

**AGENDA ITEM**

**REPORT TO CABINET**

**18 SEPTEMBER 2025**

**REPORT OF SENIOR  
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

**CABINET DECISION**

**Deputy Leader of the Council - Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor Paul Rowling**

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT & SOCIAL CARE OMBUDSMAN (LGSCO) ANNUAL  
COMPLAINTS REPORT 2024/25 AND THE NEW COMPLAINTS POLICY**

**SUMMARY**

The report provides Cabinet with details of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's (LGSCO) annual review letter for 2024/25. The annual review letter details that there were 30 enquiries submitted to the Ombudsman during 2024/25 (a reduction from the previous year), 8 met the threshold for a detailed investigation by the Ombudsman. Of the 8 complaint investigations, all were upheld. All recommendations made by the Ombudsman, following their investigations, have been accepted and implemented by the Council.

Secondly, the report provides details of the Council's new corporate Complaints Policy to be implemented from 1 January 2026. The new policy is aligned to the new LGSCO Complaint Handling Code. The new Policy outlines that there will be two stages in the new corporate complaints process; Stage 1 is 10 working days and Stage 2 is 20 working days. Complaints will continue to be resolved at the earliest opportunity.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Cabinet to note the report which sets out that the Council has fully complied with the recommendations from complaints investigated by the Ombudsman.
2. Cabinet to approve the Council's new Complaints Policy to be implemented from 1 January 2026.

**REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS**

To ensure Members are aware of the position regarding complaints to the Ombudsman about the Council and to provide assurance that the Council is responding in line with LGSCO expectations. To ensure Members are aware of the new corporate Complaints Policy.

**OMBUDSMAN REPORT**

1. Each year the Ombudsman publishes its annual letter and summary of statistics on the complaints and enquiries it has received about Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council and the

decisions made. The Council has received the latest report for the financial year ending 31 March 2025.

2. Of the 30 complaints and enquiries dealt with by the Ombudsman in 2024/25, 8 were progressed to investigation, with all 8 of the complaints being upheld. The number of complaints investigated by the LGSCO has decreased since the previous year (13 in 2023/24) suggesting that more complaints are being appropriately resolved and addressed locally without the need for escalation to the Ombudsman.
3. Of the 8 upheld Ombudsman complaint investigations, 3 related to Adults Services, 2 related to SEND and Inclusion, 1 related to Planning, 1 related to Revenues and Benefits and 1 regarding Community Transport.
4. The report details that the LGSCO was satisfied with the remedy offered by the Council (such as an apology, financial redress) in advance of the complainant raising the complaint with the LGSCO, in 3 out of the 8 cases. Remedy guidance for officers undertaking complaint investigations, has been strengthened in the complaints training programme delivered by the Information Governance Team and will also be included in the annual Complaints Officer Forum in the new year.

## **NEW COMPLAINTS POLICY**

5. The Ombudsman published new requirements for council complaint handling in February 2024 in its 'Complaint Handling Code'. In summary, the Code aims to:
  - ensure consistency in complaint handling
  - provide clear guidance around differentiating between service requests (such as reports of potholes and broken street lighting) and complaints
  - focus on improvement and learning from complaints
  - provide complainants with clarity regarding the role of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
  - Encourage greater Member oversight and scrutiny of complaints
6. The Council's Customer Feedback and Complaint Policy will be replaced by a new corporate Complaints Policy to be implemented from 1 January 2026. The Children's and Adult's statutory procedures for complaints are unaffected and remain unchanged.
7. The key changes to the Policy relate to the number of stages and timescales for response, as detailed in the table below. There will no longer be an Early Resolution Stage (i.e. attempt to resolve complaints within the first 5 working days, without a full investigation), and instead there will only be two stages. Where appropriate, the Council will continue to resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity, before the complaint is acknowledged and an investigation is undertaken.

<b>Complaint Stage</b>	<b>Acknowledgement</b>	<b>Timescales</b>	<b>Extension (if appropriate)</b>
Stage 1	Within 5 working days	10 working days	10 working days
Stage 2	Within 5 working days	20 working days	20 working days

8. The new Complaint Policy will be implemented from 1 January 2026. Officers responsible for coordinating complaints will be invited to attend briefing sessions in December 2025 to outline the key changes.

9. Following implementation of the new policy, an evaluation will be undertaken after three months to ensure that the Policy is operating effectively.
10. In addition to the new Policy, the Code requires Councils to undertake an annual self-assessment, designate a lead Member for complaints (Councillor Paul Rowling), arrange for complaint performance information to be scrutinised by Members (Executive Scrutiny), and to publish an annual complaints report on the Council's website. A workplan has been developed detailing these requirements and is currently underway to ensure that the Council is fully compliant from 1 April 2026. The workplan will be overseen by the Corporate Governance Group.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

11. A copy of the 2024/25 performance tables received from the LGSCO is attached at **Appendix I** of this report. A useful guide to interpretation of the Ombudsman's statistics is available on the [LGSCO website](#).

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

12. None as a direct result of this report. The financial implications of individual complaints would be dealt with separately as part of the responses to those complaints.

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

13. There are no direct legal implications arising from the report. They may, however, arise on a case-by-case basis, depending on the particular circumstances of the complaint and related decision and Legal Service input is called upon in these cases. The Corporate Governance Group also has a Legal Service representative.

## **RISK ASSESSMENT**

14. LGSCO complaint investigations and associated decision notices create public relations risks to the Council and can undermine resident confidence. The new Complaints Policy and associated procedures are designed to minimise these risks, and the oversight provided by the Complaints Team and Corporate Governance Group provide assurance to senior management and Members that complaints are taken seriously, corrective action is implemented and learning maximised. The new requirements for oversight and scrutiny of complaints, by Members, will ensure that complaints are reviewed, appropriately resolved and any improvements identified.

## **WARDS AFFECTED AND CONSULTATION WITH WARD / COUNCILLORS**

15. The Ombudsman complaints information does not indicate any significant ward specific information or trends.
16. The introduction of the new Complaints Policy will affect all wards and residents who wish to raise complaints with the Council. An Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment has been undertaken to assess the impact of the new Policy on the community.
17. The lead Member for complaints, Councillor Paul Rowling, has been briefed regarding the latest annual complaints report and the new Complaints Policy.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

18. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's annual review of Local Government complaints for 2024/25 has been published and relevant extracts have been included in this report. A copy of the complete report can be viewed on the [LGSCO website](#).
19. Further information regarding the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Code can be found on the [LGSCO website](#).

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## **Appendix I - Stockton data from the annual report 2024/25**

<b>Complaints upheld</b>	
<b>100%</b> of complaints investigated were upheld.	National average of <b>80%</b> in similar organisations
<b>8</b> upheld decisions	
<b>4</b> upheld decisions per 100,000 residents	Average for authorities of Stockton's type is <b>5.3</b> upheld decisions per 100, 000
Statistics are based on a total of <b>8</b> investigations for the period between 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025	

<b>Compliance with Ombudsman recommendations</b>	
<b>100%</b> of cases the Ombudsman were satisfied Stockton had successfully implemented for recommendations.	National average of <b>100%</b> in similar organisations

<b>Satisfactory remedy provided by the organisation</b>	
In <b>38%</b> of upheld cases the Ombudsman found the organisation had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman	
<b>3</b> satisfactory remedy decisions	
Statistics are based on a total of <b>8</b> upheld decisions for the period between 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025	