

Agenda Item No:

Report To: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: Thursday 8th May 2025

Report Title: Annual Housing Complaints Performance Report 2024/25

Report Author: Danny Regan

Job Title: Housing Performance & Improvement Manager

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



Summary: This is the second report presented to the Cabinet that outlines the complaints received in relation to the Housing Service. Following on the 2023/24 report, this report covers the financial year from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025, and evaluates the service's performance in complaints-handling.

The report details the number of complaints, the reasons for the complaints, the timescales for handling them, learning from complaints and the associated staff and financial costs for complaints handling. It is a requirement of the Housing Ombudsman that these figures are published annually.

The report also gives Members an understanding of what the Housing Service is working towards and the measures it has put in place to ensure continuous improvement in complaints handling across the service.

Key Decision: YES

Significantly Affected Wards: All

Recommendations: The Cabinet is recommended to:

- I. **Note and comment on the Housing Complaints Performance Report.**
- II. **Approve the publication of the Housing Complaints Performance Report.**

Policy Overview: This report is provided annually to ensure that there is Council oversight of the Housing Service's complaint performance. It allows Cabinet to understand the Housing Department's performance when handling complaints and make comments on the service improvements we plan to make as a direct consequence of the complaints received.

Aspects of the Housing Service's role come under the Housing Ombudsman while others fall under the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. In this report, the terms Housing Ombudsman and Ombudsman would be used to refer to either or both organisations.

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:	Poor performance in complaint handling could see an increase in the number of compensation payments made by the Housing Department. It is therefore key to ensure complaints are used to improve our services and that all complaints are handled as per our complaints policy.
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 in order to bring the Council back into compliance. In the event of on-going failures with compliance, the Housing Ombudsman can issue a Complaint Handling Failure Order (CHFO) The Housing Ombudsman Self-Assessment Guidance states a landlord's failing 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
Contact:	Danny.regan@ashford.gov.uk – Tel: (01233) 330372

Report Title: Annual Housing Complaints Performance Report

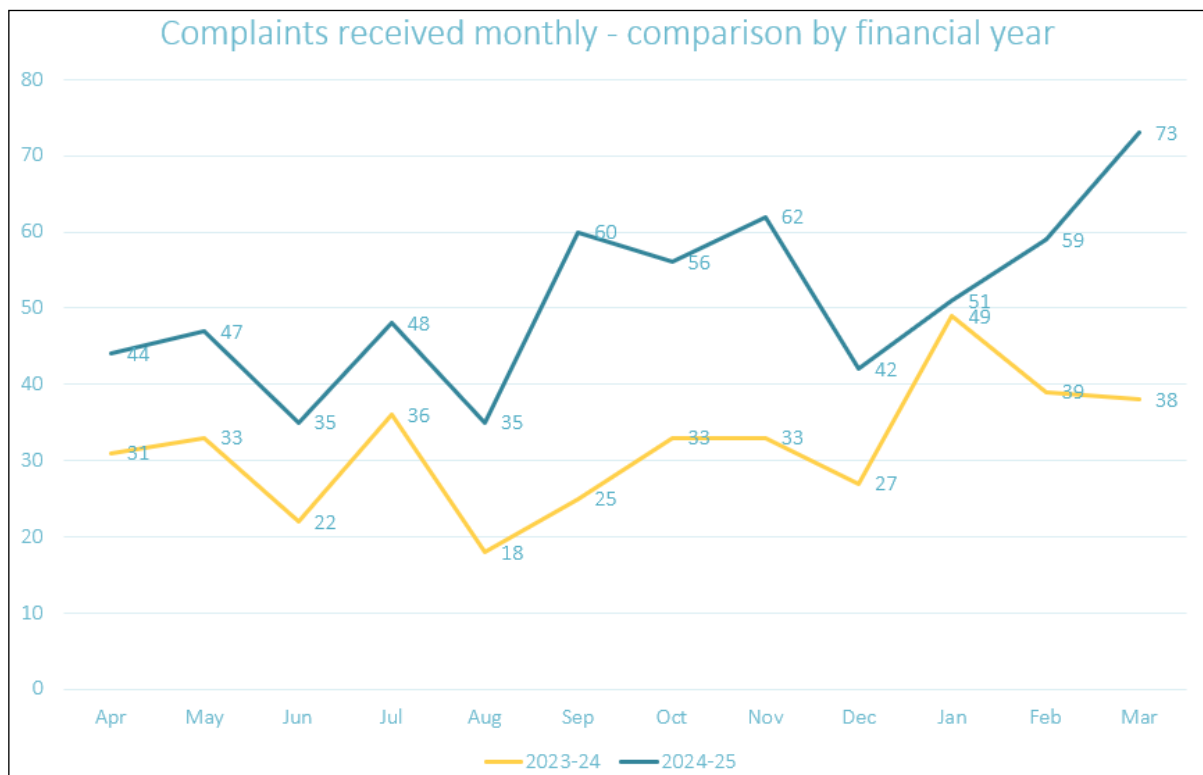
Introduction and Background

1. The Housing Ombudsman published a new statutory Complaint Handling Code that came into effect on 1 April 2024. A similar non-statutory code was also introduced by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman at the same time.
2. The statutory guidance provides for a single, robust set of standards for complaints procedures that are accessible, efficient and fair. These will facilitate the development of a framework for high-quality complaint handling that will enable the Council (as landlord) to resolve complaints raised by its residents as efficiently and effectively as possible and embed lessons learning from complaints to drive service improvements.
3. The revised Complaint Handling Code requires landlords to produce an annual complaints performance and service improvement report for scrutiny and challenge, which will be part of a self-assessment against the Code.
4. The Council has historically reported on complaints as part of the Standards Committee. The Housing department's performance is now reported annually prior to 30 September to ensure compliance with the Housing Ombudsman requirements.

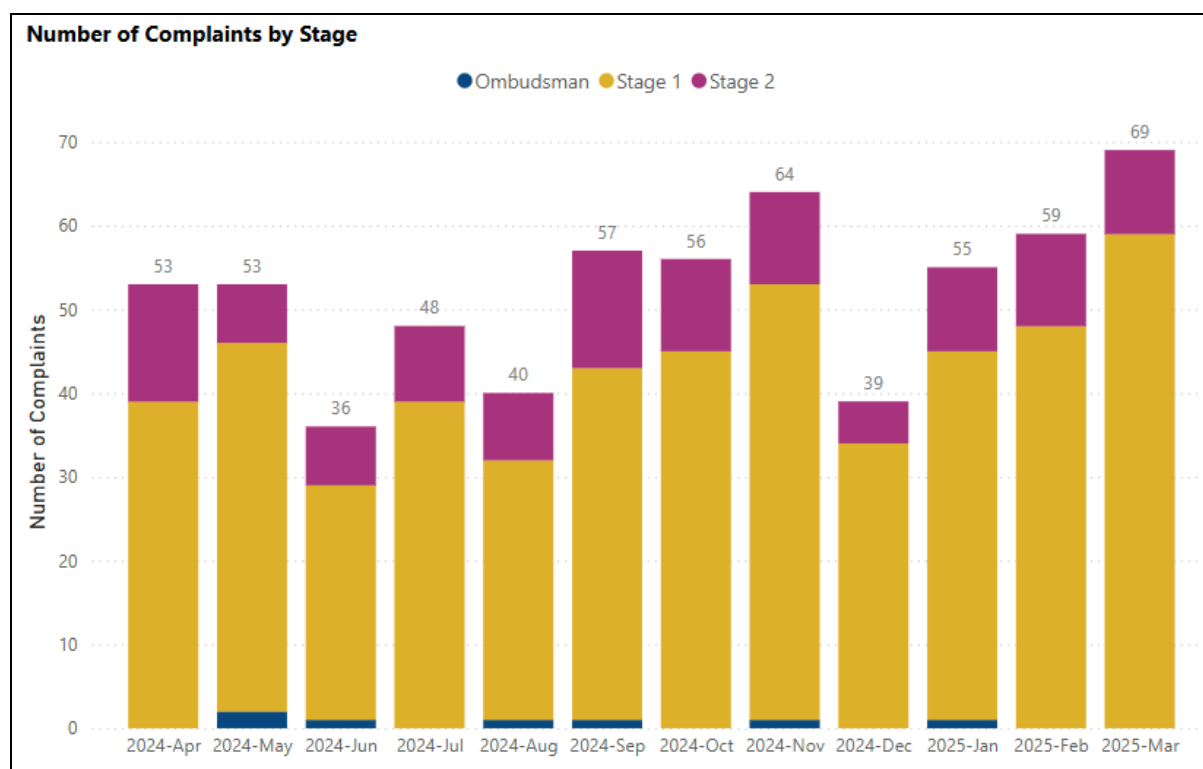
Complaint Handling Performance 2024/25

Complaints Received

5. A detailed breakdown and analysis of the housing complaints performance figures is provided in **Appendix A**.
6. Between April 2024 and March 2025, the Housing department received a total of 629 complaints, accounting for 64.65% of all 973 complaints received by the council for the financial year which is a small drop from last year which saw Housing account for 67% of the councils' complaints. Most of these complaints were resolved at stage one (505 complaints), with 117 resolved at stage two, and 7 investigated by the Ombudsman. 75% of those complaints were considered justified or partially justified which is a drop of 4% from last year.
7. The graph beneath shows a comparison of 23/24 and 24/25 running totals. The large increase seen in January to March 2025 can be attributed to the change in our heating and hot water maintenance contractor. This period of change has seen a significant increase in the number of complaints as both parties settle into the new contract.



8. The table below breaks down the stages of complaints.



Reasons for Complaints

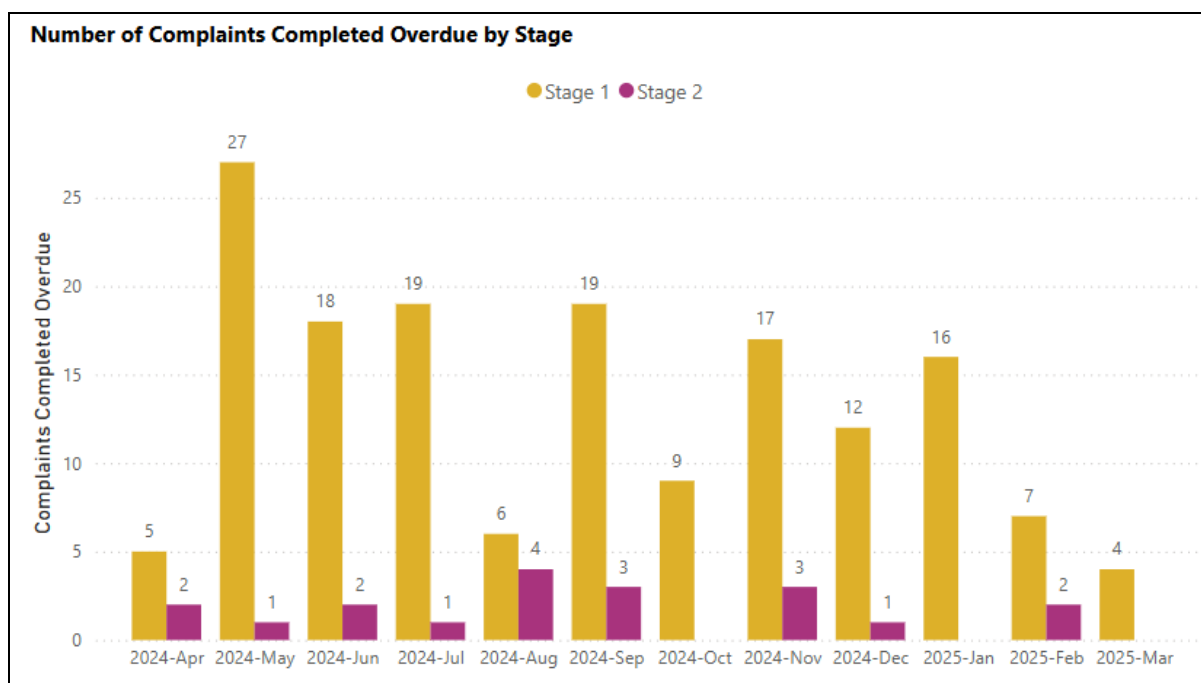
9. Of the 629 complaints Housing Repairs attribute for 55.96% (352) of the complaints handled by the department. Attached in **Appendix B** is a visual breakdown of the complaints received relating to repairs. The biggest issue within our repairs complaints was 3rd Party Contractor issues (17%) followed

timescales to deal with issues (14%) then windows and doors (7%). Other contributed for 14% of the complaints and this is a grouping of complaints that totalled <1% of the larger number.

10. The table attached in **Appendix C** breaks down the complaints into the reasons why they have been made across the entire department. Some complaints were for multiple reasons and therefore could fall into 3 different areas in the table.

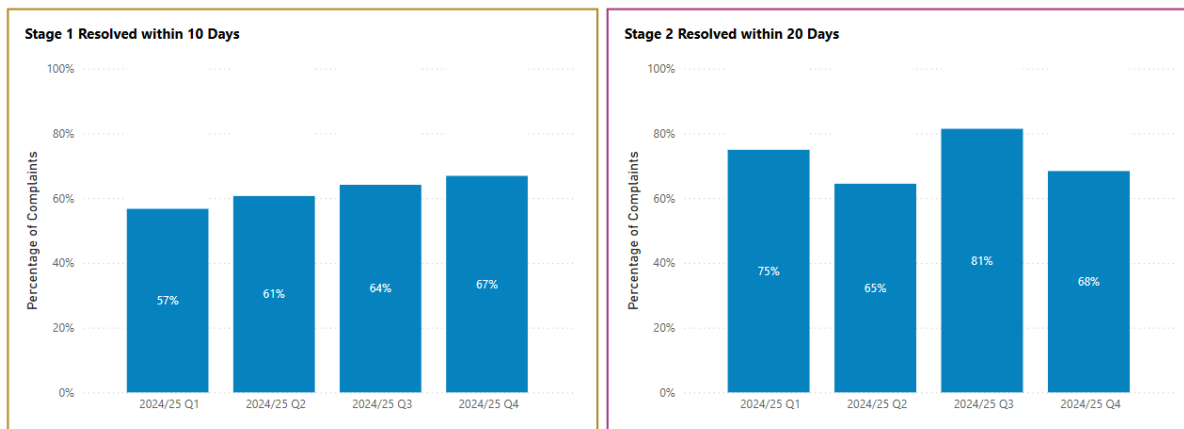
Complaints that were Completed Overdue

11. A total of 178 complaints, 28.29% of the total number received, were marked as completed after their agreed deadline, with more overdue complaints recorded in the first half of the year. The majority of the complaints handled within the Housing department related to repairs which are often complex cases with multiple issues attempting to resolve these complaints with many moving parts including gaining information from external contractors can affect response times.
12. The table below shows the number of overdue complaints for both the stage 1 and stage 2 responses. The table below shows that there was improvement in both the stage 1 and stage 2 responses as the year came to a close.



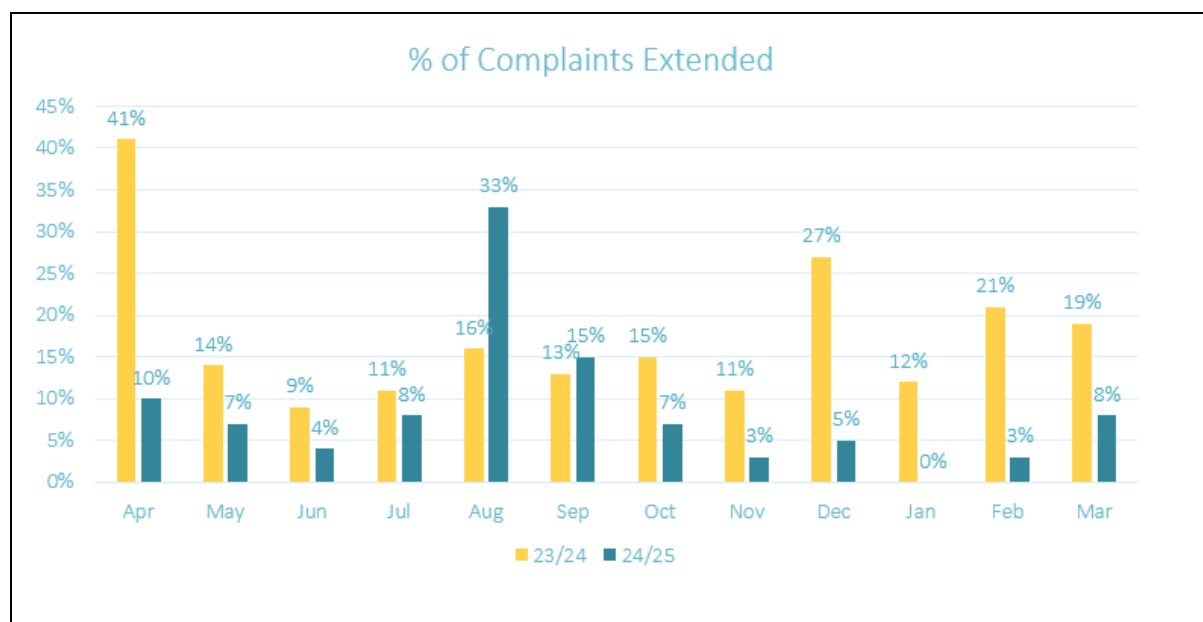
Response Time Targets

13. The target response time for stage one complaints is 10 working days, and for stage two complaints is 20 working days. On average, stage one housing complaints were completed in 10 working days, and stage two in 20 working days.
14. The table below shows the percentage of complaints responded to within the target timescales, broken down into quarters. For stage one complaints, this shows an improving picture on responses in the last quarter.



Deadline Extensions

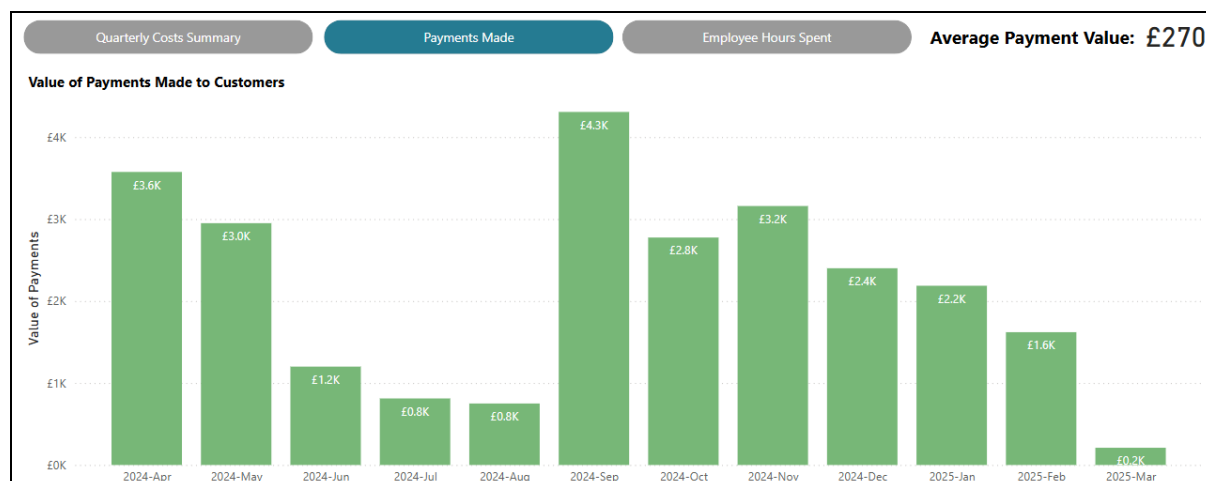
15. Council staff can request an extension to the initial deadline if they anticipate they will not meet the timescales set as part of the Complaint Handling Code. 17% of housing complaints had their target response dates extended in 2023/24. This decreased to 9% in 24/25. These made up 85% of all extensions requested across the Council.
16. The table below shows the percentage of complaints where an extension was requested before our response was sent. With a comparison against 23/24 performance.



Payments Made

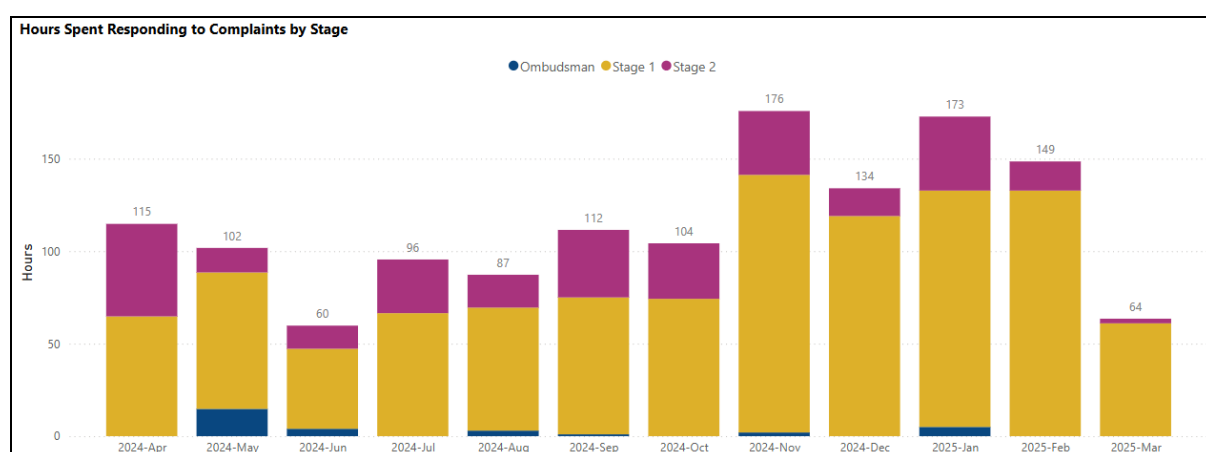
17. The Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code has an expectation that where appropriate, compensation should be paid to complainants as part of the resolution for their complaint. The Ombudsman frowns on organisations being unduly reluctant to offer compensation where appropriate and has the power to instruct organisations to offer compensation and/or pay higher amounts.
18. The total value of compensation payments made to customers in resolving housing complaints was £26,486.82 which is an increase from the £14,109 paid 2023/24. The average payment was £270 per complaint.

19. The table below shows the value paid in any month, not from when the complaint was made.



Officer Time and Expense

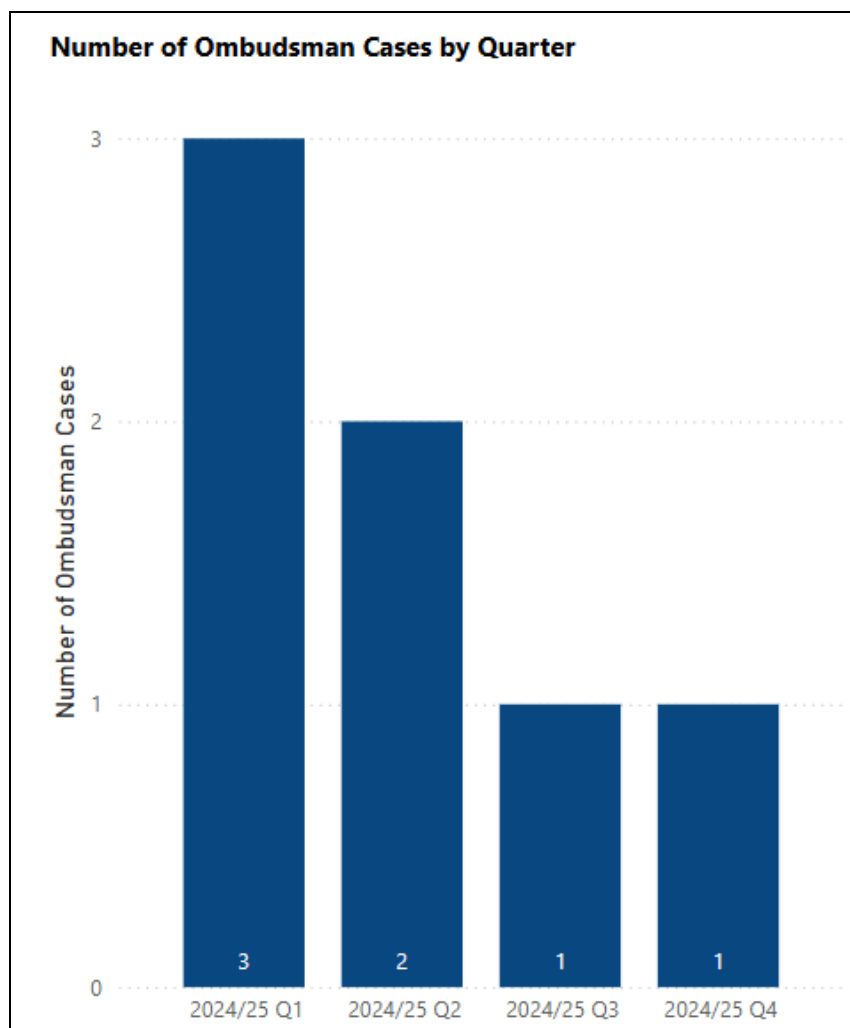
20. Council officers spent a total of 1372 hours responding to complaints, this figure is double what was spent last year when 669 hours was spent. The 1372 hours responding to complaints (this equates to roughly 180 working days/36 working weeks), with 1042 hours on stage one complaints and 330 hours on stage two complaints. This equates to approximately £29,000 in employee pay and with the combined cost of compensation means that £56,227.82 was spent handling complaints in 24/25.
21. This data clearly highlights why getting the service right first time is important to reduce the time spent on responding to complaints. The Housing team has an engagement team to work with residents to improve services and a permanent Resident Liaison Officer to work with tenants on repair complaints to improve outcomes in this area.



Housing Ombudsman Complaints 2023/24

22. There were 7 complaints investigated by the Ombudsman, of these:
- 2 had no evidence of maladministration.
 - 3 were not investigated.
 - 1 was found to have maladministration.

- d. 1 was upheld based on maladministration and injustice in relation to ongoing repairs issues.
23. The one case upheld was a matter relating to repairs. The Council was found to be at fault in the handling of a reported repair and our failure to keep the tenant informed of the process and ensuring the works were completed in a timely manner. The Council agreed to apologise, make a compensation payment and follow the recommendations made by the Ombudsman to improve the service we provide.
24. The table below highlights the quarter that the Ombudsman received the complaints.



Performance Improvement Measures

25. This report is published annually and must be made publicly available and submitted to the Housing Ombudsman before 30 September every year to ensure compliance with the code.
26. There are a number of on-going activities intended to improve how the Council reports on complaints for the future. These include:

a) Continuing to Improve Our New In-House Complaint Management System

27. In July of 2024 the Council implemented a new in-house complaint management system that allows for complaint data to be held in one single location and enables better reporting of the data to deliver robust and effective data analysis.

b) Monitoring and Reporting

28. The Housing department has established a monthly meeting specifically to look at performance relating to our complaint handling and learning from complaints. This is a mandatory meeting for all team leaders and managers within the Housing department and is a time where the service focuses on the following key areas:

- I. **Complaint Trends and Patterns:** Analysing the data to identify recurring issues and trends in complaints. This includes looking at the most common reasons for complaints, the departments or service areas with the highest number of complaints, and any seasonal patterns.
- II. **Response Times and Deadlines:** Monitor the response times for handling complaints at both stage one and stage two. Ensure that complaints are being resolved within the target response times and investigate any delays or overdue complaints.
- III. **Quality of Resolutions:** Evaluate the quality of the resolutions provided to complainants. This includes assessing whether the resolutions are satisfactory, fair, and address the root causes of the complaints.
- IV. **Customer Feedback:** Review the feedback from complainants to understand their satisfaction with the complaint handling process. This can provide valuable insights into areas for improvement.
- V. **Staff Training and Resources:** We have held training sessions provided by the Ombudsman with all managers that handle complaints on improving our responses and the importance of good complaint handling.
- VI. **Contractor Performance:** We are currently reviewing the performance of our third-party contractors involved in the complaints. Ensuring that contractors are meeting the council's standards and address any issues related to their performance.
- VII. **Financial and Staff Costs:** Monitor the financial and staff costs associated with handling complaints. Look for opportunities to improve efficiency and reduce costs without compromising the quality of service.

- VIII. **Ombudsman Cases:** Review the outcomes of complaints investigated by the ombudsman. Identify any systemic issues and implement corrective actions to prevent similar issues in the future.
- IX. **Policy and Procedure Review:** Regularly review and update the complaint handling policies and procedures to ensure they are aligned with best practices and regulatory requirements.
- X. **Continuous Improvement:** Promote a culture of continuous improvement by using the insights gained from complaint data to make informed decisions and implement changes that enhance the overall effectiveness and responsiveness of the housing service.

c) Learning from Complaints

- 29. The Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code expects organisations to capture and evidence how they are learning from complaints and capture these. The new Complaints Tracker system, introduced in July 2024, has made it easier for the service to do this.
- 30. Such lessons learnt are reviewed and shared at the Housing Service's monthly performance monitoring meetings across all the teams within the service to minimise the likelihood of failures being repeated and drive a culture of continuous improvement for proactively better outcomes to customers.
- 31. Examples of changes made to processes and practices as a result of learning from complaints are provided on the last page of Appendix A.

d) New Complaints Policy

- 32. A new Housing Complaints Policy was developed to ensure that all complaints are managed effectively, fairly, and in a timely manner. It aligns with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code and applies to all tenants, leaseholders, and individuals affected by the services provided by Ashford Borough Council.

Conclusion

- 33. In 2024/25, the Housing department received 629 complaints, which accounted for 64.65% of all council complaints. This is a slight improvement from the previous year, where Housing accounted for 67% of the total complaints. The majority of complaints were resolved at stage one (505 complaints), with 117 resolved at stage two, and 7 investigated by the Ombudsman. The percentage of justified or partially justified complaints decreased by 4% from the previous year, now standing at 75%, showcasing the ongoing push for improvement.
- 34. While average response times have been achieved, with stage one complaints resolved in an average of 10 days and stage two in 20 days, there is room for improvement in reducing the number of overdue complaints and addressing the common issues related to timescales and third-party contractors. We have now started to use the 5 days allowed by the

Ombudsman to acknowledge complaints to get a head start on resolving the issues or contacting contractors earlier to get the information needed to respond to our tenants.

35. The financial and staff costs associated with complaint handling have been significant, doubling what we have in previous years highlighting the need for continued efforts to optimise processes and resources, but this trend is expected considering the number of complaints received has also doubled and the Housing Ombudsman's position on compensation.

Portfolio Holders' Views

36. Cllr. Heather Hayward – Housing complaints make up the majority of the complaints made to the Council. A lot of work has been done to ensure a consistency of approach in complaints handling across the Council. This is evidenced in the direction of travel towards continuous improvement.

Cllr. Noel Ovenden – This is the second year running that the Housing Service has provided a housing complaints performance report for Cabinet to review. The number of complaints has increased due to more publicity to residents on how to complain and a more receptive attitude from the service of receiving these. It is worth noting the improvements in complaints handling in 2024/25 compared to the previous year.

Contact and Email

37. Danny Regan, Housing Performance & Improvement Manager
38. Email: danny.regan@Ashford.gov.uk Tel: 01233 330372