation has been perceived as insufficient to reflect the inconvenience, distress, or length of service failure.

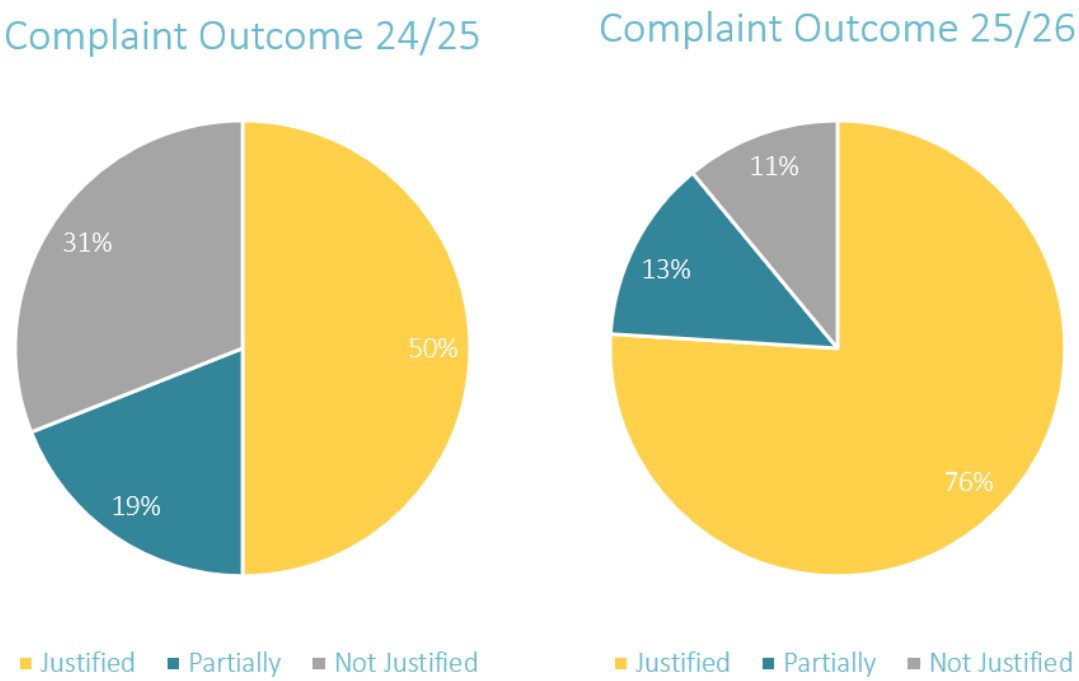
26. To address these issues, we have:

    a) Increased compensation offers at Stage 1, ensuring awards are more proportionate and aligned with the Ombudsman guidance.

b) Introduction of a “Customer Promise” function within the new CRM system, providing a clear and auditable record of actions and works committed to residents at Stage 1. This is expected to go live in July 2026

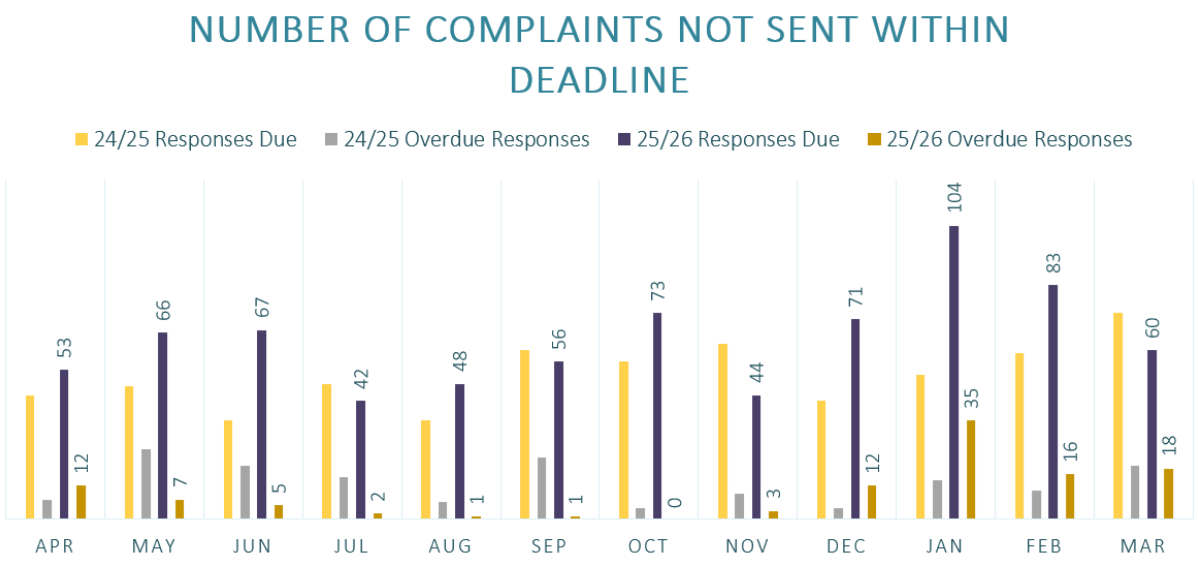
c) Establishment of a dedicated housing complaint-handling team, to improve oversight, accountability, and monitoring of agreed actions to ensure commitments are delivered. We have recently completed recruitment and the team is expected to be in place by June.

27. The table below shows the comparison from last year to this year on Stage 2 complaint outcomes.

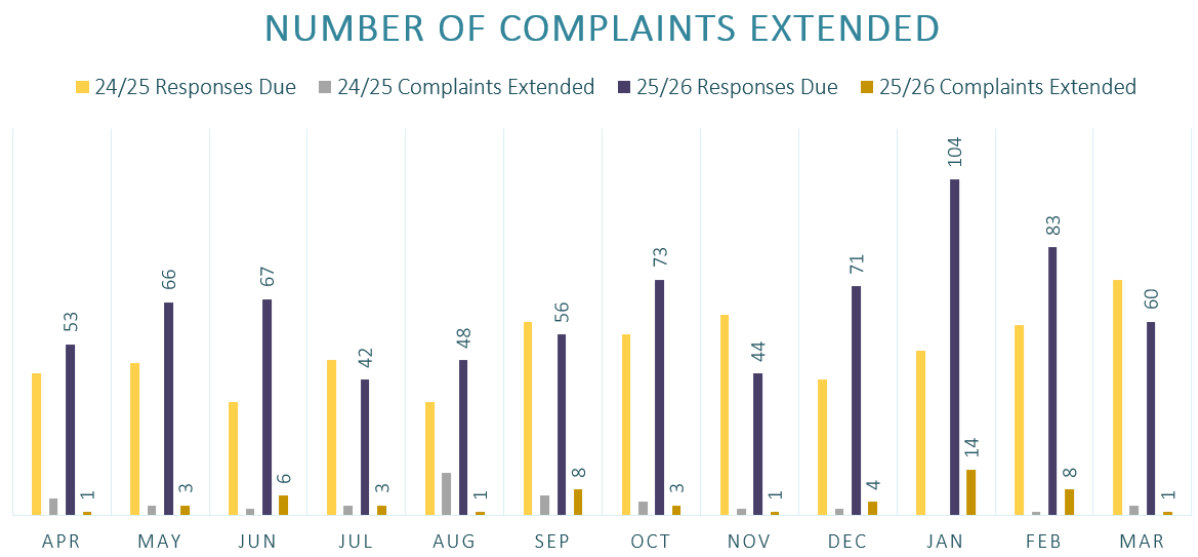


Overdue Complaint Responses and Extensions

28. A total of 112 complaints, 15% of the total number received across Stage 1 and Stage 2, were marked as complete after the due date. This is a significant drop of 13% based upon last year. The graph beneath shows the number of complaints for both Stage 1 and Stage 2 combined. The table shows that Q4 has been particularly difficult due to the increase in complaint volumes. The majority of these complaints related to seasonal repair issues.



29. Council staff can request an extension to the initial deadline of a complaint if they anticipate they will not meet the timescales set as part of the Complaint Handling Code. 9% of complaints received in 24/25 were extended this has dropped to 7% this year. The graph beneath shows the percentage of complaints where an extension was requested before our response was sent. With a comparison against 24/25 performance.



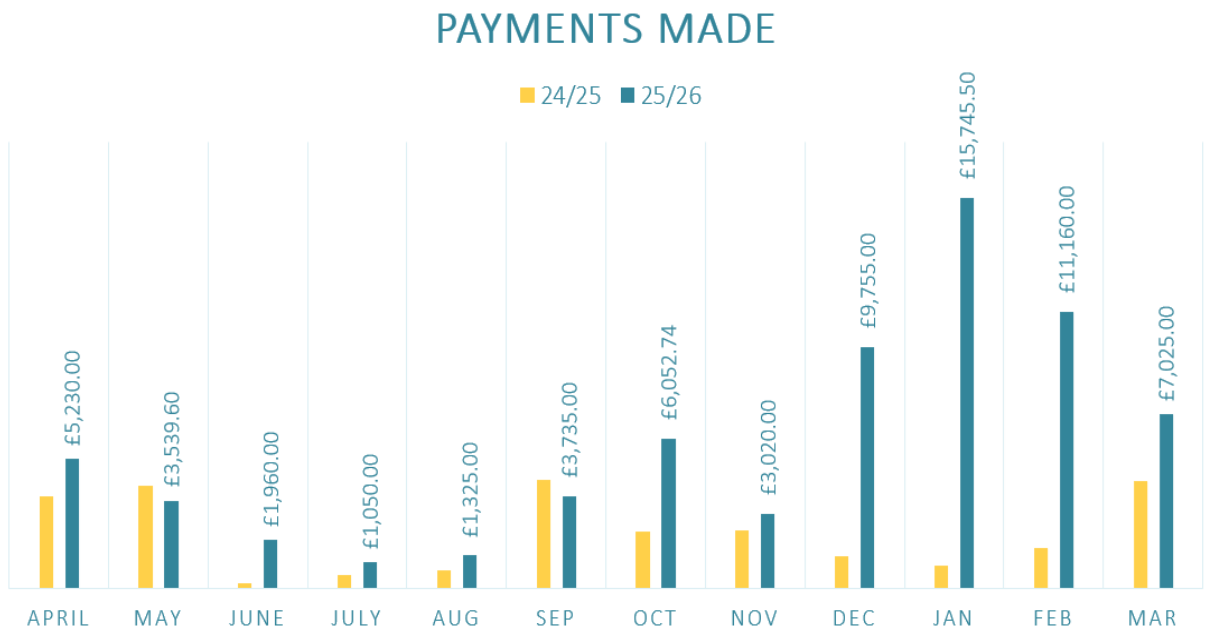
Payments Made and Officer Time

30. The Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code has an expectation that where appropriate, compensation should be paid to complainants as part of the resolution for their complaint. The Ombudsman frowns on organisations being unduly reluctant to offer compensation where appropriate and has the power to instruct organisations to offer compensation and/or pay higher amounts.

31. The total value of compensation payments made to tenants during the year was **£69,597.84**, an increase from **£26,486.82** in 2024/25. While the **average compensation payment per complaint (£251)** is comparable to last year (**£270**), compensation has been issued in **a greater number of cases**. This

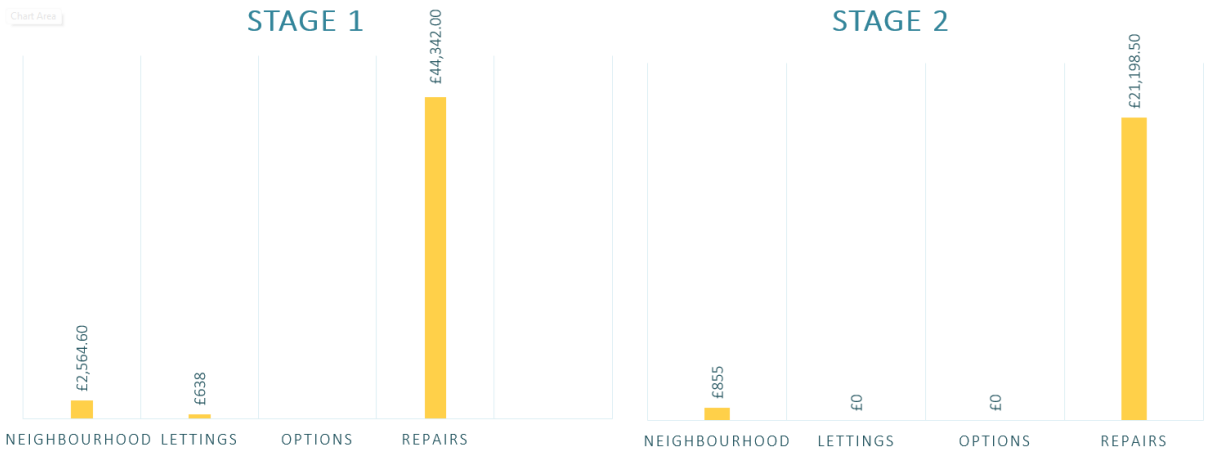
reflects a more consistent application of compensation across the service and a stronger focus on providing proportionate redress where service failure or inconvenience has been identified, rather than an increase in the severity of individual complaints.

32. The table below breaks down compensation paid on a month-by-month basis.



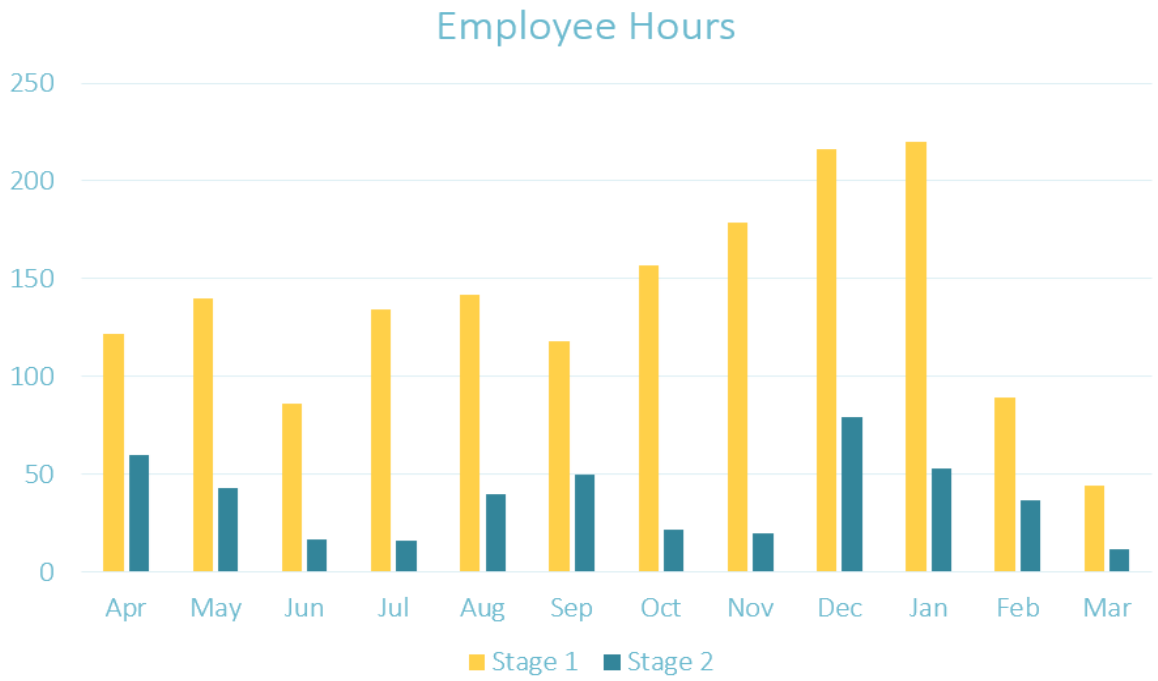
33. The significant increase in compensation payments in December followed an internal review undertaken by the Repairs service. This review identified that 42% of complaints escalated to Stage 2 involved dissatisfaction with the level of compensation offered where the complaint had been upheld. In response, a decision was taken to increase compensation awards at Stage 1 and, in some cases, to offer financial redress where previously just an apology would have been provided. This brings out approach to compensation to be more in line with the Housing Ombudsman Service's guidance on remedies for complaints.

34. Repairs issued the most amount of compensation as seen in the graph beneath. Payments totalling £44,342 at Stage 1 and £21,198.50 at Stage 2.



35. Council officers spent a total of 2,095 hours responding to complaints, this figure is a significant increase on the 1,372 hours last year. The 2,095 hours responding to complaints equates to roughly 283 working days/56 working weeks, with 1647 spent handling Stage1 and 449 at Stage 2. This equates to £45,835 in employee pay and with the combined cost of compensation means that £115,432.84 was spent on handling complaints in 25/26, a 105% increase.

36. The increase in officer time spent handling complaints can, in part, be attributed to a change in complaint submissions. An increasing number of complaints are being submitted using AI-assisted tools, resulting in complaints that are significantly longer and more detailed than necessary. While this does not always reflect increased complexity or additional service failure, it does require more officer time to review, analyse, and respond fully to the issues raised.



Housing Ombudsman Complaints

37. In 2025/26, the Council received 17 requests for information from the Housing Ombudsman, which are classed as *open cases*. During the year, five cases were formally investigated and closed by the Housing Ombudsman and one case investigated and closed by the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman. It should be noted that these determinations relate to historic complaints that were concluded internally during 2024, with the Ombudsman's investigation and final decision taking place in 2025/26. The table below sets out the outcomes of these cases.

Housing Ombudsman Case	Outcomes
Case 1	Maladministration on handling of residents reports of a strong odour.
Case 2	Maladministration on handling of residents' concerns about the

	condition of the property when he moved in.
Case 3	Severe Maladministration on handling of the residents leak and damp and mould and maladministration in handling of the complaint, record keeping and condition of the windows and doors.
Case 4	Maladministration on handling of the repairs in the resident's property.
Case 5	No evidence of Maladministration.

38. In all the cases we have been found to have not provided the service expected of us we have now satisfied the Housing Ombudsman Service by way of apology to the residents; financial redress and all works being completed as recommended.

39. In June we will receive our Landlord Performance Report which will expand upon the information above. We will ensure the analysis of this data is provided next year along with the relevant 2026/27 data as we will push back the publication of this report later into the year to allow for its arrival.

Housing Ombudsman Self-Assessment

40. As required by the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, the Housing Service completes an annual self-assessment to provide assurance that its complaints policy and processes remain compliant with the Code's requirements.

41. The self-assessment is a detailed, evidence-based review of how complaints are defined, handled, escalated, remedied and overseen, and is used to identify areas of good practice as well as opportunities for continuous improvement. The draft for our 25/26 submission providing assurance that the Council's approach to complaint handling is compliant at the point of review is attached marked **Appendix C**.

42. Following the submission and approval of the last annual self-assessment, the Housing Ombudsman undertook a further review of the Council's Housing Complaints Policy in March 2026. This review resulted in 13 recommendations, all of which will be incorporated into an updated version of the complaints policy ready for our annual submission in October 2026, this will ensure it remains fully aligned with best practice and the Ombudsman's expectations.

Housing Ombudsman Landlord Performance Report 2024/25

43. The Housing Ombudsman has published a Landlord Performance Report for ABC covering 2024/2025 attached marked **Appendix D**. This was not available at the time the Council completed its Annual Complaints Report last year. The report provides an independent overview of complaint outcomes for cases referred to the Ombudsman during the period and has therefore been reviewed and reflected here. The Council's Landlord Performance Report for 2025/2026 is not yet available and is expected to be published by the Ombudsman in late **June 2026**. Going forward this report to Cabinet will not be produced until later in the year to allow for Housing Ombudsman Landlord Performance report to be reviewed and reflected upon accordingly.

Summary (2024/25)

44. During 2024/25, the Housing Ombudsman issued six determinations relating to Ashford Borough Council, resulting in 22 individual findings. Of the findings included in the maladministration calculation, 15 were maladministration or service failure, giving an overall maladministration rate of 71%**,** which is slightly below the national comparator rate of 77% for landlords of a similar size and type**.**

45. There were no findings of severe maladministration, and outcomes were primarily split between maladministration (36%) and service failure (32%). The majority of findings related to property condition, followed by complaints handling and staff conduct**.** Complaints handling, while smaller in volume, had a 100% maladministration rate, highlighting the importance of timely escalation, clear communication, and adherence to complaint handling standards.

46. The Ombudsman issued 27 orders in total, including compensation, repairs, specific actions, and apologies. All orders were complied with in full and within the required timescales, demonstrating effective learning and responsiveness following determinations. Total compensation ordered across cases amounted to £4,700, predominantly linked to property condition and complaint handling issues.

47. Overall, the report indicates areas for improvement, particularly around property condition and complaint handling**,** while also providing assurance that the Council responds appropriately to Ombudsman findings, complies fully with orders, and uses determinations to inform service improvement.

Learning From Complaints

48. Complaints continue to be a key source of intelligence for the Housing Service and are routinely analysed to identify themes, systemic issues and opportunities for service improvement. Over the last year, learning from complaints has been used not only to resolve individual cases, but to strengthen core service delivery, improve consistency and ensure early intervention where issues are emerging.

49. A key area of improvement has been greater consistency and oversight in complaint handling, supported by clearer accountability within the service and strengthened performance monitoring arrangements. This has enabled earlier identification of delays or recurring issues and has supported more timely escalation where needed.

50. Learning from complaints has also informed improvements in communication with residents**,** particularly around managing expectations, providing clearer updates, and explaining outcomes and next steps more consistently. Feedback has shown that clearer communication can reduce repeat contacts and help rebuild confidence, even where complaints cannot be upheld in full

51. In reviewing complaints received during the year, the service identified an increase in complaints linked to properties that had undergone works funded through the Social Decarbonisation Housing Fund. The issues raised were

primarily concerned with higher electricity costs following the installation of air source heat pumps and the sequencing of remaining works, including windows, doors and insulation. In several cases, these energy efficiency measures were completed after the heat pump installation, resulting in properties losing heat and residents experiencing higher running costs during the interim period.

52. This learning was escalated to the relevant delivery and operational teams. As a result, the installation process has been revised for subsequent phases of the programme. Windows, doors and insulation works are now completed in advance of air source heat pump installation to ensure homes are appropriately heat-retentive before the new system is operational. This change is intended to improve resident experience, reduce the risk of increased energy costs, and prevent similar complaints arising in future.

Performance Improvement Measures

53. There are several changes coming this year in how we handle complaints to improve the service we provide to our residents. These include:

a) New Housing Complaints and Resolution Team

The Housing Complaints and Resolution Team will provide a consistent, high-quality, and resident-focused complaints service across Housing. The team will ensure complaints are handled fairly, thoroughly, and within regulatory timescales, with a strong emphasis on early resolution, appropriate remedies, and learning-led improvement.

The team will lead on the investigation and resolution of Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints, act as the key liaison with the Housing Ombudsman and MPs and ensure compliance with the Complaint Handling Code. It will work closely with operational services to secure timely actions, deliver agreed outcomes, and prevent recurrence of issues.

A core function of the service will be to analyse complaint themes, identify systemic issues, and embed learning into service design and delivery. The team will provide insight, feedback, and training to service areas, strengthening accountability and driving continuous improvement. Clear communication with residents, transparency in decision-making, and proportionate compensation aligned with policy and best practice will underpin all activity.

Overall, the service will support improved customer experience, reduced escalation, and stronger organisational learning from complaints.

b) Updated Complaint Policy

A new updated Housing Complaints Policy will be developed to reflect the proposed changes mentioned above and will ensure that all complaints are managed effectively, fairly, and in a timely manner.

c) New Compensation Policy

The Housing Ombudsman has issued new compensation guidance, effective from April 1, 2026, which aims to establish a consistent "single vision" for fair compensation across the housing sector. It clarifies when and how to pay compensation, urging landlords to resolve issues early to prevent complaints, particularly regarding service failure for repairs and amenities. We will use this guidance to write and publish a new Housing Compensation Policy this year.

d) AI in Complaint Handling

Housing will align with the corporate guidelines and processes for responding to AI-generated complaints, ensuring a consistent and proportionate approach. This will be supported through clear customer guidance and staff training to manage overly complex or lengthy submissions effectively while maintaining a fair and accessible complaints process.

e) Resident Scrutiny

From next year, resident scrutiny will play a more active role in the council's complaint handling arrangements. Complaint handling performance will be presented to the resident scrutiny panel on a quarterly basis to support transparency, challenge, and learning. In addition, residents will be invited to provide feedback on the annual complaints report alongside the relevant Portfolio Holder, ensuring that resident insight directly informs oversight and service improvement.

Conclusion

54. Complaint volumes within the Housing Service have continued to increase significantly during 2025/26, largely driven by repairs-related issues, particularly seasonal pressures linked to heating, damp and mould, and service delivery delays.

55. While performance against Ombudsman timescales has improved at both Stage 1 and Stage 2, a higher proportion of complaints have escalated, indicating that resolutions at earlier stages have not always fully addressed underlying service failures or resident expectations.

56. Compensation payments and officer time have increased substantially, reflecting both the scale of service pressures and a deliberate shift towards more proportionate financial redress in line with Ombudsman guidance, where service failures have occurred.

57. The introduction of a dedicated Housing Complaints and Resolution Team, alongside updated complaints and compensation policies, provides a strong foundation to improve complaint quality, embed learning, reduce escalation, and strengthen regulatory compliance and resident confidence going forward.

Portfolio Holder's Views

58. This is the third year an annual report on Housing complaints has been presented to Cabinet, underlining the Council's ongoing focus on transparency and effective complaint handling within the Housing Service. Complaints remain a crucial tool for understanding residents' experiences and identifying where services need to improve, and while volumes have continued to rise - particularly in relation to repairs - performance against Ombudsman timescales has improved.

    The report also reflects the emerging challenge of AI-generated complaints, which can be more resource-intensive to assess without necessarily indicating greater service failure, and a proportionate and consistent approach is being taken to manage this.

    The introduction of the new Housing Complaints and Resolution Team is an exciting development for the service, providing a stronger framework for oversight, consistency and accountability, and establishing a solid platform for improved outcomes for residents and the service.

Contact and Email

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ii) Email: danny.regan@Ashford.gov.uk Tel: 01233 330372