

Ashford Borough Council Housing Service Complaints Policy 2026

Purpose and Scope

This policy sets out how Ashford Borough Council handles complaints about its Housing Service, in line with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code. It explains what residents and service users can expect from us when raising a complaint and how we will ensure complaints are handled fairly, proportionately, and within clear timescales.

The aim of this policy is to ensure that complaints are acknowledged, investigated, and responded to effectively, with a focus on putting things right, learning from outcomes, and improving our services.

This policy applies to all complaints about the Council's Housing Service, whether the service is delivered directly by the Council or on its behalf. It covers complaints raised by tenants, leaseholders, applicants, and anyone else who has been affected by the Housing Service or the way it has been delivered.

In this policy, references to "we", "us", or "our" mean Ashford Borough Council. References to "you" or "your" mean any resident, service user, customer, or an authorised representative acting with the individual's consent.

This policy applies to complaints about the Housing Service in whole or in part and is published on the Council's website to ensure it is open, transparent, and accessible to all.

1. Relationships with existing policies

The Council's Corporate Complaints Policy 2025

2. Definitions

- **Complaint:** An expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions, or lack of action by the landlord, its staff, contractors, or those acting on its behalf, which affects a resident or group of residents. A complaint may be raised verbally, in writing, digitally, or through a representative and does not have to use the word "complaint" to be treated as such.
- **Service request:** A request from a resident or service user to the landlord for action to be taken or a service to be provided for the first time, for example reporting a repair. Service requests are not complaints, but they must be recorded, monitored, and progressed in line with service standards. Where dissatisfaction is expressed about how a service request has been handled, the matter should be treated as a complaint.

- **Complainant:** The individual or group of individuals making a complaint, or an authorised representative acting on their behalf with consent.
- **Stage 1 Complaint:** The first formal stage of the complaints process, where the complaint is acknowledged, investigated, and responded to within the published timescales set out in this policy.
- **Stage 2 Complaint:** A complaint that has been escalated following dissatisfaction with the Stage 1 response and is subject to a further review by a senior officer not involved at Stage 1.
- **Legal proceedings:** details of the claim, such as the Claim Form and Particulars of Claim, have been filed at court.

3. Policy Statement

We are committed to delivering high-quality housing services and value feedback from our residents to help improve how we operate. Having a positive and accessible approach to complaints across our service is important to us.

Residents do not need to use the word “complaint” for an issue to be treated as such; any expression of dissatisfaction with our service will be recognised and handled appropriately. Where a resident raises dissatisfaction, they will be clearly informed of their right to make a formal complaint and given a choice about whether they wish to do so.

We aim to resolve complaints quickly, fairly, and transparently, ensuring residents are treated with respect and dignity throughout the process. We are committed to using the complaints process as a learning opportunity to drive service improvement and to put things right where we need to.

4. Policy content

How to Make a Complaint

We want to make sure our complaints process is accessible. A complaint can be raised in any way and with any member of our staff.

Complaints can be made via the following methods:

- **In Writing:** Email to housingresolutions@ashford.gov.uk , or by post to Ashford Borough Council, International House, Dover Place, Ashford, Kent, TN23 1HU.
- **By Phone:** Call 01233 331111 during business hours.
- **In Person:** Visit our offices
- **Online:** Through the complaints form on our website <https://www.ashford.gov.uk/housing/council-tenant/existing-council-tenants/housing-complaints-procedure>

Complainants can also seek advice and support from the Housing Ombudsman Service at any stage of the complaints process. Their contact details can be found at section 6 of this policy.

Who can complain?

Anyone who has been affected by a decision made by the Council, or by the way a service has been provided, can make a complaint. This includes residents, service users, businesses, visitors to the borough, and anyone receiving a Council service.

A complaint can also be made by a representative acting on behalf of another person, where they have been asked to do so, or where the person is unable to make the complaint themselves. This may include family members, advocates, councillors, Members of Parliament, or advice agencies.

Where a complaint is made on behalf of another person, we require consent to be provided to confirm that the individual is aware the complaint is being made on their behalf and is happy for information to be shared with their representative. Once consent is received, we will investigate the complaint and liaise directly with the representative

Service Requests

In line with the definitions set out in this policy, a service request is a request from a resident or service user of the Council to take action or provide a service for the first time. A service request is not a complaint unless the resident expresses dissatisfaction with how the request has been handled.

A first request for service, will be logged and responded to as a service request rather than as a complaint. We will inform the resident or service user that their request is being handled as a service request, rather than as a complaint. Service requests are managed through our normal service delivery processes and in accordance with the relevant service standards and timescales.

Examples of service requests

Service requests may include, but are not limited to:

- Reporting a repair for the first time
- Requesting a service to be provided where there has been no prior failure
- Asking for information or assistance relating to a housing service

When a service request becomes a complaint

As set out in this policy, a complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions, or lack of action by the Council or those acting on its behalf.

If a resident becomes dissatisfied with the way a service request has been handled, or believes that we have failed to deliver the service appropriately, they will be

informed of their right to make a complaint and given the choice as to whether they wish the matter to be treated as a formal complaint under this policy.

Service requests and complaints running alongside each other

Raising a complaint will not stop or delay our efforts to address the underlying service request. Where appropriate, we will continue to progress the service request at the same time as investigating the complaint, to ensure issues are resolved as quickly and effectively as possible.

5. Complaints Handling Process

All complaints will be investigated and responded to by the Housing Complaints and Resolution team. Complaints sent direct to senior managers within the Council will be passed to the Housing Complaints and Resolution team, who will contact the complainant directly.

The stages of the complaints handling process are set out below:

Stage 1: Formal Complaint

1. Acknowledgment:

- Complaints will be acknowledged within **5 working days** of receipt.
- The acknowledgment will confirm that the complaint is being investigated and provide the name and contact details of the person handling the complaint.
- Within the acknowledgment we will provide
 - a) A definition of the complaint.
 - b) The outcomes the complainant is seeking.
 - c) Aspects of the complaint we are and are not responsible for.

2. Investigation and Response:

- Complaints will be allocated to a member of the Housing Complaints and Resolutions Team who will carry out the investigation and provide a response. As part of this Stage One process, we will contact complainants to discuss the complaint in detail, understand what the issues are and what resolution the complainant is looking for.
- A full investigation will be conducted, and a written response provided within **10 working days** of the complaint being acknowledged.

3. If the complaint requires more time to investigate, you will be informed of the delay and provided with a new expected response date. We will aim to advise you of any expected delay as soon as possible and the extension will not exceed 10 working days. If a response date is likely to fall outside of these timescales we will agree these with you and keep you informed about your complaint. Resolution:

- Once we have investigated the complaint, we will respond to the complainant outlining the following;
 - a) The complaint stage,
 - b) Our understanding of the complaint,

- c) Our decision on the complaint,
- d) Reasons for that decision,
- e) Clear details of any remedy offered to put things right, including timescales we have agreed with you,
- f) Details of any outstanding or further actions required and how we will monitor progress.
- g) How you can contact us to discuss our findings
- h) Details of how to escalate your complaint to stage two if you're not satisfied with the outcome.
- If the complaint is upheld, the response will detail the steps taken to put things right. Remedies could include:
 - a) apologising
 - b) acknowledging where things have gone wrong
 - c) providing an explanation, assistance or reasons
 - d) taking action if there has been delay
 - e) reconsidering or changing a decision
 - f) amending a record or adding a correction or addendum
 - g) Providing a financial remedy
 - h) Changing policies, procedures or practices.

If a complainant tell us about new issues that are related to your original complaint before we respond at Stage 1, we will look into them as part of the same complaint. If you new or separate issues are raised after we have sent our Stage 1 response, or if dealing with them would delay the reply, we will record them as a new complaint and respond separately at Stage 1. We will inform the complainant how we will respond to the new issues they have raised.

Stage 2: Complaint Escalation

1. Request for Review:

- If the complainant is dissatisfied with the Stage 1 response, they can request an escalation to Stage 2 within **28 days** of receiving the response.
- This request can be made through any of the contact methods listed in Section 4 of this policy.

2. Stage 2 Acknowledgement

- Complaints will be acknowledged within **5 working days** of receipt.
- The acknowledgment will confirm that the complaint is being investigated and provide the name and contact details of the person handling the complaint.
- Within the acknowledgment we will provide
 - a) A definition of the complaint.
 - b) The outcomes the complainant is seeking.
 - c) Aspects of the complaint we are and are not responsible for.

3. Stage 2 Investigation:

- A member of the Complaints and Resolutions team that has not been directly involved with the Stage 1 response will review the complaint.
- A thorough investigation will be conducted, and a final response provided within **20 working days** of the Stage 2 complaint

acknowledgment If the complaint requires more time to investigate, you will be informed of the delay and provided with a new expected response date. We will aim to advise you of any expected delay as soon as possible and the extension will not exceed **20 working days**. If a response date is likely to fall outside of these timescales, we will agree these with you and keep you informed about your complaint

4. Final Resolution:

- The response will outline the following:
 - a) The complaint stage,
 - b) Our understanding of the complaint,
 - c) Our decision on the complaint,
 - d) Reasons for that decision,
 - e) Clear details of any remedy offered to put things right, including timescales we have agreed with you,
 - f) Details of any outstanding or further actions required and how we will monitor progress.
 - g) How you can contact us to discuss our findings
 - h) Your right to contact the Housing Ombudsman Service if you remain dissatisfied.
- The complainant will be informed that this is the final stage of the internal complaints process and provided with details of how to contact the Housing Ombudsman if they remain dissatisfied.

6. Housing Ombudsman Service

- If the complainant remains unhappy after the Stage 2 response, they may refer their complaint to the Housing Ombudsman. The Housing Ombudsman can be contacted at any stage for advice and guidance.
- Contact details for the Housing Ombudsman Service:
 - **Phone:** 0300 111 3000
 - **Website:** <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk>
 - **Email:** info@housingombudsman.org.uk

7. Exclusions

While the Council aims to be open and accessible in recognising and responding to complaints, there are some circumstances where a matter will not be considered as a complaint under this policy, or where a complaint will not be escalated to Stage 2 after a stage 1 response has been issued. Any decision not to accept or escalate a complaint will be fair, reasonable, clearly explained to the complainant, and made in line with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code. The following are acceptable exclusions:

Time-limited complaints

We may not consider a complaint where the issue giving rise to the complaint occurred more than **twelve months** before the complaint was raised. This is unless there is a good reason for the delay and it is still possible to investigate the matter fairly.

Legal proceedings

We will not consider a complaint about matters where **legal proceedings have started**. Legal proceedings are defined as details of the claim, such as the Claim Form and Particulars of Claim, having been filed at court. Issues not subject to legal proceedings may continue to be considered where appropriate.

Previously considered matters

We may not accept or escalate a complaint where the same issue has already been fully considered through the Council's complaints process and a final Stage 2 response has been issued, unless new and relevant information is provided that could reasonably change the outcome.

Other exclusions

Service requests, as defined in this policy, are not complaints unless dissatisfaction is expressed about the handling of the request. Where dissatisfaction is identified, residents will be informed of their right to make a complaint and given the choice to do so.

Where a complaint is not accepted

If a complaint is not accepted under this policy, we will provide a clear written explanation of the reasons and advise the resident of any alternative routes available to address their concerns, including their right to approach the Housing Ombudsman where appropriate.

8. Confidentiality and Data Protection

All complaints will be treated with strict confidentiality. Personal data will be handled in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Data Protection Act 2018 and Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations 2003 as amended and the guidance and codes of practice issued by the Information Commissioner.

9. Learning and Continuous Improvement

- We take learning from complaints seriously as this is a key part of service improvement. All complaints will be reviewed to determine what we can learn from the complaints itself, our handling of the complaint and the resolution developed in relation to this.
- Complaints will be monitored regularly at Housing Management Team meetings to identify patterns and areas for improvement. Learning will be disseminated across the Housing Service and the wider Council as appropriate.
- For continuous improvement, full regard will be paid to updates, briefings and guidance from the Housing Ombudsman from time to time along with examples from the Housing Ombudsman provides on cases by other organisations.

- An annual report will be published detailing the number of complaints, their nature, outcomes, and any improvements implemented as a result.

10. Performance Reporting and Monitoring of Policy

We will report the Housing Service's annual performance on complaints to the Council's Cabinet which will serve as the governing body for the monitoring of the Housing Service Complaints Policy. This does not exclude performance being reported to other officer and members' meetings within the Council.

- The Housing Services performance for the previous financial year will be reported to Cabinet by the end of September in the current financial year.
- The Cabinet's comments and decisions on the Service's performance will be publicly available on the Council's website.
- Performance on housing complaints will also be reported to residents and customers on the Council's website, in residents' newsletters and at resident group meetings as appropriate.
- We will publish our self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code annually by the end of October.

11. Unreasonable and Persistent Complaints

Where a complainant's behaviour is considered unreasonable or persistent, the Council may take action in accordance with the Council's Corporate Unreasonable Conduct Policy. Any decision to apply this policy will be taken at an appropriate senior level, will be evidence-based and proportionate, and will be communicated clearly to the complainant with an explanation of the reasons and details of any review or appeal rights.

12. Accessibility

This policy is available on our website and can be provided in alternative formats or languages upon request including large print, Braille or audiotape. Assistance will be provided to any complainant needing help to access or understand this policy.

13. Policy Review

This policy will be reviewed every two years, or sooner if there are changes in legislation or best practices recommended by the Housing Ombudsman or other regulatory bodies. An annual health check of the policy will be conducted in conjunction with the Housing Ombudsman complaints self-assessment.

This policy has been designed in accordance with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code to ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability in handling complaints.