

KEY DECISION

Part I – Release to Press



Agenda item: **5**

Meeting Cabinet
Portfolio Area Housing
Date 10th September 2026



Housing Annual Complaints Self-Assessment and Service Improvement Report 2025/26

Authors Kate Ford & Matt Gough

Lead Officers Kerry Clifford
Richard Protheroe | 2938

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To present two documents for consideration and review:-
- Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report 2025/26, and
 - Annual Self-Assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code
- These documents form part of the annual reporting and review that is required of the Council as a Registered Social Landlord (RSH).
- 1.2 To demonstrate compliance with the Complaint Handling Code, the Council must produce and publish the *Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report* and to undertake an annual *Self-Assessment*. These are required to be published on the Council's website and submitted to the Housing Ombudsman by 30th September 2026.
- 1.3 The Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report 2025/26 and the Annual Self-Assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code provide transparency on complaint volumes, key themes and

outcomes. They demonstrate how learning from complaints has informed service improvements, set out the actions planned for 2026/27 to drive further improvement, and provide assurance that the Council's complaints handling arrangements comply with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 To note and approve the Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report 2025/26 (Appendix A) and the Self-Assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code (Appendix B).
- 2.2 To note the Ombudsman determinations captured within the Complaints and Service Improvement Report 2024/25 (Appendix A).
- 2.3 That delegated authority be granted to the Strategic Director (RP), after consultation with the Housing Portfolio Holder, to finalise and submit the Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report 2025/26 and the Self-Assessment, in accordance with the Council's obligations under the Regulator of Social Housing's Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard and the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, taking into account any comments made by the Cabinet.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 strengthened the regulatory framework for social housing and established complaints handling as a key component of landlord accountability. The Act provides the Housing Ombudsman with statutory powers to issue and monitor compliance with the Complaint Handling Code, placing clear expectations on registered providers to ensure complaints are handled fairly, effectively and consistently.
- 3.2 As a registered provider of social housing, the Council is required by the Housing Ombudsman to publish annually:
 - a) an Annual Complaints and Service Improvement Report; and
 - b) a Self-Assessment demonstrating compliance with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.
- 3.3 These requirements support transparency, regulatory assurance and resident accountability, ensuring landlords can demonstrate how complaints are used to drive service improvement and improve outcomes for tenants and leaseholders.
- 3.4 The Complaint Handling Code establishes clear expectations in relation to accessibility, fairness, learning, accountability, governance and timeliness. It reinforces the principle that an effective complaints process should not only provide appropriate redress when things go wrong but also enable landlords to identify systemic issues, learn from resident feedback and continuously improve services.

- 3.5 The Self-Assessment process has become an important element of the Council's wider governance and assurance framework. It supports a culture of openness, transparency and continuous improvement by ensuring complaints are viewed not simply as service failures but as a valuable source of insight into resident experience. This approach aligns with the Consumer Standards and the Council's ongoing commitment to strengthening tenant engagement, service quality and regulatory compliance.
- 3.7 During 2025/26, the Council continued to strengthen its approach to complaint handling and service improvement, using resident feedback, Ombudsman learning and regulatory requirements to drive change across housing services. A number of improvements were delivered during the year, including:
- A comprehensive review and update of the Complaints Policy to incorporate Housing Ombudsman recommendations and ensure full alignment with the Complaint Handling Code.
 - Further development of the complaints management system, improving case oversight, workflow management, reporting and performance monitoring.
 - Significant improvements in complaint response times, with performance consistently exceeding Housing Ombudsman expectations.
 - Continued delivery of the Repairs Improvement Programme, focusing on service reliability, communication and overall resident experience, leading to an increase in tenant satisfaction.
 - Adoption of an Access to Homes Policy to strengthen arrangements for gaining access to properties where works are required, reducing delays and supporting better outcomes for residents.
 - Introduction of quality assurance reviews of complaint investigations and responses to improve consistency, robustness and learning.
 - Enhancement of complaint satisfaction monitoring through the appointment of an independent provider, strengthening the Council's understanding of resident experience and perception.
 - Strengthened governance and reporting arrangements, ensuring complaint performance, Ombudsman learning and service improvement actions are subject to regular scrutiny and oversight.
- 3.8 Collectively, these improvements have contributed to stronger complaint handling performance, increased compliance with regulatory expectations and greater organisational learning. They also support the Council's wider commitment to improving housing services and delivering better outcomes for tenants and leaseholders as part of its ongoing housing improvement journey.

4. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

Compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code

- 4.1 The Annual Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report (Appendix A) provides a comprehensive overview of complaint handling performance during 2025/26. It sets out complaint volumes and trends, performance against Housing Ombudsman response times, key areas of resident dissatisfaction, learning arising from complaints and Ombudsman determinations, and the improvements implemented as a direct result of resident feedback.

- 4.2 Alongside the Annual Report, the Self-Assessment (Appendix B) provides a detailed evaluation of the Council's compliance with the Complaint Handling Code. It enables the Council to test its arrangements against regulatory requirements, identify opportunities for further improvement and provide assurance to tenants, leaseholders, elected Members, the Housing Ombudsman and the Regulator of Social Housing that complaints are being managed in accordance with statutory expectations and recognised good practice.
- 4.3 The annual Self-Assessment has concluded that the Council is compliant with the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.
- 4.2 During 2025/26, the Housing Ombudsman completed a review of the Council's Complaints Policy and identified 12 recommendations. These recommendations primarily related to policy wording, clarification of complaint handling arrangements and strengthening alignment with the latest requirements of the Complaint Handling Code. In response, the Council undertook a comprehensive review of its Complaints Policy, procedures and associated guidance, incorporating all recommendations and further strengthening its complaints governance framework.
- 4.2 The Self-Assessment confirms that appropriate arrangements are in place across all key areas of complaint handling, including accessibility, reasonable adjustments, investigation standards, learning from complaints, complaint remedies, governance, oversight and the role of the Member Responsible for Complaints.
- 4.3 The assessment also demonstrates the Council's commitment to maintaining high standards of complaint handling and to continually reviewing and improving its approach in response to Ombudsman guidance, resident feedback and emerging best practice.

Ombudsman Learning

- 4.4 The Housing Ombudsman determined 16 cases during the year, resulting in 32 individual findings. The Council complied fully with all remedies and recommendations arising from these determinations, including the provision of apologies, financial redress, repairs, property inspections and service improvements. All cases were reported to the Cabinet during 2025/26, through Quarterly Corporate Performance Reports.
- 4.5 The Council anticipates a reduction in remedies compared with the previous year, reflecting the positive impact of improved complaint handling arrangements, strengthened governance and the wider programme of housing service improvement currently being delivered.
- 4.6 Learning arising from Housing Ombudsman and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman determinations continues to be embedded across housing services. This learning has informed improvements to decision-making, record keeping, complaint investigations, homelessness case management, communication standards and resident engagement practices.
- 4.7 Importantly, the Council's approach is focused not only on responding to individual Ombudsman determinations but on identifying broader themes and

opportunities for organisational learning, helping to prevent recurrence and support better resident outcomes.

Complaint Handling Performance

- 4.8 During 2025/26, the Council received 597 Stage One complaints, representing a reduction of 13% compared with 2024/25. This reduction suggests that service improvements implemented across a number of housing functions may be beginning to have a positive impact on overall complaint volumes.
- 4.9 During the same period, Stage Two complaints increased to 137 cases, representing approximately 23% of Stage One complaints, compared with 12% in the previous year. While this increase warrants ongoing monitoring, it should not be interpreted as evidence of declining service performance. Initial analysis indicates that the introduction of the Council's new complaints management system has significantly simplified the escalation process for residents. Previously, residents were required to submit a separate written request to escalate a complaint; the new system now enables escalation through a simple online process, reducing barriers to access and supporting compliance with the Complaint Handling Code's accessibility requirements.
- 4.10 The Council will continue to monitor escalation rates throughout 2026/27 to gain a fuller understanding of the underlying causes and identify any opportunities to further strengthen early complaint resolution.
- 4.11 Performance against Housing Ombudsman response times improved significantly during the year:
- Stage One responses within timescale increased to 98.2%.
 - Stage Two responses within timescale increased to 94.2%.
- Performance exceeded sector benchmarks at Stage One and was close to the sector median at Stage Two.
- 4.12 These improvements reflect the significant focus placed on complaint management, oversight and performance monitoring during the year. More recent management information shows that performance has continued to strengthen, with compliance routinely achieving 100%, demonstrating a sustained improvement in the Council's ability to respond to complaints promptly and effectively.

Main Themes Arising from Complaints

- 4.13 Analysis of complaint data highlights a number of recurring themes which provide valuable insight into resident experience and areas where services require ongoing improvement. Service delays remained the single largest cause of complaint, accounting for approximately 41% of all cases. Repairs also continued to generate around half of all complaints and the highest proportion of upheld complaints, reflecting both the scale of the repairs service and the importance residents place on timely resolution of issues affecting their homes.
- 4.14 In addition to delays, complaints frequently identified concerns relating to communication, including a lack of progress updates, unclear expectations regarding timescales and residents having to make repeated contact to obtain information. These themes are consistent with feedback received through

Tenant Satisfaction Measures, transactional satisfaction surveys and wider resident engagement activity.

- 4.15 The analysis demonstrates that tenant dissatisfaction is often driven less by the service issue itself and more by the quality of communication and overall customer experience during the resolution process. Residents are generally more accepting of unavoidable delays where they are kept informed and have confidence that appropriate action is being taken. Conversely, a lack of communication, ownership or regular updates can significantly undermine resident confidence and increase the likelihood of complaints being escalated.
- 4.16 The Council is therefore using complaint intelligence alongside wider performance, tenancy satisfaction and resident involvement data to better understand the root causes of dissatisfaction and target improvement activity. The findings from complaint analysis have directly informed service improvement initiatives and will continue to shape priorities for 2026/27, particularly in relation to repairs, communication, complaint resolution and the overall resident experience.

Improvement Priorities for 2026/27

- 4.17 Whilst good progress has been made during 2025/26, the Council recognises that effective complaint handling requires ongoing review and continuous improvement. The themes arising from complaints, resident feedback and Ombudsman learning have informed the following priorities for 2026/27:
- Review the causes of increased Stage Two escalations and strengthen the effectiveness of Stage One complaint resolution.
 - Continue to build complaint handling capacity, management oversight and quality assurance arrangements.
 - Further embed learning from complaints across housing services to improve service delivery and prevent recurring issues.
 - Continue delivery of the Repairs Improvement Programme, with a particular focus on reducing delays, improving communication and maintaining first-time fix performance.
 - Improve customer communication and expectation management across all housing services.
 - Strengthen support and accessibility for vulnerable residents throughout the complaints process.
 - Enhance monitoring of remedies, compensation payments and Ombudsman actions to ensure timely completion and organisational learning.
 - Increase resident understanding of the distinction between service requests and formal complaints, helping residents access the most appropriate route to resolution.
 - Continue to utilise complaint intelligence, resident feedback, Tenant Satisfaction Measures and Ombudsman learning to inform service redesign and drive continuous improvement.
- 4.18 These priorities align closely with the Council's wider Housing Improvement Plan, consumer standards compliance activities and ambition to deliver high-quality, resident-focused services. By strengthening complaint handling,

learning from resident feedback and addressing the root causes of dissatisfaction, the Council will continue to improve service performance, enhance accountability and build resident trust and confidence in housing services. Furthermore, this work will support the Council's ongoing regulatory improvement journey and its ambition to achieve the highest standards of landlord service delivery.

Overall Assessment

- 4.19 The Annual Complaints and Service Improvement Report and accompanying Self-Assessment demonstrate that the Council remains compliant with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and has made significant progress in strengthening its complaint handling arrangements during 2025/26.
- 4.20 Improvements have been achieved in response times, governance, oversight and organisational learning. Complaints continue to be used as a critical source of resident insight, helping to inform service redesign, improve accountability and shape priorities for improvement. Whilst repairs, service delays and customer communication remain the most significant drivers of dissatisfaction, clear plans are in place to address these areas and further improve the resident experience.
- 4.21 The Executive Housing Working Group recognises that effective complaint handling is an essential component of the consumer regulatory regime and a fundamental measure of trust between residents and their landlord. As the Council continues its wider housing improvement journey, including progression towards achieving a C1 consumer grading, complaint intelligence will remain central to understanding resident experience, identifying areas of risk and driving continuous improvement.
- 4.22 The Council will therefore continue to use the annual self-assessment process as both a compliance tool and a catalyst for service excellence and targeted resident involvement, ensuring housing services remain resident-focused, accountable, transparent and responsive to the needs of tenants and leaseholders.

5 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations contained in these reports.
- 5.2 Officers responsible for the delivery of the improvement activity set out within the reports will need to ensure it is included in the Housing Revenue Account budget.

6 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Publication of these reports ensures compliance with:
 - the Regulator of Social Housing's Consumer Standards
 - the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.
- 6.2 Officers responsible for the delivery of the improvement activity set out within the reports will need to identify and consider any resulting legal implications.

7 EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no direct equality, diversity and inclusion implications arising from this report.
- 7.2 Monitoring and reporting on housing and complaints performance ensures that services are fair, accessible and responsive to all residents
- 7.3 Where required, Equality Impact Assessments will be completed as appropriate prior to the delivery of any improvement activity set out in this report, to ensure they do not inadvertently disadvantage any group and instead support a more inclusive housing service.
- 7.4 Effective complaints handling supports fairness and accessibility for all residents, including those with protected characteristics.

8 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Failure to publish these reports would result in non-compliance with regulatory reporting requirements
- 8.2 Failure to publish and submit an annual Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report (Appendix A) and Complaint Handling Code self-assessment (Appendix B) by 30th September 2026, would place the council at risk of non-compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.
- 8.3 Officers responsible for implementing any improvement activity set out within this report will need to consider any risk implications that arise.
- 8.4 The council has an embedded approach to risk management that mitigates any adverse effect on delivery of the council's objectives and internal control processes which provide good governance assurance.

9 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The council declared a climate change emergency in June 2019 with a resolution to work towards a target of achieving net zero emissions by 2030.
- 9.2 There are no direct climate change implications arising from this report.
- 9.3 Officers responsible for delivering the improvement activity captured within the report will need to identify and address any climate change considerations in the implementation of activities.

10 OTHER CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Implementing the priorities and improvement activity outlined in this report may impact on the development of future policy or procedure, which will be monitored through the formal policy/procedure sign-off process via Executive Housing Working Group.

11 BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- Stevenage Borough Council's Complaints Policy 2026
- Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code

12 APPENDICES

- Appendix A: Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report 2025/26
- Appendix B: Stevenage Borough Council Self-Assessment Form – 2026