

Lancaster City Council | Council Housing

Annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report

2025-26

Introduction

At Lancaster City Council, we value feedback from our residents as it helps us identify areas where our services or properties can be improved. Regardless of the complexity of the cases, residents can expect the Housing Team to address their concerns promptly.

While we strive to resolve issues on the spot, there are instances where further investigation is necessary. In such cases, the complaint will be handled according to Stage 1 of our Complaints Policy, ensuring transparency and accountability in our processes. Our Complaints Policy is readily available to view online, outlining what they can expect when they make a complaint to us as their landlord.

We conduct an annual self-assessment of our complaints handling against the Housing Ombudsman Complaint code to ensure compliance, and to drive continuous improvement. This self-assessment can be found as a separate document (Appendix A) to this report.

To make a complaint or share concerns, residents can reach us via email, phone, in person, or even through our social media channels, although complainants should note that social media inquiries may not be monitored daily.

1. Executive Summary

This report outlines the annual complaint performance for the financial year to date (April 2025 to March 2026) and the key learning and service improvements made following resolution of complaints.

Total complaints received	Total: 201
○ Stage 1 ○ Stage 2 ○ Excluded	○ 148 ○ 21 ○ 32
% change in complaints received in the previous year.	+101% (100 cases to 201)
% of complaints progressed to Stage 2	12.4%
○ Direction of travel from 2024/25	○ +3.8%
% of all complaints responded to within the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code timescales	Total:
○ Stage 1	○ S1: 91% (134 of 148)
○ Stage 2	○ S2: 80% (17 of 21)

Throughout this financial year, we have continued to embed and strengthen the approaches introduced in the previous year to support a sustained culture of learning from complaints and customer feedback.

The Council remains fully committed to continuous service improvement. This extends beyond formal complaints and includes insights gathered through wider tenant engagement, learning from Housing Ombudsman publications and determinations, sector developments, and relevant media and best practice across the housing sector.

A key priority has been to ensure that tenants are both aware of, and confident in using, the complaints process. To support this, we have maintained a proactive approach to promoting the service and the role of the Housing Ombudsman through a range of channels, including digital platforms, the Council's website, and tenant communications such as newsletters.

In November, we also delivered a comprehensive programme of refresher training for all staff involved in complaint handling. This programme reinforced expected standards, provided practical insights from recent cases, and enabled officers to share learning and good practice across services.

This has contributed to a more consistent and informed approach to complaint resolution. We are committed to maintaining this focus and will repeat this training programme during 2026/27 to ensure continued improvement and alignment with best practice.

2. Complaint Performance

Complaint Volume

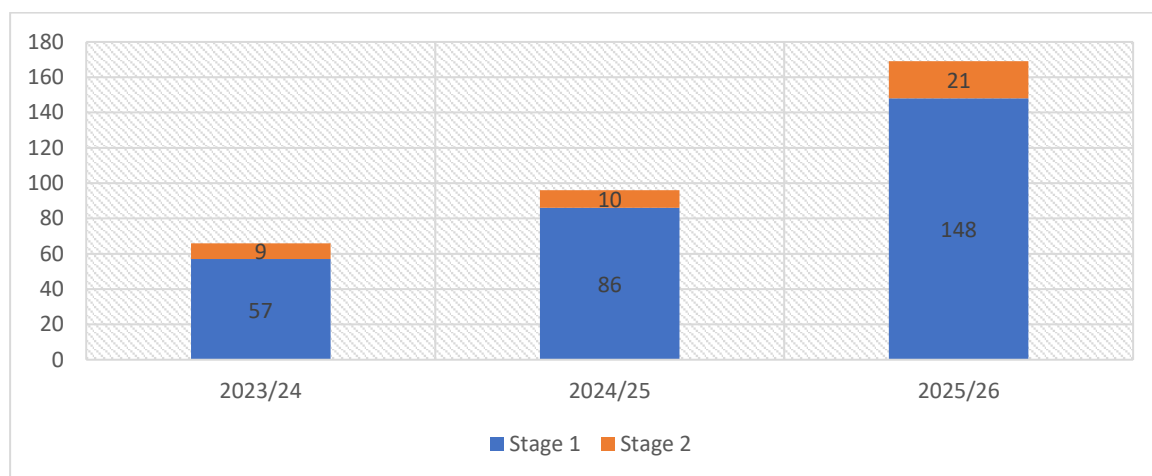
Overall, there has been a 101% increase in complaints received during this financial year when compared to the previous year. This figure is broken down as follows across our complaint stages:

Stage 1: 148

Stage 2: 21

Excluded: 32

We have had an escalation rate of 12.4% from Stage 1 to Stage 2 during the financial year to date. Which is a notable increase from 2024/25 Q4 escalation rate of 8.6%



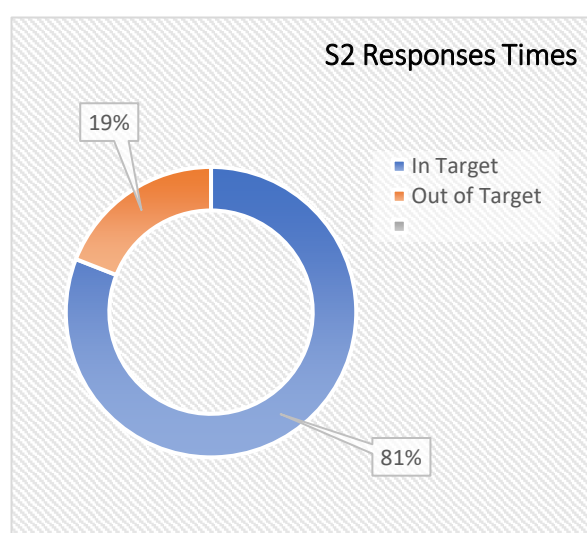
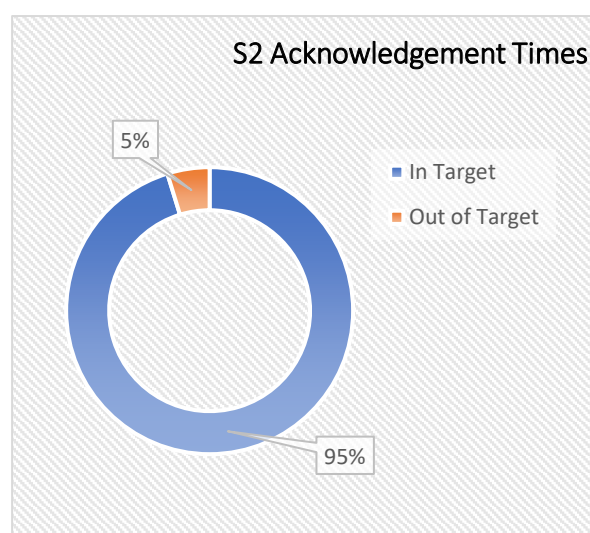
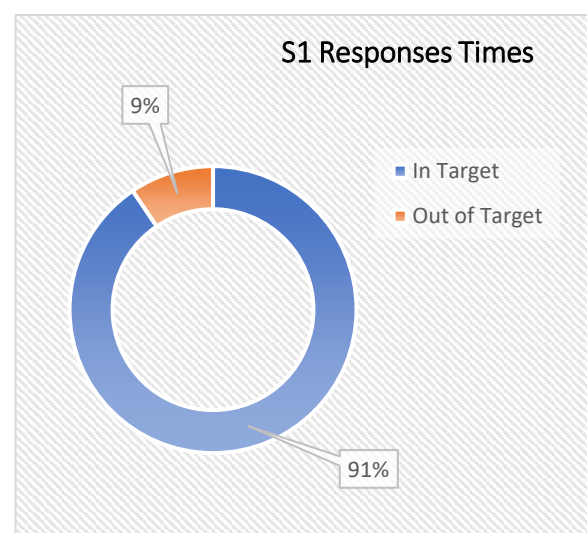
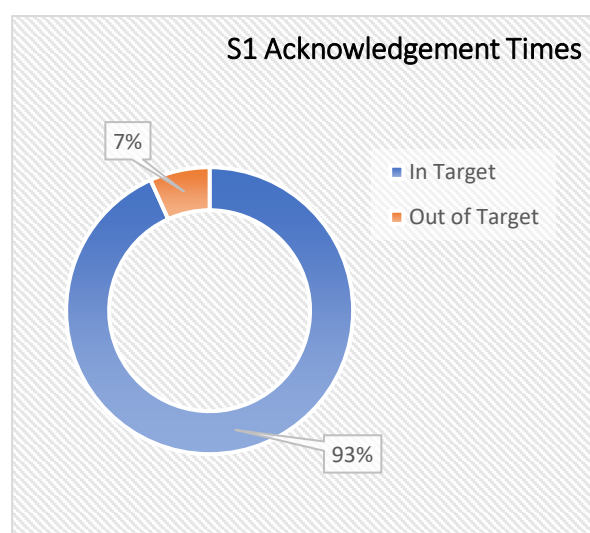
The increase in complaint volume is taken very seriously by our service, however it was an expected reality due to the continuation of work undertaken to promote the complaints process. The Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code is clear that high volumes of complaints must not be seen as a negative, as they can be indicative of a well-publicised and accessible complaints process. As such, the Council Housing Service is committed to embody a positive complaints culture where complaints are welcomed and treated as valuable sources of data and feedback to aid service improvement.

While we are satisfied that our complaint process is accessible and well publicised to residents, our overall aim is to ensure that resident concerns are resolved promptly and effectively, without the need to resort to the formal complaints process.

Acknowledgement and Response Rates

In the financial year to date (April to March) the acknowledgement and response rate, in line with the Ombudsman Standards, are as follows:

Stage	Acknowledgement (A)	Response (R)
1 (A) - 5 Working Days (R) - 10 Working Days	93.2% 138 of 148 Cases	90.5% 134 of 148 Cases
2 (A) - 5 Working Days (R) - 20 Working Days	95.2% 20 of 21 Cases	80.9% 17 of 21 Cases
Combined	93.5% 158 of 169 Cases	89.3% 151 of 169 Cases



Please note that, in instances where the Council was unable to meet the Housing Ombudsman's prescribed response timescales, an extension was appropriately applied in the majority of cases.

At Stage 1, extensions were applied in 13 out of 14 cases where the response fell outside the required timeframe. At Stage 2, extensions were applied in 3 out of 4 such cases.

This reflects that, in most instances, delays were managed in line with the requirements of the Complaint Handling Code, with extensions formally implemented to ensure transparency and continued engagement with residents.

The primary reasons for delay were:

- Complexity of cases requiring multi-service input
- Awaiting information from contractors or third parties
- Staff availability during peak demand periods

Outcomes and Remedies

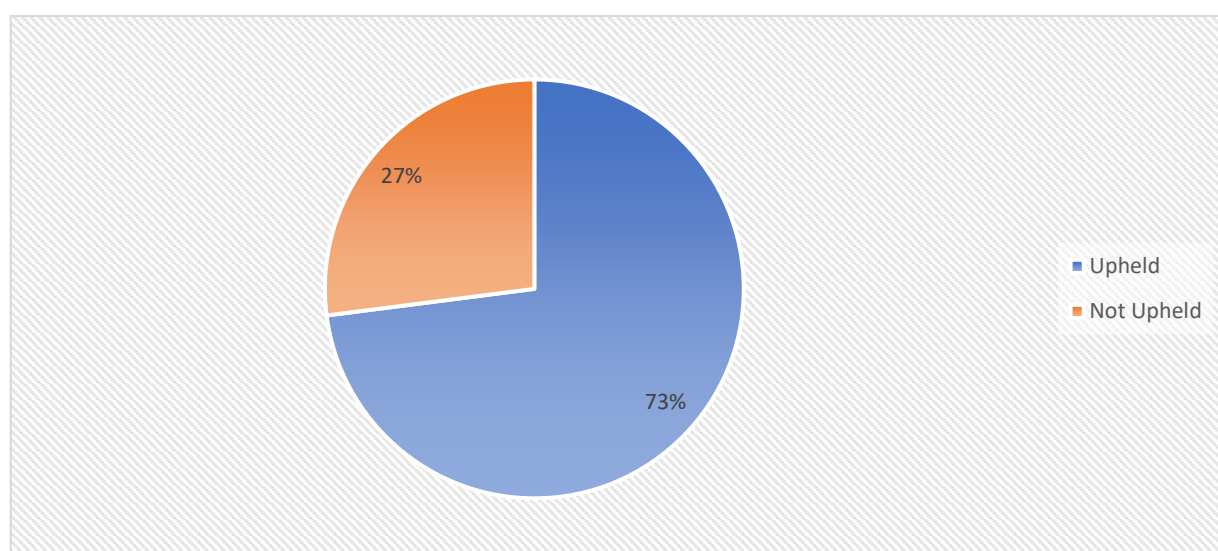
Monitoring complaint outcomes is a key element of understanding service performance, identifying failure, and ensuring that appropriate remedies are delivered. It provides assurance that the organisation is both recognising where things have gone wrong and taking proportionate action to put matters right.

In 2025/26, 73% of Stage 1 complaints were upheld, equating to 108 cases upheld and 40 cases not upheld. This relatively high uphold rate indicates a transparent and customer-focused approach to complaint handling, where issues raised by residents are carefully considered and acknowledged where service standards have not been met.

Importantly, a higher uphold rate is not viewed negatively. Instead, it reflects a positive complaints culture in which the service is open to recognising shortcomings, learning from outcomes, and using this insight to drive service improvement. Each upheld complaint represents an opportunity to identify root causes, implement corrective actions, and improve future service delivery.

Remedies provided during the year were proportionate to the issues identified and focused on resolving the customer's concerns, including explanations, apologies, and service-led actions to address failures. This approach aligns with the organisation's wider commitment to accountability, continuous improvement, and compliance with the expectations of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.

Year	Upheld / Outcome	Volume (where available)	Notes
2025/26	Stage 1 upheld: 73%	Upheld: 108 Not upheld: 40	High uphold rate supports transparency and learning.



Service Areas

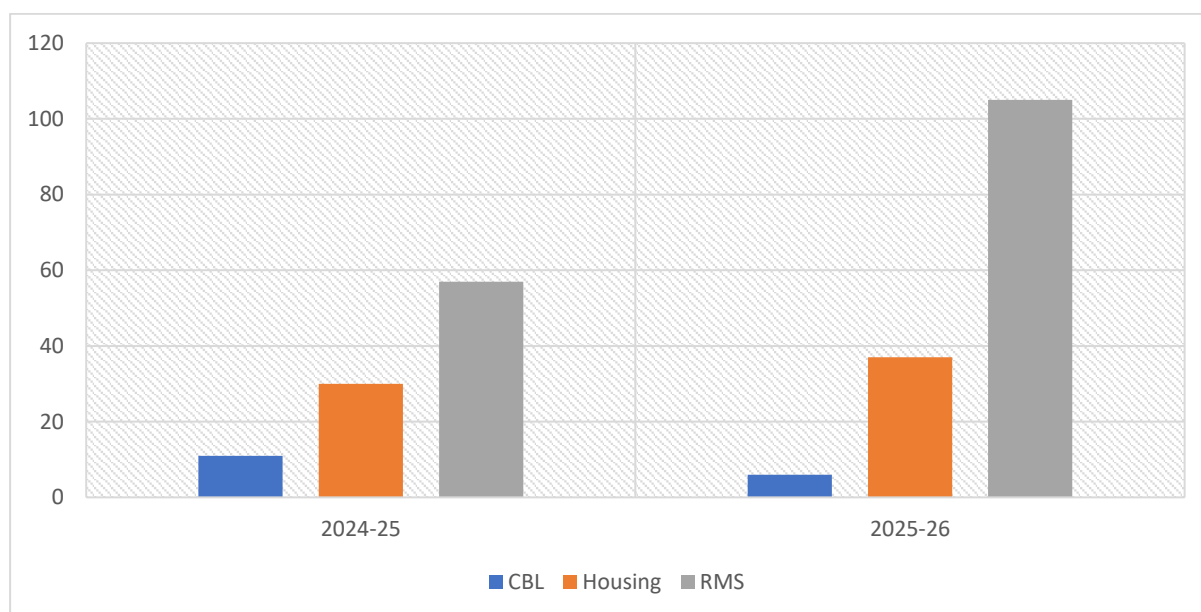
Analysis of complaint distribution across service areas supports a risk-based approach to service improvement, highlighting where operational pressures and customer impact are most significant.

In 2025/26, the Repairs and Maintenance Service continues to account for the highest proportion of complaints. Of all non-excluded Stage 1 complaints, 105 cases were attributed to Repairs and Maintenance, representing a substantial increase from 57 cases in 2024/25. This reflects both the scale and complexity of repairs activity across the housing stock, as well as known service pressures linked to demand, contractor performance, and end-to-end repairs pathways. However it is worth noting that this is in the context of there being approximately 12,000 responsive repairs carried out each year, making this one of the largest service areas in terms of work and tenant interaction.

Housing Management accounted for 37 complaints in 2025/26, an increase from 30 in the previous year. While lower in volume than Repairs and Maintenance, complaints within this area continue to highlight the importance of effective tenancy management, communication, and case handling.

In contrast, Choice Based Lettings generated a lower level of complaint activity, with 6 complaints recorded in 2025/26 compared to 11 in 2024/25. This indicates a relatively stable performance area with limited complaint-driven risk.

Consistent with previous reporting, the concentration of complaints within Repairs and Maintenance provides a clear focus for targeted service improvement activity, particularly in relation to communication, timeliness, and the management of repairs journeys and service handovers between teams.



Complaint Themes

Analysis of complaint themes provides an important early warning system for identifying systemic service weaknesses and prioritising improvement activity. By reviewing upheld complaints in detail, the service is able to understand the underlying causes of dissatisfaction and ensure that learning is translated into targeted service improvement.

In 2025/26, the most significant theme identified from upheld complaints was Neglect or Unjustifiable Delay, accounting for 48.1% of upheld cases. This represents a continuing and increasing area of risk, closely

aligned with operational pressures within service delivery—particularly in relation to repairs—and remains a key priority for improvement.

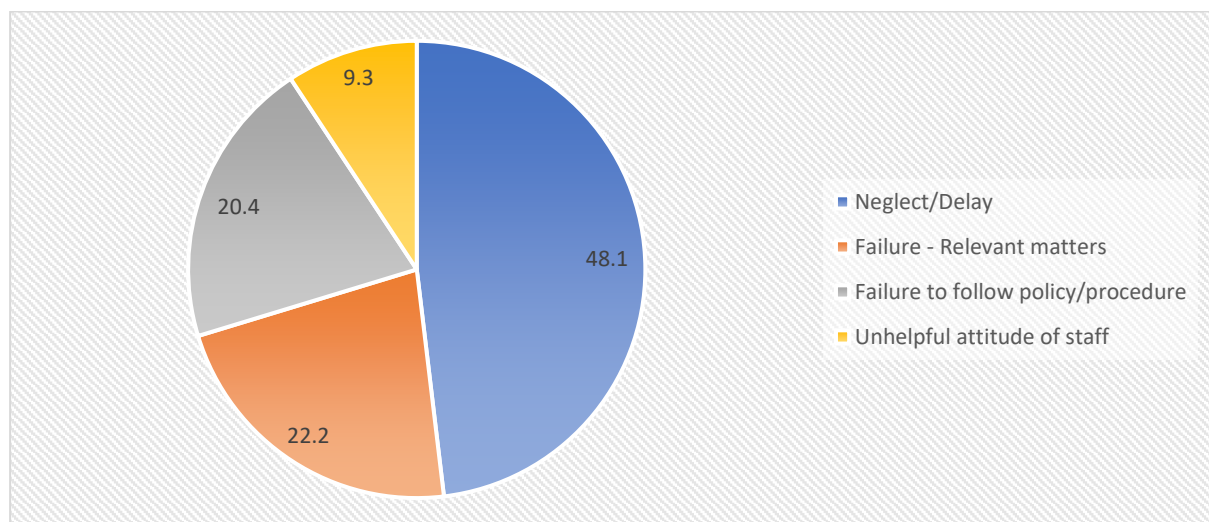
The second most prevalent theme was Failure to take account of relevant matters (22.2%), highlighting instances where customer circumstances, vulnerability, or case history were not fully considered in decision-making. This reinforces the importance of adopting a more holistic, customer-focused approach when managing cases.

Failure to follow procedure accounted for 20.4% of upheld complaints, indicating that while policies and processes are in place, there are inconsistencies in their application. Addressing this requires continued emphasis on staff training, quality assurance, and management oversight.

A smaller proportion of complaints (9.3%) related to unhelpful attitude of employees, suggesting that while customer care standards are generally maintained, there are isolated instances where service delivery falls below expected behavioural standards.

It should be noted that following a revision to how complaint learning is categorised in 2025/26, communication is no longer recorded as a standalone complaint theme. Instead, communication-related issues are now captured as a cross-cutting learning theme, recognising that communication failures often underpin a wide range of complaint types rather than existing in isolation. This change strengthens the service's ability to identify root causes more accurately and apply learning across multiple service areas.

Overall, the thematic analysis demonstrates a clear and consistent link between delays, process adherence, and customer experience. These insights are used to inform targeted improvement activity, support service redesign, and ensure that learning from complaints is embedded across the organisation.



Exclusions

The Council's complaints policy sets out the criteria under which a complaint may be excluded from the formal complaints process. Where a complaint is not accepted, residents are provided with a clear explanation and information on their right to refer the matter to the Housing Ombudsman.

In 2025/26, a total of 32 complaints were excluded from the process, reflecting improved recording and transparency.

The reasons for exclusion were:

- Day-to-day service requests: 21
- Reports of anti-social behaviour: 5
- Matters previously investigated under the complaints policy: 4
- Other: 2

The majority of exclusions related to day-to-day service requests, where issues had not progressed beyond an initial request for action and were resolved through operational service channels. A smaller number related to anti-social behaviour, which are managed through separate procedures, and duplicate complaints, where the matter had already been investigated.

Overall, the profile of exclusions demonstrates appropriate and consistent application of the complaints policy, ensuring that formal complaints are focused on genuine expressions of dissatisfaction while other issues are managed through the most suitable route.

3. Ombudsman: Annual Landlord Performance Report

The most recent Ombudsman landlord performance report is attached (Appendix B), this report from the Housing Ombudsman covers the period of April 2023 – March 2024.

At the time of this report, the Ombudsman have published their 2024-25 individual landlord performance reports, which include landlords with 5 or more findings determined between 1 April 2024 and March 2025.

As Lancaster City Council have had created less than 5 findings in that year Appendix B still acts as the most recent copy of an Annual Landlord Performance Report.

4. Ombudsman Decisions

In recent years the Housing Ombudsman Service has developed an increasingly proactive role in monitoring and intervening in housing service delivery through receipt of individual complaint cases and analysis of emerging themes and trends. Their 'spotlight' reports, for example, offer guidance and recommendations for effective service delivery in a range of areas and the Housing Service uses these to inform ongoing service review.

With regard to specific cases, Lancaster City Council was subject to 3 investigations in the 2025/26 financial year.

Case 1

For the council's handling of a resident's report of damp and mould, whilst they were in temporary accommodation. In this case the Ombudsman found that our handling of the damp and mould and also the complaint itself, constituted maladministration surmised by the Ombudsman as:

- A delay between the landlord's property inspection and follow on works.
- Work to fit a storage heater was also unreasonably delayed.
- The landlord did not always consider the impact on the resident and his household.
- A delay in responding to the tenant throughout the complaints process.

As a result of this investigation Lancaster City Council was ordered to:

1. Write to the resident with an apology for its failures identified in its report
2. Pay a total of £700 to recognise the distress and inconvenience caused in both the handling of damp and mould as well as the resulting complaint.
3. Write to the resident to set out its position with regards to his claim for compensation for damage to his belongings.

Case 2

Regarding the council's handling of a resident's request for a staircase replacement. In this case the ombudsman found that our handling of repair case constituted a service failure (not maladministration) surmised by the Ombudsman as:

- Failing to adhere to its repair policy timescales.
- Inadequate record keeping.
- Failing to explain why it disregarded the initial inspection's recommendation to replace the stairs.

With regards to the handling of the complaint itself, there were no findings of maladministration.

As a result of this investigation Lancaster City Council was ordered to:

1. Write to the resident with an apology for its failures in managing the repair.
2. Pay £100 to recognise the distress and inconvenience caused.

Case 3

For the council's handling of a resident's report of damp and mould who stated the landlord had not done enough to resolve this issue. In this case the Ombudsman found that our handling of the damp and mould and also the complaint itself, did not constitute any form of maladministration or service failure maladministration surmised by the Ombudsman as:

- The landlord acted in line with its repairs policy timescale in response to the resident's report of damp and mould.
- It acknowledged a failing in following up with its promise to arrange fogging of the property. It apologised and offered appropriate compensation.
- The landlord responded to the complaint in line with its complaints policy at both stages.

As a result of this investigation Lancaster City Council was not given any orders by the ombudsman, but was recommended to continue efforts to provide the resident with a small amount of compensation.

5. Learning from our Complaints and Risk Assurance

Complaints data for 2025/26 indicates a stable and understood risk profile. The majority of risks identified through complaints were already known and actively managed through established improvement actions. Q4 complaints largely reinforced existing priorities rather than revealing systemic failure.

Three specific issues were identified in Q4 complaints and have been added as new actions to the year-end action plan. No unmanaged or unmitigated risks were identified at year end.

Repairs Quality and Repeat Failure (Right First Time)

Learning Point / Risk	Repeat complaints arise where repairs or inspections fail to identify all defects at the first visit, leading to avoidable follow-on work and loss of tenant confidence.
Position in 2025-26	This remains a known and ongoing risk, particularly in non-damp-and-mould inspections. The structured DASH inspection approach has proven effective for damp and mould but is not yet universal.
Control and Assurance	○ Use of structured inspection tools (DASH) in damp and mould cases ○ Management spot-checks and review of repeat complaints ○ Ongoing action B1 to extend structured inspection principles to other trades
Q4 Impact	Q4 complaints reinforced the need for wider adoption of this approach but did not indicate a new risk type.

Communication During Delays and Missed Appointments

Learning Point / Risk	Where delays, missed inspections or follow-on works are not clearly communicated, dissatisfaction escalates even when the underlying technical response is appropriate.
Position in 2025-26	This is a well-evidenced and accepted risk, particularly within repairs delivery and contractor interfaces.
Control and Assurance	○ Automated appointment confirmations and reminders (embedded) ○ Development of a formal repairs' communication standard (Action B3) ○ Contractor communication expectations reinforced (Action B4)
Q4 Impact	Q4 complaints confirmed that this remains a key driver of escalation, reinforcing the importance of embedding the communication standard.

Outstanding Repairs, Follow-on Works & Handovers

Learning Point / Risk	Repairs and follow-on works raised after inspection can remain unallocated or delayed due to handover gaps between inspectors, scheduling and contractors.
Position in 2025-26	This is a persistent operational risk, exacerbated by service pressure rather than procedural failure.
Control and Assurance	○ Increased management oversight of overdue and unallocated jobs ○ Emerging exception reporting and scheduling review processes ○ Action B2 continues into 2026/27
Q4 Impact	Q4 complaints provided further evidence of this risk but did not change its nature or severity.

Complaint Intake, Triage and Ownership (New Q4 Risk Area)

Learning Point / Risk	Complaints can be delayed at intake stage where cases are transferred between teams without early ownership or clarification, affecting acknowledgement times and customer confidence.
Position in 2025-26	This risk emerged in Q4 and relates to an internal process control rather than service delivery.
Control and Assurance	○ New action C1 added to reinforce early triage expectations and shared ownership ○ Clarified internal handling expectations at complaint intake
Q4 Impact	Q4 complaints directly informed the identification of this control gap.

Use of Stock Condition and Survey Intelligence (New Q4 Risk Area)

Learning Point / Risk	Where existing stock condition or survey information is not actively used or communicated during inspections, issues may be missed and later escalated, including via external agencies.
Position in 2025-26	This represents a newly identified intelligence-use risk, rather than a failure of inspection activity
Control and Assurance	○ New action C3 introduced to strengthen expectations around use and communication of existing data ○ Linked to, but distinct from, Right First Time repair actions
Q4 Impact	Q4 complaints highlighted instances where issues were later identified externally rather than at survey or inspection stage.

Estate and Programme-Based Services (New Q4 Risk Area)

Learning Point / Risk	Complaints arise where estate-based programs (e.g. grassland management) are not clearly explained, leading to dissatisfaction driven by misunderstanding rather than service failure.
Position in 2025-26	This is a distinct risk separate from repairs and appointments.
Control and Assurance	○ New action C2 added to improve proactive tenant communications for estate programmes ○ Ownership clearly assigned to estate services rather than repairs
Q4 Impact	Q4 complaints demonstrated the need for clearer programme-level communication.

6. Complaints Service Improvement & Action Plan

Building on the learning and risk analysis set out in Section 5, the Council Housing service has maintained a structured and evidence-led approach to translating complaint insight into tangible service improvement.

In 2025/26, complaints have continued to reinforce a stable and understood risk profile, with the majority of issues aligning to known operational pressures—particularly within repairs delivery, communication, and case handling. Importantly, complaint learning has not identified widespread or systemic failure;

rather, it has provided targeted insight into where existing controls require strengthening, embedding, or extension.

The approach this year has therefore focused on:

- Embedding improvements already introduced in response to previous learning
- Strengthening control measures in known risk areas (e.g. repairs, communication, oversight)
- Identifying and responding to emerging risks identified through Q4 complaints
- Ensuring clear ownership, accountability, and monitoring of all improvement actions

This represents a maturing approach to complaint handling, where learning is not treated as isolated actions, but as part of a continuous improvement system aligned to service risk and performance.

The 2025/26 Complaints Learning & Action Plan consolidates all activity into a single, assured position. It replaces previous trackers and reflects:

- actions completed and embedded during the year,
- actions in progress and carried forward into 2026/27, and
- new actions identified through year-end complaint analysis.

Each action is supported by evidence (including case references and Q4 learning logs), held separately, ensuring a clear audit trail from complaint → learning → improvement.

A. Closed in 2025/26

Action Reference	Learning Theme	Action Agreed	Service	Status	Evidence/Outcome
A1	Repairs Communication	Introduce automated SMS/email confirmations for repair requests and appointments.	RMS	Closed	Automated confirmations and reminders implemented across appointed repairs and damp & mould inspections.
A2	Damp and Mould	Strengthen damp and mould processes and follow-up in line with Awaab's Law.	RMS	Closed	Revised procedures implemented; improved recording and follow-up evidenced in Q4 cases.
A3	Professional Conduct	Reinforce staff and contractor conduct expectations through toolbox talks and supervision.	RMS Housing	Closed (BAU)	Conduct reminders embedded into toolbox talks and management oversight.
A4	ASB Case Management	Clarify ASB processes, ownership and expectation-setting for residents.	Community Safety	Closed	Policies and templates updated; learning reinforced through case review and training.
A5	Communal Repairs- Intercoms	Improve oversight and move towards planned replacement of intercom systems.	RMS	Closed	Contract management strengthened; procurement and planned

approach agreed and budgeted.

B. On-Going at Year end

Action Reference	Learning Theme	Action Agreed	Service	Status	Target Completion
B1	Right First Time (Repairs)	Build on the existing Damp & Mould DASH inspection approach by extending structured inspection principles to other repair inspections.	RMS	Ongoing	Rolled out by End of 2026/27
B2	Outstanding Repairs Oversight	Improve management oversight of raised but unallocated and overdue repairs, including follow-on works after inspection.	RMS	Ongoing	Overdue WIP regular reporting in end of Q1 2026/27
B3	Repair and Works Communication	Embed a repairs communication standard covering delays, missed appointments, follow-on works and program-based activity (e.g. scaffolding).	RMS	Ongoing	Q2 2026/27
B4	Contractor Communication	Introduce a Contractor Code of Conduct to strengthen contractor expectations on access attempts, failed contact reporting and feedback to scheduling teams.	RMS	Ongoing	Q2 2026/27
B5	Tenant Accessibility	Improve consideration of tenant availability and preferred contact methods (e.g. shift workers) in repairs and complaints processes.	All Teams & Complaints	Ongoing	Q2 2026/27
B6	Understanding Claimants	Introduce a series of equality, diversity and inclusion questions at the start of the complaints process to ensure an equitable service,	Social Housing Governance	Ongoing	Q1 2026/27

C. Identified at Year End

Action Reference	Learning Theme	Action Agreed	Service	Status	Target Completion
C1	Complaint Triage & Ownership	Reinforce early complaint triage and clearer ownership where cases are returned or reassigned between teams, to avoid intake delays.	Complaints	Identified & Allocated	TBC

C2	Grassland Management & Estate Programmes	Develop clear, proactive tenant communications explaining grassland management programmes and what residents should expect from estate-based services.	Housing	Identified & Allocated	TBC
C3	Use of Stock Condition & Survey Intelligence	Ensure existing stock condition and survey information is actively used during inspections and that relevant findings (or limitations) are clearly shared with tenants to avoid missed issues and escalation.	RMS & Property	Identified & Allocated	TBC
C4	Recharge and Voids	Improve clarity and consistency of recharge explanations, appeal routes and evidence use in responses	Housing (Recharges)	Identified & Allocated	TBC