

## Housing Complaints Performance and Service Improvement 2023.2024

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### Purpose of the Report

1. To seek the views of the Housing, Environment and Healthier Communities OSC on the Housing Complaints Performance and Service Improvement report for 2023.24.

### Background

2. The Housing Ombudsman (HO) Complaint Handling Code (CHC) requires social landlords to produce an annual complaints performance and service improvement report for scrutiny and challenge.
3. The report must include:
  - the annual self-assessment against the CHC
  - a qualitative and quantitative analysis of performance
  - any findings of non-compliance with the CHC by the Ombudsman
  - the service improvements made as a result of the learning from complaints.
  - Annual report from the HO on the landlord's performance
  - Any other relevant reports or publications produced by the HO in relation to the work of the landlord
4. This report sets out the above in relation to housing complaints.

### Housing Complaints Performance 2023.24

5. The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) has introduced a framework of Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) that all social landlords must collect and report on from 2023.24. In relation to Complaint handling these include:
  - Satisfaction with the landlord's approach to complaint handling
  - Complaints relative to the size of the landlord
  - Complaints responded to within Complaint Handling Code timescales
6. **Satisfaction with the landlord's approach to complaint handling** – this is measured by a perception survey and in 2023.24 the survey was carried out by telephone. Compared to data from 2022.23 satisfaction has increased from 21% to 26% in 2023.24. Although satisfaction has increased, it remains comparatively low when compared to our other TSM scores. Low levels of satisfaction with complaint handling is a trend widely reported across the social housing sector, however our performance indicates that we are not providing a good customer experience.

7. **Complaints relative to the size of the landlord** – this TSM aims to provide the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) with the number of complaints received per 1000 properties. This alongside data from the other Tenant Satisfaction Measures provides an indication as to how effective a landlord’s complaint policy is being implemented. We have exceeded the target of registering 13 complaints per 1000 homes during 2023/24, which evidences a proactive approach to registering complaints.
8. In total 429 stage 1 complaints were received during 2023.24 and 56 stage 2 complaints.
9. **Complaints responded to within Complaint Handling Code timescale** - to ensure compliance with the CHC the Council adopted a simplified two-stage process for Housing complaints with a target of 10 working days to respond to stage 1 complaints and 20 working days for stage 2 complaints were adopted.
10. The HO target of 10 days for responding to stage 1 complaints has proven to be very challenging and only 29% were responded to within timescale during 2023.24. Performance against the HO target of 20 working days for a stage 2 complaint was better with 71% responded to within timescale.
11. Performance against the three Complaint TSM will be reported to the RSH by the 30 June 2024 as part of the Council’s submission of all the TSM results.

### **Improving Complaint Handling Performance and Customer Experience**

12. **Service Redesign – Complaint Handling Repairs and Maintenance** - to identify barriers to performance and propose solutions, a discovery project has been undertaken by the Customer Feedback and Insights Officer. This review has specifically focused on complaint handling within Repairs and Maintenance as this service receives and responds to the largest number of complaints by some margin therefore has the biggest impact on performance. However poor performance and low customer satisfaction with complaint handling apply across all Housing services.
13. A report setting out the findings and recommendations will be discussed with the Housing Leadership team in June 2024 and a response agreed. An update will be brought to a future meeting of this committee.
14. **Customer Scrutiny Review - Stage 1 response letters** - In response to evidence that shows low levels of satisfaction with the Council’s approach to dealing with Housing complaints, the Resident Influence Panel commissioned a scrutiny review of stage 1 complaint responses across all Housing services. The aim of the review was to scrutinise the standard of stage 1 complaint responses and recommend actions that will improve the customer experience.
15. A separate report which sets out the reviews findings and recommendations will be presented at this meeting by two customers who took part in the review. We will then discuss their findings with the Resident Influence Panel and develop an action plan to implement their recommendations.
16. **Support and Training** - Ongoing support has been provided to officers and managers involved in complaint handling and training has been provided to over 100 employees during 2023.24. Training guides have been made available on the

intranet and a live dashboard showing all complaints currently awaiting a response has been developed and launched. The dashboard shows managers which open stage 1 complaints relate to their service if they have been allocated to an investigating officer and if the customer has received an acknowledgement.

## **Complaint Trends**

17. Complaint trends are an effective tool for identifying areas of risk, testing culture, and checking if there is a disconnect between policy and practice. During 2023.24 the following summarise the main housing complaint themes
  - Time taken to complete a repair
  - Estate Maintenance
  - Anti-Social Behaviour
  - Boundary maintenance
  - Damage to property.
  - Communication
18. Appendix 1 includes examples of complaints by the themes set out above.
19. In 2024.25 we will develop our approach to learning from complaints that will seek to:
  - Meet our regulatory requirements
  - Identify emerging themes and issues so that we can act promptly
  - Identify learning and use this to create SMART action plans
  - Focus on embedding learning
  - Demonstrate that we have learned from complaints
  - Share learning across services and the wider Council
20. Our approach will be informed by learning from peers across the Council and other social landlords.

## **Compliments**

21. 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.
22. During 2023.24 a total of 73 compliments were registered. Of these 19 were internal compliments from other officers or managers and 54 were from customers. Broken down by service area:
  - Repairs and maintenance 31
  - Neighborhood Housing Services – 27
  - Multi-storey team - 6
  - Neighbourhood Relations -3
  - Investment -2
  - Lettings - 2

- Rent and Income -2

23. Key themes from compliments include carrying out repairs to a good standard, helping to resolve an enquiry quickly and effectively, providing practical guidance including bidding on a new home and giving general advice on arrange of issues.

### **Housing Ombudsman Service**

24. An annual report is produced by the HO service for each landlord and will be received later in 2024.25. This will set out our performance in relation to complaints accepted by the HO and will compare us against other social landlords. A copy of the annual report will be included in the next Complaints update report with a full update on determinations made by the HO in 2023.24.

### **Complaint Handling Code – self assessment**

25. The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 empowered the HO to issue a code of practice about the procedures members of the Scheme should have in place for considering complaints. It also placed a duty on the HO to monitor compliance with a code of practice that it has issued.

26. One requirement is for social landlords to self-assess against the complaint handling code, identifying any area of non-compliance.

27. The self-assessment was carried out with a focus group of tenants and leaseholders in 2023.24 and identified some updates that are required to the Council's Complaint's policy and to training guidance. A copy of the draft self-assessment is included with this report in Appendix 2.

28. In line with HO requirements the self-assessment will be published on the Council's website. It is also a requirement that social landlords demonstrate compliance through an annual submissions process. This must be completed by 30 June 2024.

### **Online Complaint reporting**

29. To refine our approach to handling housing related complaints, enquiries, and compliments submitted online a redesign exercise was undertaken. A survey of customers who had recently used the online service was undertaken and this was followed up with telephone conversations to explore responses in more depth. Insight provided from this customer engagement included:

- The absence of updates following submission
- Difficulty in speaking directly to the appropriate person or department.
- Challenges in locating forms on the website.
- Confusion about the process
- Unclear support options

30. In response we have we introduced the following enhancements.

- A new, user-friendly digital form that consolidates all contact types into one accessible format to include a save and resume feature.
- Updated web pages to clearly outline the process and expected timelines.
- Enabling customers to specify their preferred contact methods and timings.

- Refine the form categories to ensure direct routing to the correct service team from the initial contact.
  - Implement automatic email confirmations upon submission.
31. We will monitor the impact of these changes and carry out further customer engagement to improve the online experience further.

### **Next Steps**

32. Implement actions identified from the self-assessment including updates to the Council's Complaint's policy.
33. Bring a six-monthly update to this committee to evidence progress being made to improve housing complaint handling performance.
34. Submit an annual Complaints report and self-assessment against the Code to the Housing Ombudsman by 30 June 2024.

### **Recommendations**

35. The Housing, Environment and Healthier Communities OSC is asked to provide its views on the Housing Complaints Performance and Service Improvement 2023.2024 report.

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Contact: Martin Poulter 5380

## **Appendix 1 – Complaint Themes**

### **Time taken to complete the repair:**

- Residents left without the full use of rooms due to the length of time taken to complete the repair, or facilities such as hot water and heating.
- Outstanding repairs causing other issues within the property due to the time taken to complete the repair – i.e. example states damaged guttering has resulted in damp and mould in the home.
- ‘Make safe’ appointments provide a temporary fix, but the full repair then takes a long time to complete.
- A number of complaints relate to roofing issues specifically and the time taken to complete repairs.
- Customers having to live with damp and mould in their home for long periods of time due to time taken to complete a repair – one said they waited 6 months after they initially reported the damp and mould and still hadn’t had an appointment.

### **Estate maintenance**

- Rubbish building up in back lanes and the length of time taken by the council to address it.
- Neighbouring gardens in poor condition, despite reports no action taken.

### **Antisocial behaviour**

- Reports of minor antisocial behaviour not being addressed by the council. One customer said they’d reported numerous issues over 5 years and no action had been taken. Examples include – loud music from neighbours, cigarette ends being thrown into neighbours garden, rubbish in neighbouring gardens, general noise from neighbouring properties.

### **Boundary maintenance**

- Work relating to boundary fences/hedges commenced without communication with the customer leaving no boundary between two properties.

### **Damage to property**

- A customer complained that her property was removed from a communal area in a block of flats and disposed of.
- A resident complained that their property was damaged while in storage during a house move and that some items went missing.

### **Communication**

- Work such as scaffolding being erected was carried out without being communicated to the resident – one example is from a private tenant living next door to a council tenant who’d had scaffolding erected in their property without any prior notice or permission requested.
- Appointments missed without being communicated with the customer.
- A number of customers state that they’ve contacted the council repairs service to report a new repair or seek an update. They state nobody got back to them.

- Customers not kept up to date with the progress of their repair work, they have to contact the council if they need an update and many state they're told somebody will contact them but they don't.
- Customers receiving multiple updates for repair work appointments which just provides a reference number. One reported receiving numerous text messages with different dates for works leaving them unsure when their work would be carried out.
- Works booked in with the customer but then cancelled with no warning. The customer then had to contact the repairs service to rebook.
- Some residents have reported that they feel that the officer they've dealt with has had a poor attitude towards them.