

Response on behalf of the Cabinet to the Annual Complaints Handling and Service Improvement Report 2025/26 (Housing)

As the Member Responsible for Complaints, I have reviewed the Council's Housing Ombudsman self-assessment and the Appendix B - Annual Complaints Handling and Service Improvement Report 2025 (Housing).

The Cabinet welcomes the production of this report and the transparent assessment it provides of complaint handling performance, Housing Ombudsman activity, service learning and improvement during the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026. The report demonstrates the Council's continued commitment to treating complaints as an important source of feedback and as a valuable opportunity to improve services for tenants and residents.

During 2025/26, housing complaints increased compared with the previous year, with 201 Stage 1 complaints and 39 Stage 2 complaints received. Whilst any increase in complaints should be carefully monitored, the Cabinet notes that this has occurred during a period in which the Council has undertaken significant work to improve the accessibility of the complaints process, strengthen the identification and recording of complaints and make it easier for tenants to raise concerns and provide feedback. We welcome this increase as a natural consequence of making it easier to make a complaint and we believe an element of this is previously unmet demand and makes it easier for our tenants to communicate issues to the Council.

One of the most encouraging aspects of this report is the significant improvement in complaint handling performance during the year. Stage 1 response compliance improved steadily throughout 2025/26, culminating in 100% compliance in Quarter 4 and an overall compliance rate of 96.52% for the year. Stage 2 responses remained fully compliant throughout the year, with all complaints responded to within the required timescales or an agreed extension.

The Cabinet also welcomes the improvements implemented during the year, including enhancements to complaints procedures, reporting arrangements, monitoring systems and dashboards, and the introduction of a dedicated Stage 2 response template to improve consistency and oversight.

In addition, the Cabinet welcomes the adoption of the revised Complaints Policy during 2026 following the Housing Ombudsman's review of the Council's policy. The changes implemented provide additional assurance that the Council's arrangements continue to align with the expectations of the Complaint Handling Code and reflect good practice in complaint resolution.

The report identifies a number of recurring themes, particularly in relation to housing repairs, heating and hot water, contractor performance, damp and mould and communication issues. Housing Repairs continues to account for the majority of housing complaints, representing 159 of the 201 Stage 1 complaints received during the year. Whilst this is unsurprising given the volume and complexity of interactions that occur within that service, the Cabinet expects services and contractors to continue working together to address the root causes of complaints, improve communication with tenants and reduce the likelihood of recurring issues.

The Cabinet notes that two Housing Ombudsman cases were determined during the year and both were upheld against the Council. Whilst the number of Ombudsman determinations remains relatively low, every Ombudsman decision provides an opportunity to learn and improve. The Cabinet expects all learning arising from Ombudsman investigations to be fully

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implemented and embedded within service delivery and will continue to monitor progress through regular reporting arrangements.

The report also highlights a reduction in tenant satisfaction with the Council's approach to complaint handling. This is an important indicator and one that the Cabinet takes seriously. Whilst compliance with response times is essential, effective complaint handling is ultimately measured by the experience of tenants, the quality of communication, the fairness of outcomes and the extent to which identified issues are resolved and prevented from recurring. Continued focus will therefore be required to ensure that improvements in procedural performance are matched by improvements in customer experience.

The Cabinet supports the improvement priorities identified for 2026/27 and welcomes the focus on sustaining response-time performance, improving complaint acknowledgements, strengthening contractor accountability, improving data and reporting, embedding organisational learning and increasing engagement with tenants. In respect of contractor accountability, we are pushing them proactively to ensure that service delivery meets the Council's and our tenants' expectations. This should improve tenant satisfaction with the works undertaken and reduce the need for complaints to be made in the first place. These priorities are appropriate and reflect the key issues identified through complaint trends, Ombudsman activity and service performance during the year.

The Cabinet remains fully committed to the Council's strategic objective of improving housing services and recognises that effective complaint handling is an important part of achieving that aim. A positive complaints culture helps the Council identify areas where services can be strengthened, ensures accountability to tenants and residents and supports continuous improvement across the organisation. Complaints should therefore continue to be viewed not merely as issues to be resolved, but as opportunities to learn, improve and strengthen public confidence in the services delivered by the Council.

As the Member Responsible for Complaints, I am encouraged by the progress made during 2025/26 and the clear programme of improvement established for the year ahead. The Cabinet will continue to provide oversight and challenge through regular reporting arrangements and will support officers in ensuring that lessons learned from complaints translate into meaningful and measurable service improvements for tenants and residents.

Councillor M J Nee

Portfolio Holder for Finance, Governance, Technology and Resilience

Member Responsible for Complaints

Dover District Council