

**Agenda Item No:**

**Report To:** O&S/Cabinet

**Date of Meeting:** 29 April 2025/8<sup>th</sup> May 2025

**Report Title:** Corporate Complaints 2024/2025

**Report Author:** Michelle Pecci

**Job Title:**

**Portfolio Holder:** Heather Hayward, Portfolio Holder for Performance and

**Portfolio Holder for:** Direction



**Summary:**

This is the first report presented to Cabinet that outlines the complaints received corporately during the financial year from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.

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 our Complaints Handling Policy that this information is reported to Cabinet annually and reported on the council's website.

**Key Decision:** NO

**Significantly Affected Wards:**

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

- I. Note and comment on the Corporate Complaints 2024/2025 report.**

**Policy Overview:** The recently agreed Corporate Complaints Policy requires us to report to Cabinet annually on to publish performance on our website.

**Financial**

**Implications:**

**Legal Implications:**

*Text agreed by [title of Legal Officer] on [date]*

**Equalities Impact Assessment:**

Not required as this is a monitoring report.

**Data Protection Impact**

**Assessment:** Not necessary as no large scale data processing carried out in the development of this report.

**Risk Assessment (Risk Appetite Statement):** The council has a low risk appetite to compliance risks. Ensuring complaints are effectively handled has many benefits to us as service providers. It saves time, money and improves the customer experience. It also ensures we are compliant with the Ombudsman's Code and associated guidance.

**Sustainability Implications:** None.

**Other Material Implications:**

**Exempt from Publication:** NO

**Background Papers:** **Housing Complaints Reports**- The Housing Service reports on complaints performance in a separate report to ensure compliance with the Housing Ombudsman Handling Code, but this report will include data on housing complaints too in order to provide an overall picture of complaints received by Ashford Borough Council.

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## Report Title: Corporate Complaints 2024/2025

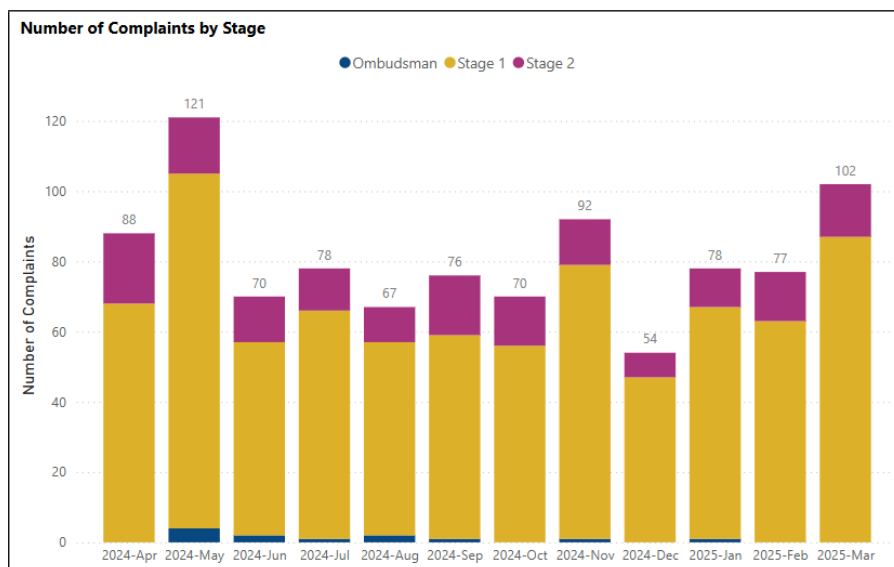
### Introduction and Background

1. In March 2025 the Council adopted an updated Complaints Handling Policy that aligned with the guidance by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and is consistent with mandatory Housing Ombudsman Handling Code.
2. The new policy identifies the council's Cabinet as the governing body with oversight for the Complaints Handling Policy and requires performance for the previous financial year being reported to Cabinet by the end of June each year.
3. The Housing Service reports on complaints performance in a separate report to ensure compliance with the Housing Ombudsman Handling Code, but this report will include data on housing complaints too in order to provide an overall picture of complaints received by Ashford Borough Council.

### Complaints 2024/2025

#### Complaints received

4. Between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025 received a total of 973 complaints, 82% of these were resolved at stage one (799 complaints) with 162 resolved at stage two. Twelve complaints were escalated to the Ombudsman during this period. 70% of complaints were considered justified or partially justified.
5. The table below provides a summary of complaint by stage for each month of 2024/25.



## Complaints by Service

6. The tables below show the number and percentage of complaints by service, together with an indication of the service size as a percentage of headcount. This comparison is provided as context to the proportion of complaints to size of service area, but it should be noted that services with greater public-facing scope will attract a larger number of complaints.

Directorate/Service	Complaints	Percentage
⊕ Housing	629	64.65%
⊕ Environment Property and Recreation	226	23.23%
⊕ Planning and Development	52	5.34%
⊕ Finance	40	4.11%
⊕ People Communications and Technology	14	1.44%
⊕ Port Health	5	0.51%
⊕ Multiple or No Specific Service	4	0.41%
⊕ Legal and Democracy	2	0.21%
⊕ Development	1	0.10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>973</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Port Health	24%
Housing	23%
Environment, Property & Recreation	15%
People Communications and Technology	10%
Planning & Development	9%
Finance	9%
Legal & Democracy	4%
Development	2%
Economic Development	2%
Policy and Performance	1%
Chief Executive and Support	1%

## Reasons for complaints

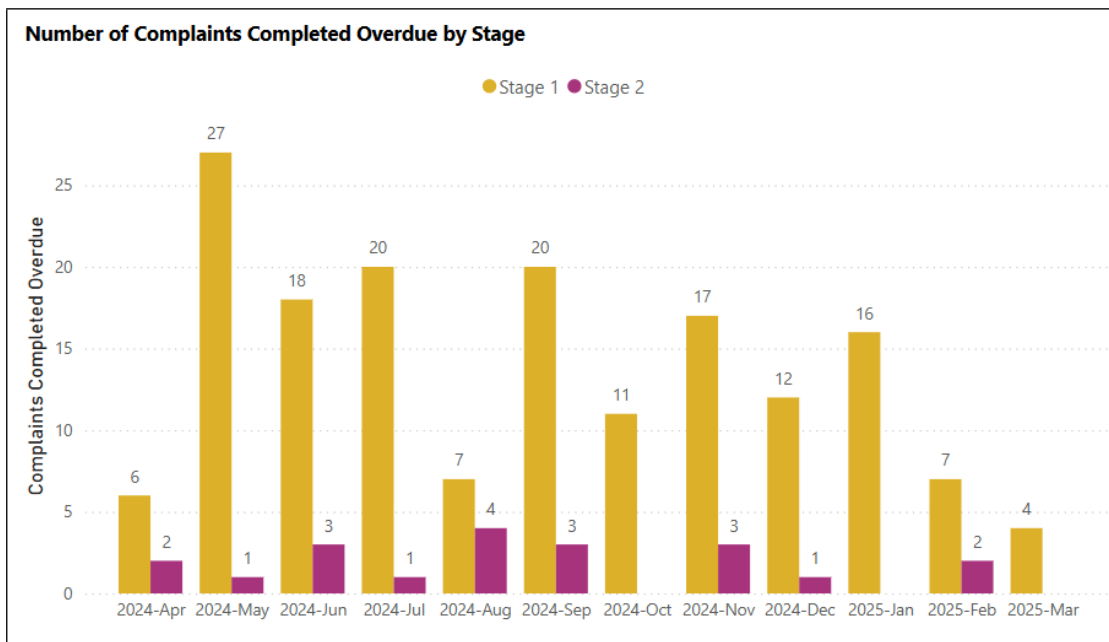
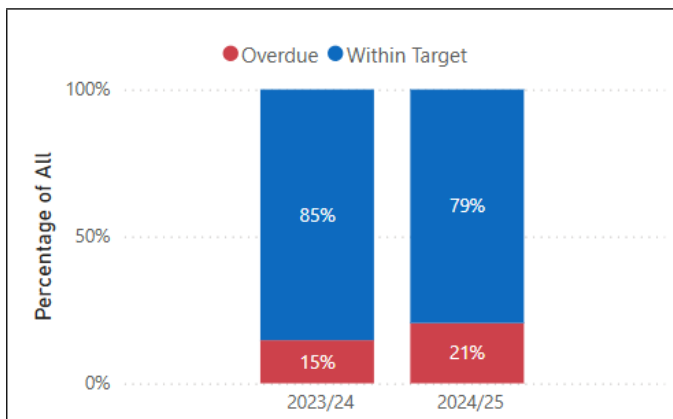
7. The next table provides the top 20 reasons for complaints in this period; the most common reasons being service failure, Timescale to deal with issues, and third party contractor. Some complaints were for multiple reasons and could fall into a number of categories.
8. As context, during Q1 2024/25 we experienced difficulties with our new waste contract which resulted in a peak of complaints in Q1 and Q2 about service failure and time taken to deal with issues. The final two quarters of the year have much improved figures.
9. Housing results for the largest number of complaints, this service is complex and has been subject to considerable, well reported, change and challenges this year, both in the HRA (repairs/landlord services) and General Fund, especially in relation to homelessness.
10. Planning and Development have had a third highest level of complaints, and over a third of these (36.5%) relate to 'inappropriate planning decision', there are other routes by which to appeal about these complaints but it is necessary to record and respond to complaints of this nature to ensure that wider issues are not lost through the proper appeal processes.

Top 20 Reasons for complaints

	2024/25 Q1	2024/25 Q2	2024/25 Q3	2024/25 Q4	Total
Complaint Reason	Number of Complaints	Number of Complaints	Number of Complaints	Number of Complaints	Number of Complaints
Service failure	126	51	13	12	202
Timescales to deal with issues	67	42	27	26	162
3rd party contractor	24	33	41	39	137
Policy/procedures	37	37	28	21	123
Service Standards		7	38	21	66
Miscellaneous	21	26	10	7	64
Heating/Hot Water		2	20	36	58
Staff attitude	17	21	9	10	57
Windows/Doors		8	23	22	53
Length of time waited	22	22	2	5	51
Damp/Mould		3	25	17	45
Staff error	14	12	10	6	42
Plumbing		4	22	7	33
Inaccurate information	9	3	4	11	27
Anti-social Behaviour		1	13	11	25
Loss of service	12	5	4	2	23
Inappropriate planning decision	3	4	9	3	19
Plastering		3	9	7	19
Roofing		4	12	2	18
Kitchens		1	8	6	15

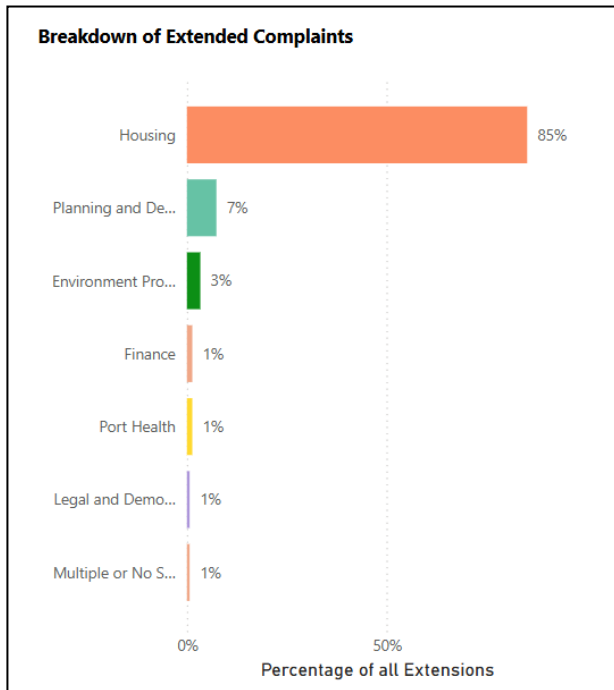
### Complaints that were completed outside of specified timescale

11. The complaints policy requires us to respond to all Stage One complaints within 10 days, and Stage Two complaints within 20 days of receipt. Extensions to time a permitted for a number of limited reasons (e.g. the need to obtain information from third parties, complexity of the issues involved or the scale of complaint necessitating additional time). Where an extension of time is approved it is recorded as completed on time.
12. The first table below shows the number of complaints responded to within the target, and that were overdue, and the second table shows a breakdown per month for the 2024/25 reporting period.
13. A key reason for the higher numbers of overdue complaints at the start of the 2024/25 year is because proportionately there was a higher number of complaints received at that time. Staff were getting used to the introduction of new shorter timescales for all complaints; previously just housing had to adhere to 10 days for stage one, all other complaints to the council were dealt with in 15 days, this was revised in advance of the Complaints Handling Policy being adopted in April 2025 to improve the service complainants received more widely and to ensure consistency of treatment across all our customers.



## Deadline extensions

14. As highlighted above, there are circumstances where a timescale can be extended. It is important to review the level of these extensions otherwise the set timescale becomes meaningless if all complaints are extended.
15. Extensions are permitted when there is a need to obtain information from third parties, if the complexity of the issues involved or the scale of complaint is such it is not possible to achieve the timescales. 2024/25 saw 16% of complaints having their timescales for response extended the table below shows which service areas had permitted time extensions.



### Costs of complaints

16. In most instances when something has gone wrong there will be a range of remedies available, from written apologies to changing decisions, revising policies and other corrective or remedial actions.
17. There are occasions where a financial remedy is necessary. It is important that we have oversight of the level and frequency of financial remedy to ensure that payments are justified and not being made in lieu of corrective action for other customers.
18. It is also important to learn lessons to prevent further similar complaints to reduce the amount of time officer's spend responding to complaints. The table below shows both the value of financial remedies provided during the year and the cost of the officer time spent responding to complaints (officer costs are based on median pay rate for the typical officer responding to stage one, and stage two complaints).
19. In 2024/25 Housing complaints account for the 78% of the total payments and officer costs. This has been particularly high this year following the introduction of the new Housing Ombudsman Code, making it more transparent how to complain, and there have been many well reported challenges with the housing repairs service. It is encouraging to see that Q4 for this reporting period figures are reducing, this is encouraging as this was not the trend in the previous year.

Financial Year	Value of Payments	Employee Hours	Total Estimated Cost
2023/24	£15,059	£26,085	£41,144
2023/24 Q1	£2,986	£8,283	£11,269
2023/24 Q2	£2,705	£5,792	£8,497
2023/24 Q3	£2,285	£5,828	£8,113
2023/24 Q4	£7,083	£6,182	£13,265
2024/25	£26,778	£44,935	£71,713
2024/25 Q1	£7,803	£11,386	£19,189
2024/25 Q2	£5,874	£10,105	£15,979
2024/25 Q3	£8,584	£12,915	£21,499
2024/25 Q4	£4,517	£10,529	£15,046

## Ombudsman complaints

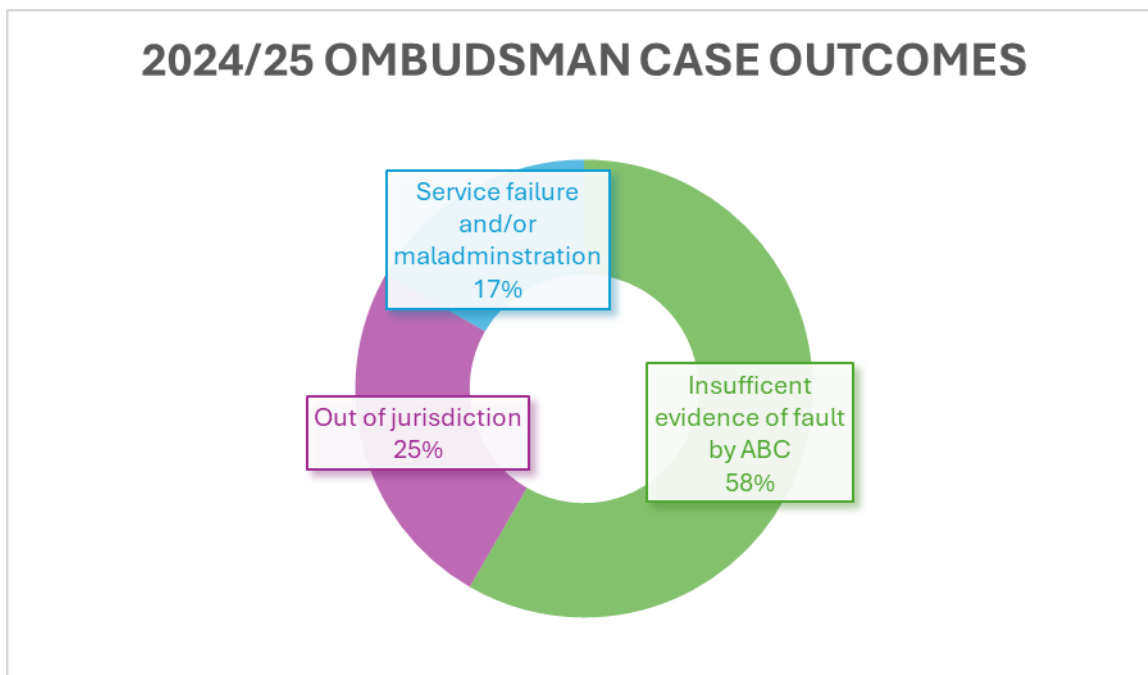
20. Ombudsman complaints are the final stage of our complaints process, where the complainant remains dissatisfied with our stage 1/stage 2 response. Cases referred to the Ombudsman vary in nature with some being determined quickly, whilst others are more complex investigations and can remain open for more than one year. Therefore, we will report on the number of current open cases to provide a picture of the volume of reporting and those where the Ombudsman has made a decision following their investigation.
21. Previously, complaints referred to the Ombudsman for the proceeding council year were reported to the Standards Committee in the first quarter of each calendar year. Going forward, Ombudsman cases will form part of this report to Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet to avoid duplication and reduce the time between the year end and performance being reported. Due to this change, a report for 2023/24 was not made to the Standards Committee but a summary is provided here along with 2024/25 performance.

### Ombudsman complaints 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025

22. In total, there were 25 investigations opened by the Ombudsman between **1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025**.
23. Of the 25 cases, 12 cases were determined/closed. Of those closed cases, two cases were upheld (had a finding in the complainant's favour) by the Housing Ombudsman and none by the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO). The remaining 10 closed cases were not investigated due to insufficient evidence /no fault found or because it was out of the Ombudsman jurisdiction. 13 cases were still open as of 31 March 2025 (one LGSCO and 12 Housing).
24. Of the upheld cases, the first related to the council's landlord responsibilities and how it responded to reports of repairs and maintenance problems.
25. The second upheld case related to the council's landlord responsibilities regarding the handling of reports of damp, mould and related works.



26. The Ombudsman's orders and recommendations to improve service we provide were implemented in full.



#### **Ombudsman complaints 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024**

27. In total there were 23 investigations opened by the Ombudsman between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 24.
28. Of those 23 cases, 15 were determined/closed by the Ombudsman. Of those closed cases, 2 were upheld by the LGSCO and 1 case was upheld by the Housing Ombudsman. The remaining 12 complaints were not investigated.
29. The first LGSCO upheld case related to the council's Planning and Development Service but no recommendations were made as the council had already provided remedial action.
30. The second LGSCO upheld case related to how the council had dealt with a complaint about anti-social behaviour.
31. The third case upheld was a matter relating to housing 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.
32. The Ombudsman's orders and recommendations to improve the services we provide were implemented in full.

#### **Performance improvement measures**

33. Management team receive six monthly updates on complaint performance, a number of ongoing activities result from these discussions including ensuring that complaints are monitored at the service level in departmental meetings,

and lessons learned are documented and implemented. There are improvements in processes where complaints are discussed as part of contract performance meetings. There is internal communication, briefings and updates on complaints for staff.

34. This year a new complaint management system has been rolled out, and this has enabled us to review and amending procedures, ensuring consistency of application of the policy so that the record more accurately reflect the complaints we receive.
35. Services also review the outcomes of complaints investigated by the ombudsman to identify systemic issues and to implement corrective action to prevent similar incidents in the future.
36. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on complaints are reported through the Corporate Performance Report to the Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee quarterly. The KPIs keep a regular check on how well the council is doing in meeting its 10 day target for responding to stage 1 complaints and the 20 day target for stage 2 complaints. The number of complaints are also reported on.
37. From 2025/26, this [new] report will be overseen by the Cabinet as the specified governing body in by June each year, and a more detailed drill down on the Housing complaints will travel with this report each year too. Performance of complaints will be reported on the council's website.

## **Conclusion**

38. The Cabinet are the specified governing body for overseeing the application of the Complaints Handling Policy, adopted at the March 2025 Cabinet meeting. This first annual report shows a high number of complaints in key areas reflecting a number of challenges experienced throughout the year.
39. The early peak in the number complaints received as a result of issues in housing and waste inevitably led to resourcing issues as the peak was addressed, this resulted in a number of overdue complaints. The complaint numbers are levelling off and indications are that this will continue.
40. Regular reporting to Management team continues to ensure a culture of learning from complaints and provides further oversight on complaint performance.

## **Portfolio Holder's Views**

41. To be given at the meetings.

## **Contact and Email**

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