

INDIVIDUAL CABINET MEMBER DECISION

Complaints Policy Review and Revision (December 2025)

Report of Chief Officer Housing and Property

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To seek approval for the revised Complaints Policy (December 2025), which replaces the previous policy dated April 2024, ensuring compliance with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and addressing recommendations from the Ombudsman's review (September 2025).

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

- (1) That the *Complaints Policy (December 2025)* be approved as the Council's corporate policy for handling complaints.
- (2) That the updated Housing Ombudsman Complaint Self-Assessment is approved and published on the Council's website.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Housing Ombudsman reviewed Lancaster City Council's April 2024 Complaints Policy, as part of their sector wide review of social housing provider's complaints policies, and issued 21 recommendations to ensure compliance with the Complaint Handling Code at the end of September 2025.
- 1.2 The revised policy (Appendix A) addresses these recommendations, strengthens clarity for residents, and improves governance and accountability.
- 1.3 Following changes made the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Self-Assessment (Appendix B) has been updated.
- 1.4 Implementation and reporting of compliance is due to the Housing Ombudsman by 31 December 2025.

2.0 Proposal Details: Complaints Policy (December 2025)

2.1 The updated policy introduces:

- Clearer definitions of complaints vs service requests.
- Revised exclusions to ensure fairness and transparency.
- Stronger compliance with statutory timeframes and extension agreements.
- Explicit commitment to accessibility and representation rights.
- Clear process for raising additional complaints during investigations
- Formal review cycle every two years.

2.2 A more detailed account of changes made to the document can be found in the table below.

SECTION	APRIL 2024 POLICY	DECEMBER 2025 POLICY	CHANGE SUMMARY
WHAT IS A COMPLAINT?	Defined complaint per Ombudsman but stated: 'If this is the first time you are reporting an issue to us, we may decide to treat this as a request for service.'	Retains Ombudsman definition but adds examples of service requests and clarifies trigger for complaint.	Removed ambiguity; added practical examples; clarified trigger.
SERVICE REQUESTS	Mentioned difference but lacked examples and clarity.	Added explicit examples and process for recording service requests separately.	Improves clarity for residents and staff.
EXCLUSIONS	Listed 12 exclusions including policy disagreements, rent/service charge complaints, legal proceedings.	Removed blanket exclusions; clarified complaints can be raised until legal proceedings filed; added discretion for late complaints.	Aligns with Ombudsman recommendations; fairer and more transparent.
ACCESSIBILITY	Mentioned translation and home visits but no explicit commitment.	Explicitly states requests for accessible formats will be considered.	Strengthens accessibility compliance.
WHO CAN COMPLAIN	Required complainant to 'feel disadvantaged.'	Any individual or organization using council services can complain.	Removed restrictive wording; more inclusive.
COMPLAINT PROCEDURE OVERVIEW	Two-stage system stated but implied informal stage; Chief Executive could bypass process.	Confirms only two stages; removed informal stage references; deleted bypass clause.	Ensures compliance with Code.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT & DEFINITION	Acknowledgements lacked definition and outcomes sought.	Includes definition, scope, and outcomes sought at both stages.	Meets Code requirements for transparency.
TIMEFRAMES &	Extensions at	Extensions must be	Resident-focused

EXTENSIONS	council discretion; no resident agreement required.	agreed with residents and include update intervals.	and compliant.
RAISING ADDITIONAL COMPLAINTS	No reference.	New section detailing process for related/unrelated issues during investigation.	Addresses Code requirement.
STAGE 2 REVIEW	Could be handled by Chief Officer for service complained about.	Must not be same person as Stage 1 investigator.	Ensures independence and fairness.
RESPONSES	Issued after all actions completed.	Issued when outcome known; outstanding actions tracked separately.	Improves timeliness and transparency.
MONITORING & REVIEW	No formal review cycle stated.	Policy reviewed every two years or sooner if required.	Adds governance and compliance assurance.

3.0 Details of Consultation

3.1 Given that the revisions to the Complaints Policy were made to address statutory compliance requirements and implement recommendations from the Housing Ombudsman, no tenant consultation was undertaken.

3.2 The changes do not alter the fundamental rights of tenants or the accessibility of the complaints process; rather, they ensure the Council meets its regulatory obligations under the Complaint Handling Code.

3.3 Furthermore, due to the time-bound nature of the deadline set by the Housing Ombudsman recommendations, tenants and residents were not consulted with to ensure an expeditious review and revision.

3.4 Whilst timeframes have not allowed for resident consultation at this time, Council Housing service is committed to sharing these changes with the Council Housing Advisory Group and Tenant Voice, as well as seeking to adopt tenant scrutiny within our work over the coming twelve months.

3.5 The amendments to the policy have been reviewed and agreed by key staff members involved with the complaints process.

4.0 Options and Options Analysis (including risk assessment)

	Option 1: Approve revised policy (Preferred)	Option 2: Retain April 2024 policy –	Option 3: Defer approval
Advantages	Ensures full compliance with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling	No identified advantages.	Allows more time for internal review or additional consultation if required.

	<p>Code and meets Ombudsman requirements, thereby reducing the risk of regulatory action and reputational damage.</p> <p>Provides clarity and transparency for residents and staff.</p>		
Disadvantages	None	<p>This option leaves the Council non-compliant with the Ombudsman Code and recommendations as the current policy contains wording and exclusions deemed unfair or unclear.</p>	<p>Misses Ombudsman deadlines for response and implementation. Delays compliance and undermines confidence in governance processes.</p>
Risks	Minimal risk approved	<p>if</p> <p>High risk of Ombudsman enforcement action, including Complaint Handling Failure Orders. Significant reputational damage and potential governance criticism.</p>	<p>High risk of regulatory action and reputational harm.</p> <p>Potential escalation by Ombudsman for failure to act within required timescales</p>

5.0 Officer Preferred Option (and comments)

5.1 Option 1 is the officer preferred option. Adopting the new Policy ensures compliance with the Housing Ombudsman.

6.0 Conclusion

6.1 Approval of the revised Complaints Policy (December 2025) is essential to ensure the Council meets its statutory obligations under the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and complies with the Ombudsman's recommendations following their September 2025 review. The changes strengthen clarity, fairness, and accessibility for residents while improving governance and accountability.

6.2 Timely approval is critical to meet the Ombudsman's compliance deadlines thereby mitigating the risk of enforcement action and reputational harm.

RELATIONSHIP TO POLICY FRAMEWORK

The revised Complaints Policy supports the Council's priorities of delivering a Cooperative, Kind and Responsible Council and Healthy and Happy Communities. It also contributes to compliance with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and aligns with the Council Housing Service Improvement Plan (SIP) 2024–26, ensuring transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

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

No impact identified.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no legal implications to amending the complaints policy. Like any policy of the Council it is important that officers follow approve policy and only depart from policy where there is a good reason to do so. Failure to follow the complaints policy could result in adverse findings by the Ombudsman, financial penalty and reputational harm.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Human Resources:

None

Information Services:

None

Property:

None

Open Spaces:

None

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The s151 Officer has been consulted and has no comments to add

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has no further comments to add

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Complaints Policy (December 2025)

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