

**Agenda Item No:**

**Report To:** Cabinet

**Date of Meeting:** 14<sup>th</sup> November 2024

**Report Title:** Annual Housing Complaints Performance Report

**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 first report presented to the Cabinet that outlines the complaints received in relation to the Housing Service during the financial year from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, 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 and financial costs. 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 out in place to ensure the number of complaints reduce as improvements to services come through.

**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.**

**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 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. 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 June. Ashford missed the deadline for submitting this data this year and has been granted an extended period to have this report heard at Cabinet.

<b>Financial Implications:</b>	Poor performance of 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.
<b>Legal Implications:</b>	Not required as this is a monitoring report
<b>Equalities Impact Assessment:</b>	Not required as this is a monitoring report.
<b>Data Protection Impact Assessment:</b>	Not required as this is a monitoring report.
<b>Risk Assessment (Risk Appetite Statement):</b>	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.
<b>Sustainability Implications:</b>	Not applicable
<b>Other Material Implications:</b>	No other implications
<b>Exempt from Publication:</b>	NO
<b>Background Papers:</b>	Not applicable
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## **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 learned 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. The department's self-assessment was submitted on 4 September 2024. An extension was granted to allow for a new Housing Complaints Policy to be written and for the performance report to be submitted to Cabinet and reviewed.

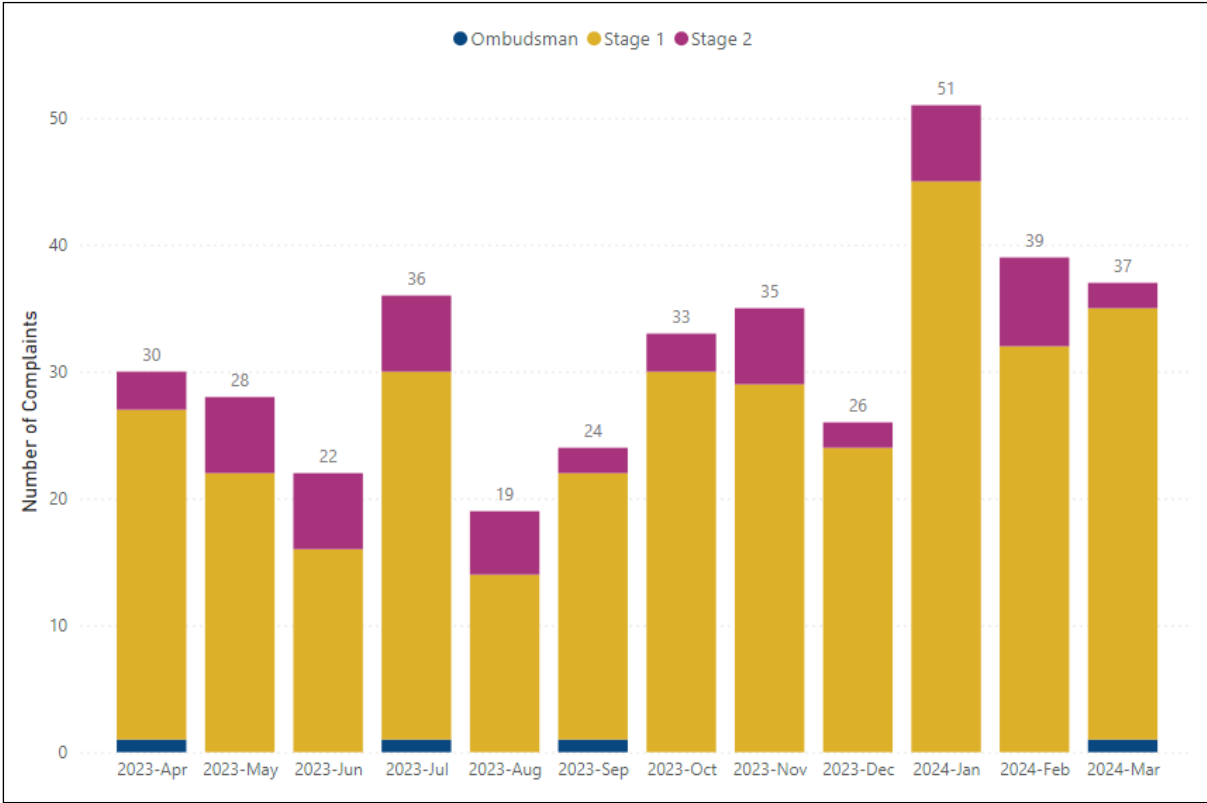
### **Proposal**

4. The Council has historically reported on complaints as part of the Standards Committee. It is now proposed that the department's performance will be reported annually prior to 30 June to ensure we are compliant with the Housing Ombudsman requirements.

### **Complaint Handling Performance 2023/24**

#### **Complaints Received**

5. Between April 2023 and March 2024, the Housing department received a total of 380 complaints, accounting for 67% of all 577 complaints received by the council for the financial year. The majority of these complaints were resolved at stage one (322 complaints), with 54 resolved at stage two, and 4 investigated by the Ombudsman. 79% of those complaints were considered justified or partially justified.
6. The table below breaks down the stages of complaints.



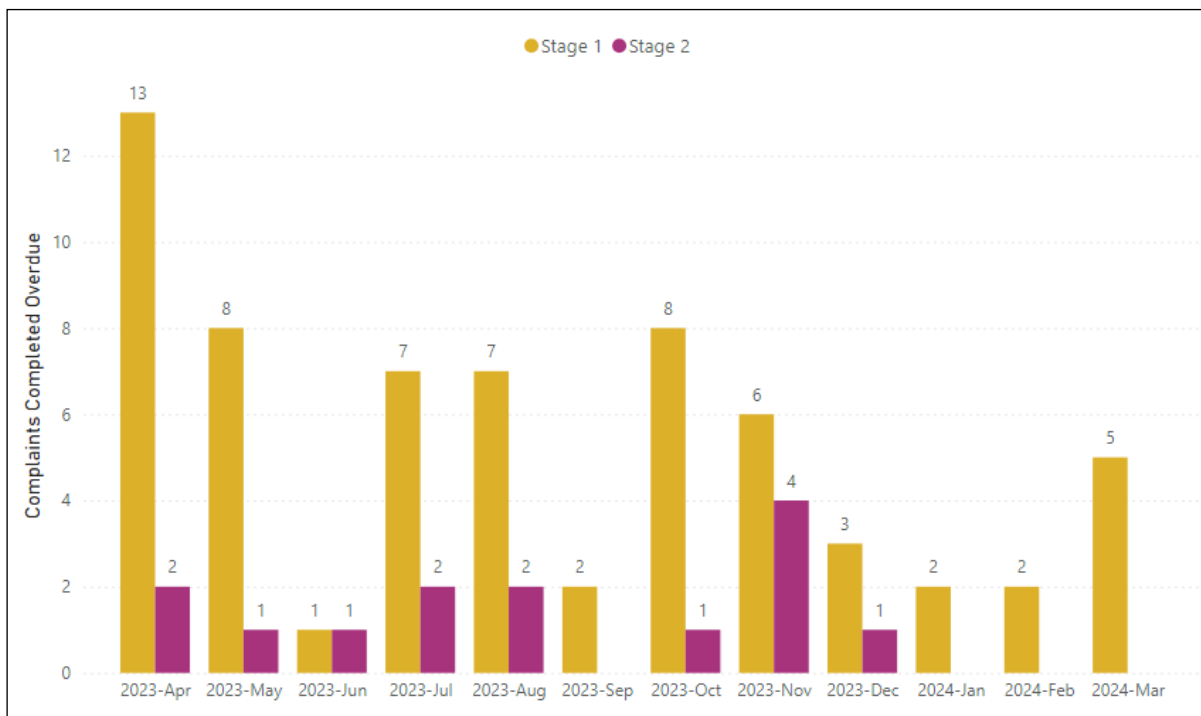
**Reasons for Complaints**

- 7. The most common reason for housing service complaints was the timescale to deal with issues, mostly related to repairs, 41% of these complaints were received between January and March 2024. This time period coincided with the implementation of our new in-house repairs team, which was the likely cause for such a high number during this period. Other common reasons included issues with third-party contractors, service failures, and housing service procedures.
- 8. The table below breaks down the complaints into the reasons why they have been made. Some complaints were for multiple reasons and therefore could fall into 3 different areas in the table.

Complaint Reason	2023/24 Q1	2023/24 Q2	2023/24 Q3	2023/24 Q4	Total
Timescales to deal with issues	27	24	25	53	129
3rd party contractor	24	21	28	26	99
Service failure	9	17	25	28	79
Policy/procedures	19	12	17	24	72
Loss of service	16	6	14	9	45
Staff attitude	9	7	8	12	36
Length of time waited	3	17	6	6	32
Miscellaneous	6	4	9	8	27
Staff error	4	1	3	7	15
Inconsistent Advice	5	4	1	3	13
Inaccurate information	3			3	6
Equality - Sexual orientation				1	1
Staffing levels		1			1

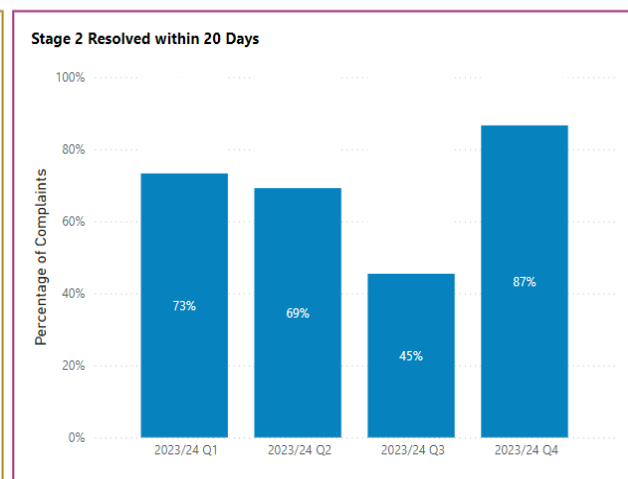
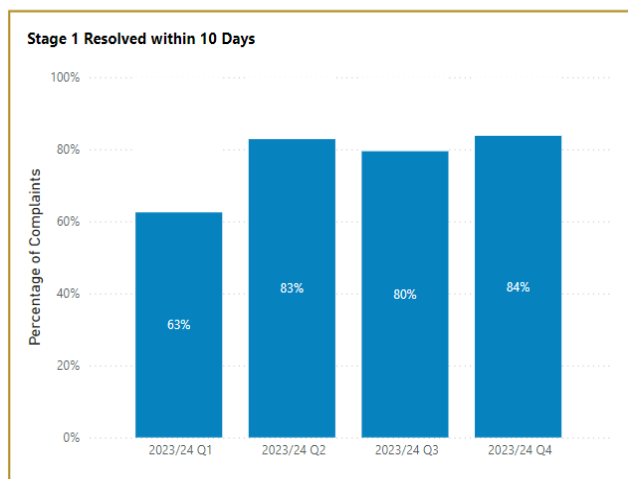
### Complaints that were Completed Overdue

9. A total of 78 complaints, 21% 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. Housing complaints made up 94% of all overdue complaints. The majority of the complaints handled within the Housing department related to repairs which are often complex cases to resolve with many moving parts including gaining information from external contractors which can affect response times.
10. The table below shows the number of overdue complaints for both the stage 1 and stage 2 responses. The table below shows that there has been an improvement in both the stage 1 and stage 2 responses as the year came to a close.



### Response Time Targets

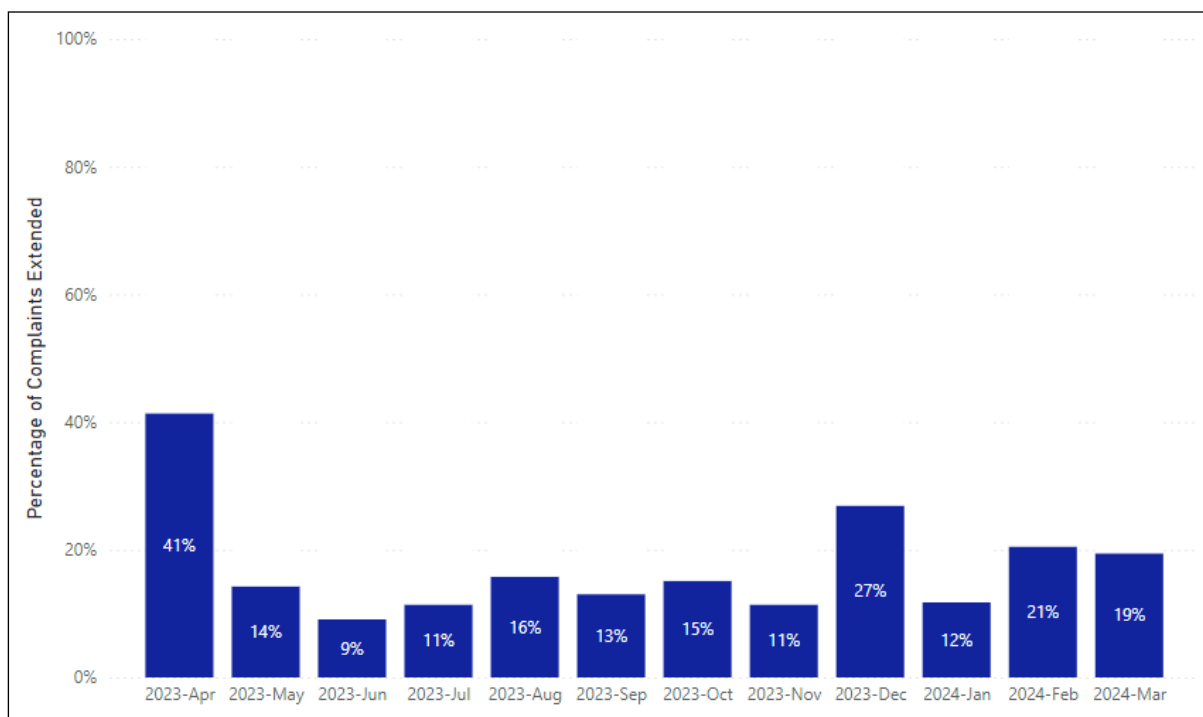
- The target response time for stage one complaints is 10 working days, and for stage two complaints is 20 working days. On average, stage one housing complaints were completed in 9 working days, and stage two in working 19 days.
- The table below shows the percentage of complaints responded it within the target timescales, broken down into months. Again this does demonstrate an improving picture on responses in the last quarter.



### Deadline Extensions

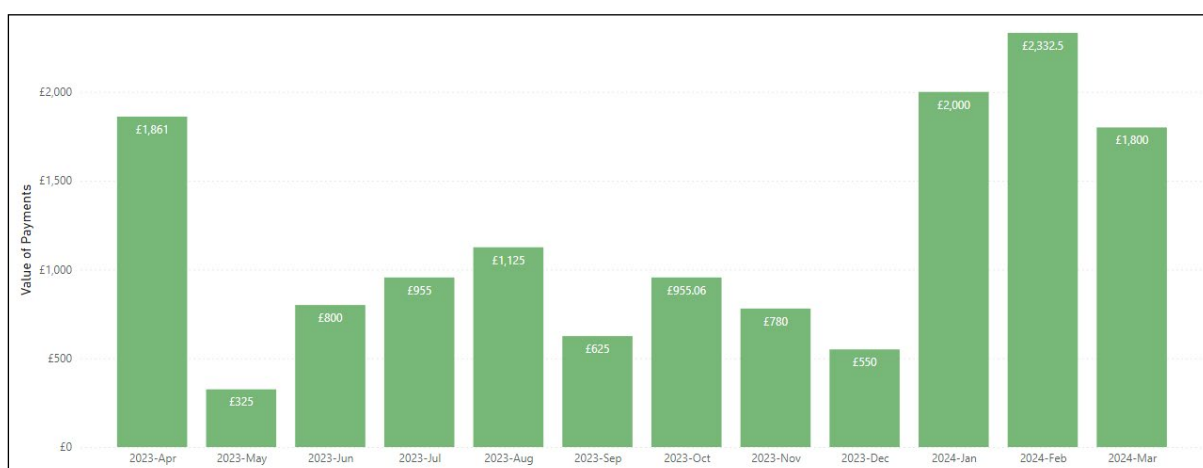
- Council staff can request an extension to the initial deadline if they anticipate they will not meet the timescales set as part of the Complaint Handling Code. 17% of housing complaints had their target response dates extended in 2023/24. These made up 87% of all extensions requested across the Council.

14. The Table below shows the percentage of complaints where an extension was requested before our response was sent.



### Payments Made

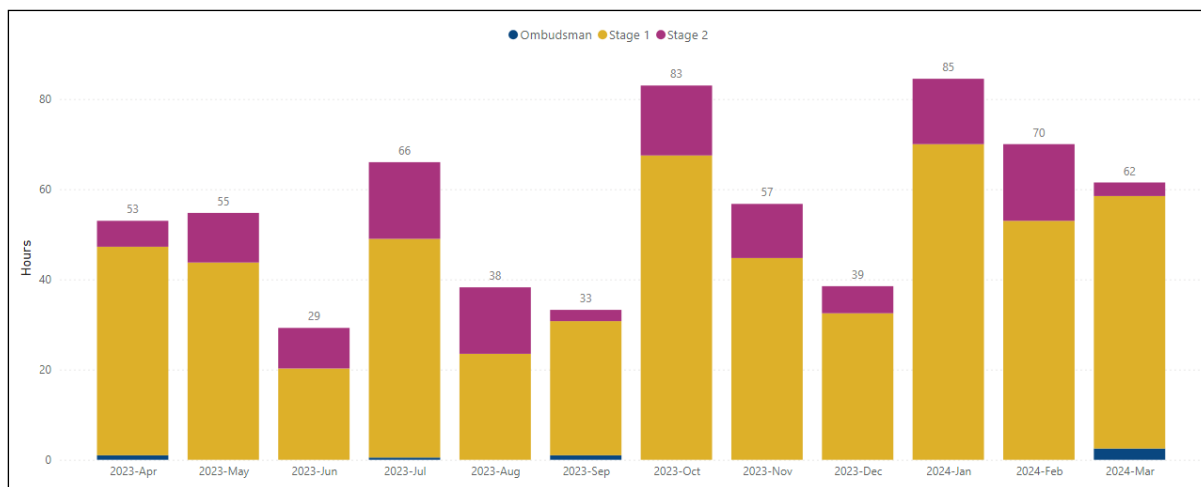
15. The total value of payments made to customers in resolving housing complaints was £14,109 for 2023/24. 60 payments were made over the period, averaging £235 per claim. The number and value of payments were highest between January and February 2024, which correspond to the increase in the number of complaints in that period.
16. The table below shows the value paid in any month, not from when the complaint was made.



### Officer Time & Expense

17. Council officers spent a total of 669 hours responding to complaints (this equates to 90 working days/18 working weeks), with 536 hours on stage one complaints and 128 hours on stage two complaints. This equates to approximately £14,000 in employee pay.

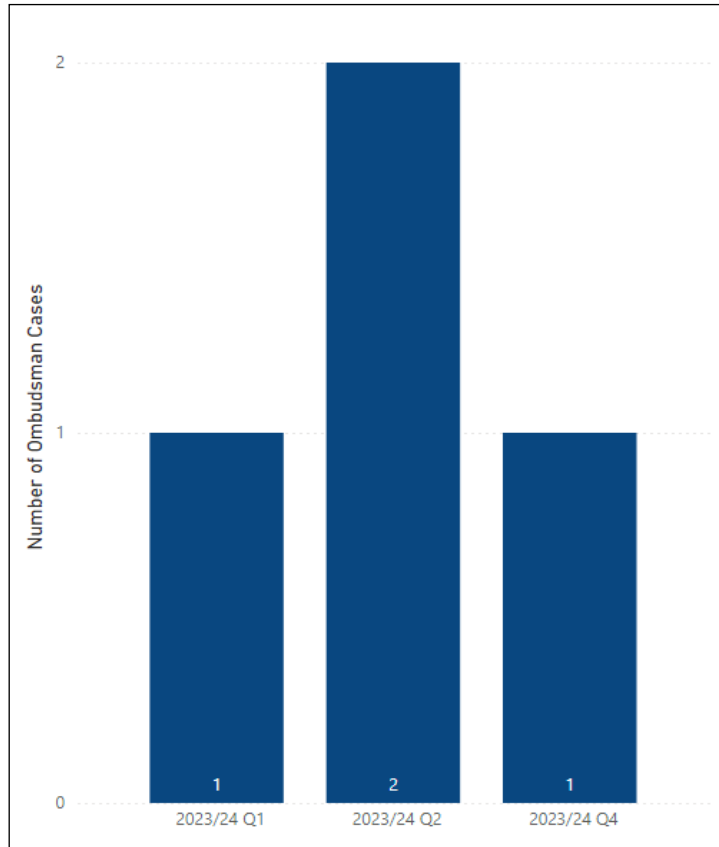
18. This data clearly highlights why getting the service right first time is important to reduce the time spent on responding to complaints. The Housing team have employed an engagement team to work with residents to improve services and have recently appointed a permanent Resident Liaison Officer to work with tenants on complaints related to repairs to target this area.



### Housing Ombudsman Complaints 2023/24

19. There were 4 complaints investigated by the Ombudsman, of these:
- 1 was closed after initial enquiries without further action.
  - 1 was not investigated.
  - 1 was considered outside the jurisdiction of the council.
  - 1 was upheld on the basis of maladministration and injustice to a customer's priority on the housing register.
20. The one case upheld was a matter relating to lettings. The Council was found to be at fault in the handling of a homelessness application as the Council did not take note of the applicant's full circumstances. The Council agreed to apologise, make a compensation payment and follow the recommendations made by the Ombudsman to improve the service we provide.
21. The table below highlights the quarter that the Ombudsman received the complaints.





## Performance Improvement Measures

22. This report will be published annually and must be made publicly available and submitted to the Housing Ombudsman before 30 June every year to ensure compliance with the code.
23. There are a number of on-going activities intended to improve how the Council reports on complaints for the future. These include:
  - a) Improving Our New In-House Complaint Management System
24. 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) Improving Data within Complaint Categories
25. The Housing department undertook an additional piece of work to drill into the categorisation of our complaints. In future reports we will be able to break down specific complaint types more clearly and examine sections within the department in greater detail. For example, we will be able to categorize complaints by service areas and then analyse the causes of those complaints more specifically. For repair complaints, we will be able to identify the number of complaints related to roofing repairs or issues such as damp and mould.

c) Monitoring and Reporting

26. The Housing department has established a monthly meeting specifically to look at performance relating to our complaint handling and learnings from complaints. This is a mandatory meeting for all team leaders and managers within the Housing department and is a time where we plan to focus 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:** Gather and analyse 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:** Assess the training and resources available to staff handling complaints. Ensure that staff are adequately trained and have the necessary tools and support to handle complaints effectively.
  - VI. **Contractor Performance:** Review the performance of third-party contractors involved in the complaints. Ensure 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.

d) New Complaints Policy

- 27. A new Housing Complaints Policy has been 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

- 28. The Housing department has demonstrated a strong commitment to addressing and resolving complaints effectively during the financial year 2023/24. With 380 housing complaints received, accounting for 67% of all council complaints, the department has managed to resolve the majority at stage one, showcasing our dedication to prompt and efficient service.
- 29. While we have achieved average response times, with stage one complaints resolved in an average of 9 days and stage two in 19 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. The financial and staff costs associated with complaint handling have been significant, highlighting the need for continued efforts to optimise processes and resources.
- 30. Moving forward, the Housing department will focus on enhancing contractor management, refining service procedures, and promoting a positive complaint handling culture. By implementing these measures, we aim to further improve our performance, ensuring that residents' concerns are addressed promptly and fairly, ultimately leading to higher customer satisfaction and service quality.
- 31. The Council is committed to providing high-quality services through a culture of learning. Our next steps in the process are to show that we are improving and are putting measure in place to do so.

## Portfolio Holder's Views

- 32. Cllr. Heather Hayward – “This is the first annual report setting out how the council's housing service is performing to meet the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code'. Publishing our performance on complaint handling is part of a programme of work the council is undertaking to ensure we embed a culture of dealing with complaints swiftly for the benefits of all.

Learning from the outcome of complaints will help to improve council services and our residents' experiences and I am pleased to see the Housing Service has taken this approach. As the Lead Member for corporate complaints, I will

be reviewing complaints handling performance regularly to ensure the council is meeting its requirements of the code and demonstrating a learning culture.”

Cllr. Noel Ovenden – “This is the first report to the Cabinet on complaint performance which forms part of the Ombudsman's requirements. The information demonstrates that there are a number of challenges to reduce incoming complaints and improve the service to our tenants.

It is good to see improving response times later of 2023/24. Although complaints are still high, I am pleased to hear that the Housing Performance and Improvement Manager is working with department managers and introduced a number of actions to improve the core service delivery expected to result in a future reduction in complaints.”

## **Contact and Email**

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