

## Board Statement

We welcome this annual complaints performance and service improvement report for scrutiny and challenge. We extend our thanks to customers and colleagues who have worked hard to deliver Stonewater and Mount Green's complaints services in 2023/24.

We have now adopted a joint policy across the Stonewater Group, including Mount Green, who joined us in January 2024. Ensuring our partnership delivers a quality complaints service for every customer is one of our priorities.

Our self-assessment highlights the steps we have taken to meet the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS)'s updated Complaint Handling Code. We are confident that this will deliver good outcomes for our customers, building on the HOS' recognition of Stonewater's approach as best practice during our merger with Greenoak last year.

We took the decision in the Spring of 2023 to significantly invest in the Stonewater Group's Customer Relations Team (CRT), which delivers our complaints service. This increase in the team has allowed us to meet the steep rise in complaint number as well as the complexity of many issues and the additional contact from and requirements of the HOS. Across the business the CRT are monitoring action plans to ensure we meet the requirements of the self-assessment and maintain our compliance with the complaints handling code.

By bringing in new expertise, alongside investing in the skills and development of our existing team, we have put in place specialist colleagues to focus on stage two complaints as well as HOS investigations. We have ensured we drive quality within the service by introducing a new assurance framework, better systems to monitor key performance indicators and more training around reasonable adjustments.

We are pleased to see that by Quarter 4, Stonewater's performance was improving. This includes achieving 88% of stage one complaints sent on time, 89% of stage two complaints on time and a rise in transactional customer service to 57% for March 2024.

Likewise, we welcome progress at Mount Green, which has successfully managed a 97% increase in stage one complaints compared with the previous year. The Mount Green team has also put real energy into learning from complaints, coordinating quarterly sessions of senior directors to agree improvements. We can see this is making a difference for customers day to day.

Nonetheless, we are, of course, disappointed by the Group's (including Mount Green) 69% maladministration rate for HOS investigations in 2023/24. We extend our apologies to customers where we didn't manage complaints well and the issues raised. Getting this right is critical for us and we will take every step to learn from this experience.

Improvement across the Group is a priority for 2024/25. To ensure this happens at pace, we asked our Chief Growth and Development Officer to undertake a review of

how Stonewater manages complaints. The outcome of this will support ongoing work to deliver our Complaints Customer Service action plan. Our independent auditors will also review the work of our complaints service in early 2025. We will keep our customers fully up to date on the improvements we make through our Customer Hubb, newsletters and wider communication.

We understand that early benchmarking suggests Stonewater Group receives more complaints than some of our peer organisations. In the spirit of the Housing Ombudsman Service's new Complaint Handling Code, we - as a Board - are clear that we welcome complaints as they help us to learn and ultimately, deliver better services.

Building on feedback from the Tenant Satisfaction Measures, we note some customers are dissatisfied with how we have handled their complaints. We need to ensure all customers know how to access our formal complaints process as a priority, while recognising the important work that is necessary to take action to address the root cause of complaints, namely in relation to communication, repairs outstanding and overdue, record keeping and timeliness in responding to customer issues.

Learning from complaints is central to our work and we can see that we again made progress in 2023/24. This includes critical learning in high risk areas such as delivery and completion of repairs, as well as consistent delivery of estates services and maintenance of safe, clean neighbourhoods.

We want to especially thank our Customer Complaints Panel for their diligent work in reviewing customer complaints. We're keen to increase customer engagement in 2024/25 our new Customer Complaints Learning Panel will be a key opportunity to ensure customers are at the heart of driving improvements in 2024/25.

We are also pleased that we have taken steps to improve the accessibility of the complaints service over the course of the year, including our Customer Guide to Complaints, which is readily available in accessible formats and translated into the eleven most common languages in the UK. We have trained all our customer facing team on how to make reasonable adjustments over the last year.

Finally, we want to reassure our customers that we are committed to delivering the best services we can. We take to heart Stonewater's customer promise that "if it matters to our customers, it matters to us". We know how we manage complaints and learn from them is hugely important to you, and we will continue our efforts to deliver even better services in the coming year.

**Juliana Crowe, Member Responsible for Complaints on behalf of Stonewater Group Board**