

Annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report

Report To: Cabinet

Date of decision: Wednesday, 03 September 2025

Portfolio: Governance, Waste and Local Economy

Access: Public document (not exempt from disclosure)

Executive Summary

This report presents an overview of the Council's complaints performance for the 2024/25 financial year ("Review Period"). It outlines how the Council aligns its practices with the standards set by the Wealden Values, Wealden's 5-Star Customer Service Standards, the Housing Ombudsman Service ("HOS") Complaint Handling Code, and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman ("LGSCO") Complaint Handling Code. The report details performance outcomes, identifies predominant themes in complaints, and outlines how feedback is being used to inform key service improvements.

Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to:

- a) Welcome the outcome of the LGSCO Annual Review 2024/25 (see Appendix C), with only 1 complaint investigated and 0 complaints upheld against the Council (compared to an average of 66% of complaints upheld in similar authorities).
- b) Welcome the outcome of the HOS Annual Review 2024/25, with no determinations made against the Council;
- c) Approve the HOS Self-Assessment as set out in Appendix A;
- d) Approve the LGSCO Self-Assessment as set out in Appendix B;
- e) Approve the revised Complaints Procedure set out in Appendix D;
- f) Approve the Remedies Policy set out at Appendix F;
- g) Support the Complaints Improvement Plan set out at Appendix G;
- h) Endorse the Cabinet response set out at Appendix H.

Council Strategy

CW4. Listening & Community Engagement:

We will strengthen local democracy and build trust in the council by developing a culture of listening and engagement to enable greater involvement of residents, communities and businesses in decisions on council services and priorities.

This report supports the Council in delivering the following targets of the Council Strategy:

Community Resilience & Wellbeing

- Effective complaint handling promotes a positive relationship between the Council and our service users. It enables our residents and customers to be heard and understood.
- Provides insight into day-to-day operations, allowing the Council to assess the effectiveness of its services.
- Use the data and learning from complaints to drive improvements in service provision.
- The Council Strategy includes a commitment to being an open, honest and transparent council

Reasons for the Recommendation

The HOS and LGSCO Complaint Handling Codes (“the Codes”) set clear standards for managing complaints by landlords and councils, aiming to ensure fair, transparent, and accountable processes. This report provides assurance in relation to the Codes by:

- Assessing compliance with the Codes;
- reporting performance openly;
- identifying themes and improvement areas;
- strengthening resilience and response times;
- learning from complaints and using outcomes to guide service development and enhance customer experience.

Introduction

1. Complaint handling is an important aspect of governance and service delivery for local authorities. It assists councils in addressing issues, acquiring feedback from residents, and improving public services accordingly. To promote consistent, fair, and transparent complaint processes, both the HOS and the LGSCO have established formal complaint handling standards for councils and service providers.

Section A: Complaint Handling Codes

The HOS Complaint Handling Code

2. The revised HOS Complaint Handling Code (“HOS Code”) was published in February 2024 and came into effect from April 2024, following national consultation. A copy of the HOS Code is available via the background papers.
3. The HOS evaluates landlord compliance in three main areas:
 - **Scrutiny and Oversight:** Landlords must produce and publish an annual complaints report covering self-assessment, performance analysis, rejected complaints, Ombudsman findings, service improvements, and actions taken after Ombudsman reports. This report and the Cabinet’s response (as governing body) must appear on the Council’s website.
 - **Policy:** Complaint policies must align with all HOS Code requirements.
 - **Practice:** Handling of complaints is assessed based on landlord data and Ombudsman case insights.

Wealden Compliance with HOS Complaint Handling Code

4. The Council is required by the HOS Code to complete an annual self-assessment on its complaints procedure, report it to Cabinet for approval, and publish it [on the complaints section](#) of our website.
5. All HOS Code requirements were met, and the self-assessment can be found in Appendix A.
6. The HOS Code requires landlords to appoint a Member Responsible for Complaints (“MRC”). The MRC at Wealden is the Leader and Portfolio Holder for Governance, Waste and Local Economy. The MRC plays a key role in complaints management and supporting a positive complaint handling culture. Further information on the role of the MRC is available via the background papers.

The LGSCO’s Complaint Handling Code

7. The LGSCO introduced a new complaint handling guidance in April 2024 (“LGSCO Code”), which provides a best practice framework for councils. Councils are encouraged to adopt it as they are able to do so, with the LGSCO starting to consider compliance as part of their processes from April 2026. While flexible in approach, the LGSCO Code highlights principles of fairness, transparency, accountability, and continuous learning. A copy of the LGSCO Code is available via the background papers.

Wealden Compliance with LGSCO Complaint Handling Code

1. The LGSCO Code requires the Council to conduct and report an annual self-assessment of its complaints procedure for Cabinet approval. Once approved, the self-assessment must be published [on the complaints section](#) of our website. It is available at Appendix B.

2. The Council is on track to meet the LGSCO Code requirements effective from April 2026, with many measures already in place under the HOS Code. See further details in the Complaints Improvement Plan at Appendix G.

Section B: Ombudsman Performance

LGSCO Annual Review of Complaints 2024-25 - The National Picture

3. The LGSCO has published the [Annual Review of Local Governments Complaints 2024-25](#), which reports that it received a record 20,773 complaints and enquiries during 2024–25. This represents a significant increase, aligned with a 16% year-on-year rise observed over the preceding two years. Of these, 4,298 complaints were investigated, with 3,552 (83%) upheld - highlighting a notable incidence of fault within local government services on a national level.
4. Complaint volumes by service area remained highest in Education & Children's Services (27%) and Adult Social Care (13%), both of which are outside the Council's remit. Nationally, Housing accounted for 17% of cases received, with an 85% uphold rate. Most housing-related complaints concerned issues such as homelessness decisions, allocations, and access to housing registers.
5. Despite ongoing pressures on councils, compliance with the LGSCO's recommendations remained exceptionally high at 99.7%, demonstrating the sector's sustained commitment to redress and continuous improvement.
6. The LGSCO further highlighted the value of early resolution, noting that 12% of cases were resolved by local authorities offering suitable remedies prior to formal investigation. The national average of upheld complaints was 6.2 per 100,000 residents, although this figure varied considerably by authority type.

Wealden LGSCO Annual Review Letter

7. The LGSCO issues an annual review letter with complaint statistics; Wealden's 2024/25 letter is in Appendix C.
8. It is highly positive to note that no complaints were upheld by the LGSCO during the Review Period. Of 15 cases referred, 3 were outside the scope of the LGSCO, 11 were closed after assessment, and 1 was investigated. The single investigated complaint was not upheld.
9. All anonymised decision reports are available at <https://www.lgo.org.uk>

HOS Annual Performance Report

10. The HOS did not submit a performance report to the Council during the Review Period, as no decisions were issued. In alignment with HOS policy, performance reports are typically prepared for landlords with higher volumes of determinations to facilitate the identification of trends or concerns.
11. During the Review Period, the HOS received notification of 15 complaints; however, no formal determinations were made. Two complaints fell outside the HOS's

jurisdiction, and feedback provided in the outcome letters were reviewed internally to capture and implement any potential learning opportunities.

12. The HOS maintains a [Decisions Archive](#), which publishes anonymised decisions for all investigated cases to encourage organisational learning and illustrate the impact that complaints can have.

Section C: Wealden – Review of Complaints Policy and Performance

Wealden Complaint Handling Review

13. Schedule 1 reports on housing complaint performance during the Review Period, as required by the HOS.
14. Schedule 2 covers council-wide complaint performance, including housing complaints.

Review of Wealden Complaints Policy

15. A recent review found the existing Complaints Policy remains fit for purpose, requiring no major changes. However, as per HOS recommendations, it is proposed that a separate Remedies Policy be adopted. The Complaints Policy now reflects this (see section 8 of Appendix D).
16. A draft Remedies Policy is provided in Appendix F. It outlines how the Council will offer redress, including statutory compensation, discretionary payments, and other remedies, to ensure consistent, fair, and transparent decisions in line with HOS and LGSCO guidance.

Section D: Learning from Complaints

Housing Service Improvements

17. We are committed to service improvements driven by complaints, strengthening trust and supporting organisational growth. The following actions were taken based on feedback:
 - **Tenancy & Estates – Mutual Exchange:** Improved introductory communication for tenants following a review.
 - **Property Services – Gutter Repairs:** Implemented a forward repair plan after a contractor failed to complete gutter repairs.
 - **Property Services – Window Replacement:** Allocated extra resources to prevent future delays caused by contractor capacity issues.
 - **Housing Allocations:** Added resilience measures to manage staff absences and maintain service continuity after a short-notice property offer withdrawal.
 - **Housing Options – Communication:** Verbal communications now consistently followed up in writing for clarity and record-keeping.

- **Property Services – Landlord Communication:** Updated letters to landlords to better promote best practices for mould prevention and treatment.
- **Property Services – Heating Repairs:** Revised procedures for updating tenant details after delays were traced to outdated information.
- **Property Services – Contractor Conduct/Scheduling:** Required contractors to enhance training and adopt new processes for customer care and scheduling.

Council Wide Service Improvements

- **Building Control:** Staff were reminded to maintain prompt communication with customers, ensuring all call-backs are completed despite operational pressures.
- **Electoral Services:** Procedures for handling change of address requests and updating the electoral register were revised to improve accuracy and fairness.
- **PR & Communications:** Communication practices were reviewed to ensure public messaging is respectful, clear, and compliant with legislation and council values.

Complaints Improvement Plan

18. A Complaints Improvement Plan (“CIP”) has been developed and is attached at Appendix G. It aims to deliver transparent, high-quality services and addresses performance challenges according to complaint handling standards. The CIP uses internal reviews, self-assessments, user feedback, and Ombudsman findings to drive improvement.
19. The CIP sets targeted, time-bound actions for better complaint management, assigning responsible officers and including progress monitoring. It applies across all relevant service areas for a consistent approach.
20. The CIP’s primary purpose is to address non-compliance, improve response timeliness and quality, and ensure fair, thorough, customer-focused complaint management. It embeds learning into service delivery and staff development while building public trust and resident confidence.
21. Progress against the CIP will be monitored quarterly and reported to the MRC and the Chief Legal and Governance Officer, with annual submissions to Cabinet, as part of this report.
22. A key outcome from early 2024–25 is improving resilience. Measures include cross-training staff and developing support roles to maintain continuity during absences or increased demand.
23. A customer feedback survey now provides tenants with an opportunity to share experiences, informing further improvements for a more responsive process.
24. Planned reporting improvements also include:
 - Enhanced logging system for detailed data analysis.
 - Standardise Service Requests centrally.
 - Quarterly performance reports for the MRC, staff, and customers.
 - Monthly meetings with Housing to review complaint handling; Information Governance Team representatives attend.
 - Meetings of the Wealden and Tenants together Housing Board.

Cabinet Response

25. The Council's governing body is required by the Codes to formally review and respond to this report. This process ensures senior management oversight and accountability for complaint management and addresses any identified areas for improvement. The response provided at Appendix H outlines actions taken and subject to the approval and input of Cabinet will be published with the annual report to inform tenants and stakeholders.

Consultation

26. This report and appendices have been the subject of consultation with the Housing Policy and Partnership Teams and the MRC.

Considerations

The following considerations were taken into account in making the recommendations in this report.

Financial Considerations

27. The approval of the Remedies Policy may have a potential impact on service budgets with regards to compensation payments; however, it is not anticipated that these will be significant. As part of the budget setting process, budgets will be reviewed to ensure adequate provisions are made.
28. Should the Council not adhere to the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) Complaint Handling Code there is a risk of further compensation payments or additional fines.

Legal Considerations

29. Reports on the Council's performance in responding to complaints assists the Council to ensure that it complies with its best value duty to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness (section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999).
30. Under section 23 (12A) of the Local Government Act 1974, The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman ("LGSCO") issued a new complaint handling code ("Code") which sets out the procedure for local authorities to follow in order to handle complaints in a transparent and accessible way. Local authorities will be expected to take the Code into consideration as a form of guidance when creating policies and procedures. As noted in the body of the report, the Council is expected to have aligned its current processes and procedures with the new Code by 1st April 2026.

31. The Housing Ombudsman complaint handling code became statutory on 1 April 2024 (Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023) (“Act”).
32. Paragraphs 9-12 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme (HOS) set out the membership obligations to which all landlords must adhere. Paragraph 9b specifies that landlords must establish and maintain a complaints procedure in accordance with the Code.
33. Paragraphs 13-15 of the Scheme set out the power and steps that the HOS can take if a landlord is failing to comply with their membership obligations.
34. The Act placed a duty on the HOS to monitor compliance with the Code. The Ombudsman’s Code Compliance Framework (‘the framework’) sets out how the HOS will assess whether a landlord has met the requirements set out in the Code

Christopher Crichton, Legal Services Manager – 29 July 2025

Climate Change Considerations

35. There are no climate change impacts arising from the recommendations of this report.

Chantal Lass, Climate Change Manager – 22 July 2025

Resource Considerations

36. There is reference in the report to challenges around reduced staffing which impacted on the handling of complaints but there are no recommendations to increase staffing. In order to ensure resilience of the service, consideration may need to be given to training staff in other service areas to support with complaints handling during peak periods of pressure. There are also wider staff implications in terms of training around the new procedures to ensure this is embedded into practice across all relevant services involved in responding to service requests and complaints.

Debbie Langridge, People & OD Manager - 29 July 2025.

Environmental and Sustainability Considerations

37. None arising from this report.’

Equalities Considerations

38. Currently being considered

Community Wellbeing and Safety Considerations

39. In line with the Codes set out by both the LGSCO and the HOS, the important role complaint handling plays in supporting community wellbeing and safety is recognised.
40. Throughout the Review Period, the Council has continued to ensure that complaints are not only resolved fairly and efficiently but are also used to inform

service improvements that contribute to the overall health, safety, and resilience of our communities.

41. Where complaints have highlighted concerns about safeguarding, personal safety, anti-social behaviour, or environmental health risks, these have been prioritised for swift resolution and escalated through appropriate channels. The Council remains committed to ensuring that complaints processes support the early identification of risks to individuals and the wider community.
42. The HOS Code specifically emphasises the importance of learning from complaints to prevent recurrence and improve services. This is particularly important in cases involving housing disrepair, tenant vulnerability, or community safety concerns, where the consequences of poor service can significantly impact residents' physical and mental wellbeing.
43. The LGSCO also highlights the need for public bodies to demonstrate transparency, accountability, and a learning culture. The process to embed these principles has started by ensuring that complaints which indicate potential harm or broader risks are reviewed not just for individual resolution but for wider service learning. In several cases this year, complaint themes have prompted reviews of policies or prompted multi-agency discussions where safety risks were involved.
44. The Council continues to promote an open and accessible complaints culture so that residents feel confident raising concerns, knowing that their voices will be heard and that issues affecting their wellbeing and safety will be taken seriously. This includes working to ensure that complaint processes are inclusive and sensitive to the needs of vulnerable individuals or those with additional needs.
45. Looking ahead, the Council aims to strengthen links between complaints data and our wider work on safeguarding, public health, and community safety—ensuring that learning from complaints is fully integrated into our service improvement and strategic planning activities. **Kirsty Ward – 18 July 2025**

Wealden Housing and Tenants Together Board Considerations

46. There has been increased engagement with the Housing Board to obtain their views and feedback on complaints performance and the progress made in addressing previously identified issues. This has reinforced the Council's commitment to transparency and accountability, while also enabling the Board to contribute to the development of improvements. The outcome has been a strengthened and more collaborative relationship between the Housing Board and Information Governance.
47. There has also been a consumer panel meeting with the Tenant's Association to provide an update on complaints performance for 2024/25. The meeting outlined the actions already implemented, the positive impact on performance in 2025/26 to date, and the longer-term measures planned to deliver sustained improvement. The Tenant's Association responded with both support and constructive feedback, which will be considered as part of the Council's ongoing approach to enhancing complaints handling.
48. The Housing Board welcomed the report and resolved:
 - a. That the Council's revised Complaints Procedure, be agreed.

- b. That the Complaint Handling Improvement plan and Housing Ombudsman Self-Assessment 2024/25 submission, be agreed.
- c. That the achievements in performance in quarter 1 2025/26, particularly in relation to social housing compliance and tenant satisfaction, be noted.

Local Government Reorganisation Considerations

- 49. As the Council navigates local government reorganisation, robust complaints feedback and ongoing performance monitoring is critical. Systematically capturing and analysing complaints enables the Council to identify emerging issues, inform targeted interventions, and adapt services to meet evolving community needs. This approach not only supports transparency and accountability as part of our Governance and Assurance Framework but also ensures that learning from residents' experiences directly shapes service improvements and helps the Council remain agile and responsive during periods of structural change.

Conclusions

- 50. This report summarises the Council's complaints performance and service improvements during 2024.25, showing an ongoing commitment to fair and transparent complaint handling under both Codes.
- 51. The strong performance in terms of both the LGSCO and HOS Ombudsman during the Review Period should be commended.
- 52. Despite higher complaint volumes and staffing challenges, most complaints were resolved at Stage 1. Targeted improvements as outlined in this report, the CIP, staff training, and better triage have already resulted in improved performance.
- 53. The Council continues to learn from complaints, with clear evidence of service and process changes that meet regulatory standards and resident needs.
- 54. The Council aims to further strengthen its complaints process by adopting a clearer reporting format and maintaining strong engagement with residents and senior leadership oversight.

Corporate Management Team Recommendation

CMT recommends that Cabinet:

- a) Welcome the outcome of the LGSCO Annual Review 2024/25 (see Appendix C), with only 1 complaint investigated and 0 complaints upheld against the Council (compared to an average of 66% of complaints upheld in similar authorities);
- b) Welcome the outcome of the HOS Annual Review 2024/25, with no determinations made against the Council;
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- f) Approve the Remedies Policy set out at Appendix F;

- g) Support the Complaints Improvement Plan set out at Appendix G;
 - h) Endorse the Cabinet response set out at Appendix H.
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Contacts and References

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Head of Service: Clare McGough – Chief Legal & Governance Officer

Report Author: Kirsty Ward – Information Governance Manager

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Classification: Non-key - Executive decision with low impact on the budget or people

Appendices:

A: HOS Self-Assessment

B: LGSCO Self-Assessment

C: LGSCO Annual Review Letter 2024/25

D: Revised Complaints procedure

E: Complaints Performance Data

F: Remedies Policy

G: Corporate Improvement Plan

H: Draft Cabinet response

Schedules

1: Wealden Housing Complaint Handling Performance

2: Council Wide Complaint Handling Performance

Background Papers:

- [The Complaint Handling Code | Housing Ombudsman Service](#)
- [Complaint Handling Code - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#)
- [Complaints Procedure - Wealden District Council](#)
- [Wealden 5 Star Customer Service Standards](#)
- [The Council's Values - Wealden District Council](#)
- [Local Government Complaint Reviews - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#)
- [Annual Review of Local Governments Complaints 2024-25](#)

- [Annual Complaint Review Reports - Housing Ombudsman Service](#)
- [Member Responsible for Complaints \(MRC\) | Housing Ombudsman](#)