

Board Statement: Stonewater

As a Board, we made the decision in 2023/24 to prioritise improving Stonewater's complaints performance. Our aim was not only to enhance the customer experience of the complaints process itself, but also to understand the reasons behind the rise in complaints and how we could help Stonewater use customer feedback to shape better services and improve satisfaction.

To inform this work, we invited our Chief Officer for Growth and Development to review our approach. This helped us develop a Board-led improvement strategy, which we've delivered over the past year. We're pleased to see real evidence of progress, giving us confidence that the customer experience is improving.

Our Annual Complaints Performance and Improvement report reflects this journey and includes clear examples of the changes we've made and the impact they've had. We're especially pleased with the improvement in Stage 1 response times, which have risen to 97.3% from 80.8% this year.

This was a key focus for us, as we know how important it is for customers to receive timely resolution when something goes wrong. We've seen this improvement in performance for several reasons. Most significantly, we introduced real-time reporting to help ensure responses are sent on time. We also funded new Customer Liaison Officer roles, employed by our responsive repairs contractors, to support quicker investigation and resolution of cases.

We've introduced new training for colleagues to support high standards in complaint handling, and performance is now reviewed weekly by a new Complaints Delivery Group, overseen by our Chief Financial Officer.

Encouragingly, we've seen around a 10% drop in new Stage 1 complaints compared with the previous year. This reflects improvements to our services based on feedback provided by customers and the Housing Ombudsman Service.

For example, we identified that grounds maintenance needed attention. Changes including creating a new online service for customers to find out when our contracting partners are due to attend to carry out grounds maintenance have now been introduced, and we've seen a reduction in related complaints.

In terms of our Housing Ombudsman performance, we're proud to report that we received no Complaint Handling Failure Orders over the year. This follows the introduction of a dedicated team to support Ombudsman investigations.

We recognise, however, that there is still work to do to improve our maladministration rate, which compares the number of maladministration findings to the total number of cases. We must continue working to ensure every complaint is thoroughly investigated and appropriately responded to.

That said, we're encouraged that the number of severe maladministration cases fell from seven to one this year compared to 2023/24. While this is a positive step, even one case is one too many, and we offer our sincere apologies. We remain committed as a Board to doing everything we can to improve.

We also want to thank our customers for their continued support. Our Customer Complaints Learning Panel brings together customers and service leads to review complaint responses. Together, they have helped improve our repairs and ASB services, as well as how we communicate with customers about complaints.

We are also grateful to the Stonewater team. In a challenging operating environment, you have maintained your focus on improving the complaints service, which reflects your strong commitment to our customer promise. This was recognised by our independent auditors, who reviewed the service in January 2025 and confirmed that we can take substantial assurance that complaints are being managed in line with our policies, procedures and the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.

Finally, I want to reassure customers that our efforts will continue into 2025/26. Complaints will be the first service to move onto our new CRM system, which will further strengthen the customer experience.