

Housing Complaints Update

Purpose of the Report

1. To seek the views of the Housing, Environment and Healthier Communities OSC on Gateshead Councils Housing complaints performance for the first six months of 2023/2024.

Background

2. The Housing Ombudsman (HO) Complaint Handling Code (CHC) sets out its expectations that social landlords develop a positive complaint handling culture and that accountability and transparency are key elements.
3. The code states that governing bodies of social landlords should receive regular updates on complaint performance to allow for scrutiny. It has therefore been agreed with the Chair of HEHC OSC that officers will present a housing complaint's update to OSC on a six-monthly basis. In addition a complaints update will also be taken to HEHC Portfolio on a six monthly basis.
4. Reports will include data on the volume, category, and trends from complaints. It will also include performance data on complaints investigated by the HO and compliance with any HO orders and findings.

Housing Complaints performance April 2023 – September 2023

5. To ensure compliance with the HO Complaint Handling Code the Council in July 2023 adopted a simplified two-stage process for Housing complaints. In addition, a target of 10 working days to respond to stage 1 complaints and 20 working days for stage 2 complaints were adopted.
6. The table below sets out the number of formal complaints registered in the first six months of 2023.24 compared to 2022.23. Whilst the number of complaints registered has increased this should be viewed as a positive improvement. The HO is clear that anything that meets its definition of a complaint must be registered as such and that they will monitor the number of complaints registered.

Complaint stage	April – September 2022.23	September 2023.24
Stage 1 Formal complaint	46	115
Stage 2 Review	11	29
Totals	57	144

7. During this period, the council responded to 53% of formal complaints within the target of 10 working days.

8. Of the 29 complaints escalated to stage 2, 83% were responded to within the target of 20 working days.
9. The change to a target of 10 working days for stage 1 complaints has been challenging. To help manage performance a complaints dashboard has been recently developed that provides data on all open complaints. The complaints dashboard will also provide insight into common complaint trends and recurring issues.
10. In addition to the performance information presented above, the Regulator of Social Housing requires that social landlords collect and report on a set of Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) from 2023.24. These include TSM's specifically relating to complaint handling:
 - Complaints relative to the size of the landlord
 - Complaints responded to within Handling Code timescales.
 - Satisfaction with the landlord's approach to handling complaints
11. The first two indicators are collected from management information and the third is collected via a tenant satisfaction survey. All three indicators are Housing key performance indicators and updates are provided in the Housing Performance report brought to HEHC OSC. All TSM indicators will be reported to the RSH after the 31 March 2024.

Complaint Themes

12. A total of 77 stage1 complaints received during this period related to Repairs and Maintenance. The key themes of repair related complaints were:
 - Time taken to complete the repair.
 - Poor communication
 - Failing to keep appointments.
13. The service with the second highest number of complaints registered was Neighbourhood Services. Key themes from the 22 complaints included:
 - Anti-Social Behaviour – handling of cases
 - Damage to property
 - Service Charges
 - Condition of estate/external areas
14. There is a similar pattern with stage 2 complaints. The majority related to Repairs and Maintenance and Neighbourhood services. In these cases, tenants requested a review of their stage 1 complaint because they weren't satisfied with the outcome of the initial investigation.

Compliments

15. In addition to complaints, we encourage employees to record compliments that they receive about colleagues and services. This is important as it also provides valuable insight into what tenants appreciate and helps us to improve the services we provide. It can also help to boost morale highlighting the positive impact we can make to our

tenants and residents. When a compliment is registered the relevant line manager is notified.

16. During this period a total of 48 compliments were registered with the two services receiving the most:

- Neighbourhood Housing Services - 24
- Repairs and Maintenance - 19

17. The remainder included praise for colleagues in Lettings, Neighbourhood Relations Team and Planned Investment.

18. A reoccurring theme in compliments related to customer service and a feeling that employees were very helpful when dealing with an enquiry or problem. Examples of direct quotes from compliments received is provided in Appendix 1.

Housing Ombudsman Annual Report 2022.23

19. Each year, the HO produces an annual report that summarises the key themes and figures from the previous year across all activity in the housing sector. In the 2022.23 report it highlighted:

- An increase of 27% in complaints received compared to previous year.
- Over 6,500 orders and recommendations made to landlords.
- £1.1 million in compensation awarded.
- An increase in maladministration findings, where service requests or complaints are not handled reasonably.
- A decrease in findings of no fault, over half found in the tenant's favour.
- 323% increase in the number of severe maladministration findings from 31 to 131. Of these 112 related to landlords with over 10,000 homes.

20. The HO also provides each social landlord with their own Annual Performance report. In 2022.23 Gateshead Council's performance was as follows:

- Four determinations (the number of cases decided upon by the Ombudsman).
- Four maladministration findings in two of the determinations.
- No cases of severe maladministration.
- £1,100 awarded in compensation.

21. Of the four findings of maladministration, two related to the way complaints had been handled and two related to the handling of repair issues.

22. Gateshead Council's maladministration rate of 50% was below the national average of 55% for all social landlords with over 10,000 properties. It is also below the national average of 62% for local authorities and ALMO's of a similar size.

Housing Ombudsman April – September 2023.24

23. In the first six months of 2023.24 the HO accepted three complaints to investigate. These three cases had been through the Councils complaints process. The Council has received the determination for one of those complaints, in which no maladministration was found. We are waiting for the outcomes of the further two complaints.

24. The HO also referred 21 complaints to the Council to progress through our complaints process. This is where tenants have gone direct to the HO without raising the complaint first with the Council.
25. In addition, the Council received one severe maladministration determination from the HO relating to a case dating back to 2018. The complaint was about the Council's handling of damp and mould at the tenant's home. The finding also related to the Council's complaint handling and record keeping.
26. An extensive review of our approach to how we manage reports of damp and mould has been carried out and a new process agreed and implemented. This has been communicated to tenants across a range of communication channels including a dedicated page on our website.
27. The new process also adopts best practice from the HO Spotlight Report on damp and mould that sets out what is expected of landlords in relation to such issues.

Complaint Handling Code – self assessment

28. Each year, social landlords are required to complete a self-assessment against the HO's complaint handling code. The purpose of the self-assessment is to ensure landlords are fully compliant with each aspect of the code.
29. This year, officers worked with a focus group of tenants to complete our self-assessment for 2023/2024. The completed self-assessment has been published on the Council's website.
30. There is a consultation underway at present regarding the Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) adopting a joint complaint handling code.
31. The aim of the joint code is to bring a consistent approach to complaints handling and will see the LGSCO adopt the key principles of the HO's complaint handling code, including a mandatory two stage complaints process and a 10-working day response target.

Future development - learning from complaints.

32. Following the implementation of a new, compliant complaints process our focus will be on how we, as a landlord, can use complaint feedback for service improvement and develop a culture of continuous learning.
33. Over the coming months, we'll be working with tenants and leaseholders in our Resident Influence Panel to discuss and plan our approach including and how we can involve tenants in that process.

Officer Support and Training

34. To support employees, regular Complaint themed team briefs are circulated. In April 2023, a team brief provided an update on the complaints process, including the new two-stage process for housing complaints, and a 10-working day response target for stage 1 complaints.

35. This team brief was followed up in November 2023, with information about the Councils performance data for Housing complaints and updates from the HO's Annual Complaints report.
36. There are also good practice guides available for employees on the intranet, which are kept up to date.
37. Complaint handling training focused on compliance with the HO's complaint handling code has been delivered to almost 100 employees over the last 6 months, both in person and via Teams. The training has been delivered to every service responsible for recording and investigating complaints.
38. Further training on effective complaint handling is in development and will be delivered in the coming months.
39. The HO provides regular updates on findings and investigations across the housing sector, which we share with colleagues to improve the service we provide to our tenants.

Recommendations

40. The Housing, Environment and Healthier Communities OSC is asked to provide its views on performance for complaints and compliments for the period April 2023 – September 2023.

Contact: Andrew Dodds, andrewdodds@gateshead.gov.uk – Customer Feedback and Insight Officer.

Appendix 1

Thank you for really listening to me and taking the time to understand. It really feels like you are trying to do something for me to fix the problem I'm having.

Susan was very helpful. She was very calm and helpful at a rather stressful time for me.

Staff are excellent. They try and help you any way they can first class well done. Thank you!

The resident has stated that on the two occasions she has spoken to Jennifer, and she was understanding, polite, informative and a pleasure to speak to.

I want to thank the garden team for a fantastic service. The team have done the best job I have ever seen and can't believe the fantastic service I have received today.