

# CABINET

## Annual Complaints Report 16<sup>th</sup> September 2025 Report of Chief Officer – Housing and Property

PURPOSE OF REPORT				
To provide an update to developments in complaints handling within council services in line with the joint Code of Practice issued by the Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (2024). The report provides performance information and the required self-assessments against the code. Following this report Cabinet are required to publish a statement in relation to complaints.				
Key Decision		Non-Key Decision	X	Referral from Cabinet Member
Date of notice of forthcoming key decision		N/A		
This report is public				

### RECOMMENDATIONS OF Cllr Sally Maddocks (Member with Responsibility for Complaints)

- (1) That the Cabinet member with responsibility for complaints be delegated to agree a statement to be published by the end of September 2025 on the Council's complaints handling in accordance with the Code.
- (2) That Cabinet approve the both the Complaint self-assessment forms and endorse the annual report and service improvement plans for 2025 and that all documents are published.

### 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 As a stock-retained local authority, the Council is subject to oversight from both the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and the Housing Ombudsman (HO).
- 1.2 Over the past year, the Council has continued to respond to the requirements of the robust approach to complaint handling which has continued to evolve from the HO and the more recently aligned Code, developed jointly with the LGSCO.
- 1.3 The Code<sup>1</sup> became effective on 1 April 2024. It brings together standards for complaint handling across housing and non-housing services, with the aim of creating a more consistent and resident-focused approach across all council

<sup>1</sup> The Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code (<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/02.-Complaint-Handling-Code-24.pdf>) and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code (<https://www.lgo.org.uk/assets/attach/6558/Complaints-Handling-Code-F-form.pdf>) are published separately, but are aligned in terms of their content.

functions.

1.4 The Code includes:

- A clear definition of what constitutes a complaint
- A two-stage complaints process with defined response times
- A requirement for annual reports, self-assessments and learning reports
- A focus on fairness, transparency, and continuous improvement

1.5 Compliance with the HO Code is mandatory for the housing service as a registered provider of social housing. The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 places a duty on the HO to monitor compliance with the Code. Non-compliance with the Code can result in the HO taking further action with failings potentially leading to the issue of Complaint Handling Failure Orders.

1.6 The LGSCO Code remains voluntary<sup>2</sup> at present but is expected to become mandatory from 2026. Currently there is not specific responsibility for the LGSCO to monitor compliance with the Code. However it should be noted that the LGSCO does investigate complaints and issue findings and has the power to issue public reports about the actions of individual organisations. Whilst not currently mandatory, in June 2024, Cabinet endorsed the Council's approach to developing a robust complaints process in line with the Code corresponding to the same approach for our Council Housing service.

1.7 Throughout 2024/25, the Council has made strong progress in aligning all service areas to the principles of the joint Code and building a more transparent and consistent complaints culture, channelled through the Customer Service Team.

## 2.0 Complaint Assessment

2.1 The Council has now completed and published its second annual self-assessment against the HO Code (Appendix A), confirming full compliance in key areas, alongside continued focus on learning and service improvement.

2.2 A voluntary self-assessment against the LGSCO Code has also been completed (Appendix B). While there are areas for improvement, this demonstrates the Council's commitment to proactively preparing for future mandatory compliance.

2.3 The Council has a published Complaints Policy that is aligned with the Code, to ensure consistent processes and expectations across all service areas. This is due to be reviewed by April 2026.

2.4 The council housing service has published its second annual Complaints Performance and Learning Report (Appendix C). This includes complaint volumes, themes, outcomes, and actions taken. Learning from complaints has improved, and structured reporting remains a focus for 2025/26. Information on performance and learning is regularly shared with the Council Housing Advisory Group.

2.5 Despite being a voluntary endeavour, a complaints annual report for non-housing services (LGSCO-related) has been produced for 2024/25, to meet the expectations of the Code (Appendix D) for the first time. An internal project team continue to meet regularly to track progress.

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<sup>2</sup> The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's (LGSCO) Complaint Handling Code is currently non-statutory. While compliance is encouraged, particularly in preparation for future changes, completion of the LGSCO self-assessment is voluntary during 2024/25. The LGSCO has stated that it intends to keep the status of the Code under review, with a view to making it mandatory in the future.

- 2.6 The Council has continuously invested in the ongoing development of its Granicus complaints system to support effective tracking, analysis and oversight of complaints across the organisation using intelligent IT solutions.
- 2.7 In accordance with the Code and referred to within the self-assessment documentations – Cabinet are required to publish a statement in relation to the Council's complaints handling.

### 3.0 Details of Consultation

- 3.1 Housing complaints performance and learning has been shared with the Council Housing Advisory Group throughout the 2024/25 financial year, which includes tenants, elected members, and partner organisations. Performance has been noted and consideration for wider involvement of tenants has been considered.

### 4.0 Options and Options Analysis (including risk assessment)

	<b>Option 1:</b> To approve the recommendations as set out in the report.	<b>Option 2:</b> That an alternative approach to complaint handling be proposed.
Advantages	Ensures continued compliance with mandatory Code (housing) and prepares for future expected mandatory compliance across all services. Improves consistency and builds a learning culture.  Continued improvement work required in non-housing areas	Unknown
Disadvantages	Continued resource requirements required on an area not yet mandatory for the Council.	Unknown
Risks	Inconsistency may persist while new systems embed.	Risk of non-compliance, reputational harm, and missed opportunity to improve customer service.

### 5.0 Officer Preferred Option (and comments)

- 5.1 Option 1: This allows officers to work towards a realistic plan for full compliance across the council in time for the expected mandatory requirement in 12 months' time. It promotes a resident focused approach to complaints, and service improvement. It also supports the continued development of IT solutions to promote a streamlined, and consistent service for residents.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

- 6.1 Generally, residents who have reached the stage of making a formal complaint against the Council are using this mechanism to show genuine and reasonable dissatisfaction. Effective and unified complaint handling and the continuation of the development of a positive complaints culture offers vital feedback on service delivery and should be treated as a genuine opportunity for improvement.
- 6.2 The Code provides a clear and unified framework to ensure complaints are taken seriously, handled fairly, and used to drive improvement. It prioritises open, transparent communication with complainants; consistency in responses and response times; accessibility for complainants; and a strong focus on evidenced learning from complaints.
- 6.3 This report and associated Appendices sets out the progress made across housing and non-housing services, and our continued commitment to accountability and learning and supports the Council's wider vision of being a 'Co-operative, Kind and Responsible Council'.

### **RELATIONSHIP TO POLICY FRAMEWORK**

Lancaster City Council Corporate Plan 2024–2027 – A Co-operative, Kind, and Responsible Council.

This approach to complaint handling supports openness, fairness, and service improvement.

### **CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

**(including Health & Safety, Equality & Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, HR, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)**

No known implications.

### **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Although the majority of time spent by officers and associated IT costs regarding complaint handling and reporting of performance can continue to be managed from within existing resources, recruitment is currently underway for a temporary part-time Complaints Performance Officer to provide additional support, to be funded from in-year Council-wide vacancy savings. For this post to be extended beyond 31 March 2026, a further source of funding will need to be identified, or a growth proposal considered as part of the 2026/27 budget-setting process.

The cost of the additional post should be considered in the context of mitigating against potential findings and future fines from either Ombudsman, especially as the expectation is that the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's (LGSCO) Complaint Handling Code will also become mandatory from 2026. Numbers of complaints being received are currently increasing, reportedly around three times as many as the corresponding period last year.

## **OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

### **Human Resources:**

Continuing to adopt this approach does bring additional requirements for those involved in complaint handling as well as reporting requirements. The Council has approved to the introduction of a part-time post to support with this work.

### **Information Services:**

Minimal – ongoing development of the Granicus system supported within existing capacity

### **Property:**

None known

### **Open Spaces:**

None known

## **SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS**

There is currently no budgetary provision for this role however in the short-term it can be managed from favourable salary savings achieved within this financial year. Beyond that the continuation is therefore subject to future funding being identified. This could be met from compensating savings being found usually via a redirection of existing budgets or service restructuring. Should they not be identified then a growth proposal will need to be considered as part of the 2026/27 budget-setting process.

## **MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS**

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments to add

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Appendix A – Housing Ombudsman Self-Assessment

Appendix B - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Self Assessment

Appendix C – (Council Housing) Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report (2024-25)

Appendix D – Lancaster City Council (Non-Housing) Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report (2024-25)

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