# Housing Complaint Performance and Service Improvement Report 2023-24

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## Introduction

This report is an annual regulatory requirement of the Housing Ombudsman’s (HO) Complaints Handling Code 2024, Section 8.1. Among other landlord legislation, the Code prescribes new conditions to ensure we respond effectively and fairly to complaints. The report is also representative of our commitment to foster a positive complaint handling culture and continuously improve outcomes for our customers.

This report also meets the requirements of the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) Consumer Standards, namely the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard. Within this report we will provide our residents and wider stakeholders with information on our complaint performance, provide insight from the complaints received and identify lessons learned. In response, we will implement service improvements to ensure we listen and act on the valuable feedback provided by our residents and use this to continuously improve services.

2023/24 has been a challenging year for complaints with the volume increasing over this period. We are determined to listen to our customers and learn from their experiences, and over the past year, have prioritised identifying areas for improvement.

We have made good progress in enhancing our complaint handling approach and implementing positive change. However, financially resourcing the increased demands on social landlords, remains an ongoing test, especially as a local authority. We have also seen a marked increase in Ombudsman determinations this year. Many of the learning points identified through these cases have already been addressed through our service improvement workstreams. But of course, we continue to seek and welcome the opportunity to work with the HO to assess the service we are providing.

## Section 1: Self-assessment of compliance against the Complaint Handling Code

We have carried out a self-assessment of our complaint handling service and are assured that we are meeting the HO’s new Code. Our governing body and the member responsible for complaints, have scrutinised and challenged the self-assessment to ensure it is a true reflection of our policy and practice. Where further improvements can be made, these are highlighted in the report.

Our 2023/24 self-assessment is appended to this report at Appendix 1 and will be available on the ‘How we are performing as a landlord’ section on our website.

## Section 2: Review of complaint handling performance 2023/24

This section of the report provides information about the number of complaints we have received, covering the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, the nature of these complaints, and the actions we have taken to prevent them reoccurring. The data also relates to Ombudsman casework, orders, and determinations and includes cases which are currently being progressed through our complaints process.

Our complaint process has two stages and a dedicated Customer Relations Team. All stage 1 complaints are investigated by housing specific staff in cooperation with the Customer Relations Team to resolve the issues and avoid repeats in the future. All Stage 2 complaints are worked on by the Customer Relations Team only to ensure an objective resolution.

## Complaints caseload

During the 2023/4 financial year, a total of 2,650 complaints were received, consisting of 2,329 Stage 1 complaints and 321 Stage 2 complaints. Overall, this represents a 15% increase from the previous year, with a 18% increase from 2022/23 at Stage 1. The figure for Stage 2 complaints remains mostly unchanged from 2022/23.

In line with previous years, the repairs service received a higher proportion of complaints both at Stage 1 and Stage 2 in comparison to the rest of the Council’s housing management services. This is despite our overall customer satisfaction with repairs sitting at 65%. A sizeable number (15%) of Stage 2 complaints were also in connection with poor complaint handling at the earlier stage.

The HO’s Code is clear that high volumes of complaints should not be seen as a negative as they can be indicative of a well-publicised and accessible complaints process. This is also supported by the increased visibility of social housing in the media and the then Department for Levelling-up, Housing and Communities national media campaign ‘Make Things Right’.

## Complaint reasons

When raising complaints, we categorise these for recording purposes and to identify trends.

Our main driver of complaints is failure/delays in delivering responsive repairs, which in the last financial year equated to 44% of Stage 1 complaints and 69% of Stage 2 complaints. The second highest reason was due to poor communications (15% of Stage 2 complaints) and quality of work/service (9% of Stage 2 complaints).

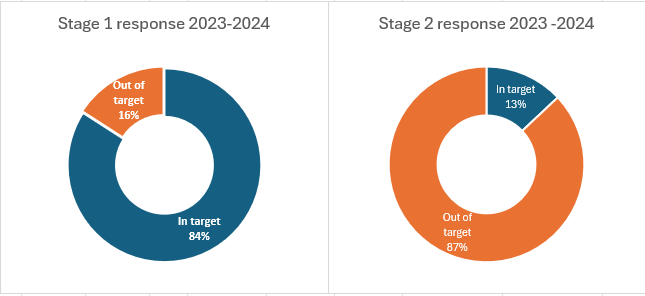
We understand the need to improve these areas and have outlined our improvement activity in Section 4 of this report.

## Compliance

Our methodology for reporting compliance is based on the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) defined by the RSH. These measures focus on the number of complaints responded to per 1,000 properties within specified customer groups, and the percentage of these responded to within the HO’s Complaint Handling Code timescales. These measures do not cover all customer groups, for example, leaseholders, but provide an indication of overall performance.

For a complaint to be recorded as compliant with the Code’s requirements, we must adhere to the following:

1. Log and acknowledge complaints within five working days; and
2. Produce a response for the complainant within 10 working days (Stage 1) and 20 working days (Stage 2).



As of 31 March 2024, we were not compliant with responding within our policy response timescales in 16% of Stage 1 and 87% of Stage 2 complaints.

The data highlights performance challenges at Stage 2 of the complaints process. The main cause for these delays is resourcing issues within the central complaints team. Other contributory factors include staff sickness and an increase in Stage 2 escalations. We have addressed the resourcing challenges in 2024-25 and this will be reflected in our subsequent year’s report.

## Complaint outcomes

In 2023/24, 2,650 outcomes were recorded against closed Stages 1 and 2 complaints.

Partially upheld complaints refer to complaints where several issues were made and at least one of these was upheld. We fully upheld 53% of complaints across the year. A steady 2%increase year-on-year since 2021/22.

**Stage 1 and Stage 2 totals**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Complaint Outcomes | 2021-2022 | 2022-23 | 2023-2024 |
| Upheld | 49% | 51% | 53% |
| Partly upheld | 24% | 23% | 21% |
| Not upheld | 27% | 26% | 26% |

In 2023/24, complaints relating to repair issues and complaint handling were more frequently upheld in comparison to other service areas.

This decline in performance with our repairs service is due to supply chain and resourcing issues amongst our contractors, which has affected several service functions, such as carrying out preliminary investigations to help inform our Stage 1 responses.

To address concerns with our complaint handling, we have ensured our contractors provide holding responses and call the resident to explain the delays.

We have commissioned an end-to-end review of our repairs service in response to the insight gained from complaints. We expect this review to be completed in December 2024 with improvements to be implemented on completion of the review. This will include strengthened contract management and an improved resident experience.

## Customer insights

Our 2023-24 TSM survey included: ‘satisfaction with the landlord’s approach to complaint handling’. Of the random sample of tenants responding to the survey 224 had made a housing complaint in the previous 12 months. Of these:

* 59 were very or fairly satisfied [26%]
* 154 were very or fairly dissatisfied [69%]

We know residents find it easy to make a complaint but can be disappointed with other aspects of the process including: the quality and/or timeliness of our responses; the remedial action proposed; sometimes inadequate communication; and the levels of compensation offered. We are working to improve all aspects of our complaints handling process, for example, in 2024-25 we have reviewed our compensation and redress policy, have delivered training for staff handling complaints, emphasising the need to improve communication with complainants throughout the process, and are looking at broader service improvements to address root causes of issues in the repairs service.

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## Compensation

During the period 2023/24, we reached an agreement with customers to pay £76,956.68 in compensation. A significant proportion of compensation was made in relation to repairs complaints. The average compensation per complainant is £101 compensation. Where the compensation value is greater than this average, this is due to a HO determination impacting the outcome.

High levels of compensation and the findings of Ombudsman investigations has prompted a review of our redress policy, which will be implemented in the new year. The policy aims to ensure better management of cases via a first-time resolution and appropriate compensation awards at Stage 1 of the complaint process. Workshops will also be hosted by the Customer Relations Team on how to ensure early remediation of cases.

## Housing Ombudsman determinations

A ‘determination’ is a term used by the HO to refer to their decision following the investigation of a case. Within each determination, there may be numerous findings to represent each issue raised as part of the investigation. Following an investigation or resolution, the HO may make one or more of the following determinations:

* **Maladministration**– where we have failed to comply with our legal obligations, policies and procedures or unreasonably delayed in dealing with the matter. This could be a finding of service failure, maladministration or severe maladministration, depending on the seriousness of the failure and the impact on the resident.
* **Partial maladministration**– where there are multiple findings following investigation within one determination and at least one, but not all, of these is maladministration.
* **No maladministration**– where the landlord is found to have acted appropriately.
* **Outside Jurisdiction** – where the HO did not have the authority to investigate. This could be for a variety of reasons including: the complaint had not been made within a reasonable timescale; the complaint did not meet the conditions of the HO’s scheme; or the matter was more appropriately dealt with by the courts, a tribunal, another complaint handling body or regulator.

A single case can receive multiple outcomes, so the total number of determinations is not always equal to the number of cases determined.

Our HO case determinations increased in line with complaints this year. We have implemented a revised approach to determinations which has helped to highlight the complexity of cases being investigated and better identify areas for learning and development.

In 2023/24, there was a total of 41 HO determinations. This is a 24% increase on the 33 cases determined during 2022/23. Serious failings with how we managed repairs and how we handled the complaints process accounted for over two-thirds of the determinations.

**Maladministration**

The national maladministration rate is 73% and is based on the performance of landlords by size, type and geographical location.

Our maladministration rate is currently 74%. This compares poorly against 60% in the previous year. We have also received two severe maladministration determinations amongst our casework. This is the first occasion the Council has received a severe maladministration determination following an investigation.

We will be utilising the wealth of information provided by the Ombudsman on their learning hub to share best practice and review lessons learnt from severe maladministration determinations. We are strengthening our relationship with the Ombudsman by evaluating our recent casework and establishing regular contact.

## Section 3: Non-compliance findings with the Housing Ombudsman Code

We were issued with six Complaint Handling Failure Orders (CHFOs) in 2023/24 in relation to non-compliance with the Ombudsman’s determination orders.

## Complaint handling maladministration

In addition to CHFOs, we also received adverse administrations relation to our complaint handling.

A summary of the findings from the determinations is included below along with information on the action we have taken to improve our service.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Housing Ombudsman findings** | **Action taken** |
| **Lack of explanation on the actions undertaken by Council services** | We have made changes to the way we administer our complaints and manage cases on our systems. This includes monitoring resolutions to ensure that works take place as agreed or if this is not possible, keeping the customer updated. We regularly track progress on casework and report performance including any delays to complaint handlers, and senior management to ensure visibility and accountability. |
| **Failure to respond to reports of ASB in a timely manner and follow through properly​** | ASB is a key concern for residents, leading to complaints including inconsistency of advice, lack of empathy, and not being kept up to date. We are carrying out an ASB improvement project which includes reviewing our ASB policy and procedure. We are also making sure we assess residents’ needs when we receive reports of ASB and use this information to tailor services for health conditions and potential risks. Our ASB team is a part of the Council’s wider community safety service and ensures a holistic approach to our service delivery. |
| **Failure to diagnose cause of leaks and remedy quickly​** | Leaks are the main cause of repair issues. The Council manages a mixed tenure property portfolio of just over 21,833 homes. This breaks down to 9,964 leasehold properties; 11,516 tenants; 353 freehold houses with a communal service charge and two supported housing projects (nine rooms).   The composition of our housing stock comes with its own unique challenges. Given the high percentage of leasehold properties in the borough and the increasing number which are sublet (currently 50%), gaining access to repair a leak can be a significant barrier. As a result, the Council is undertaking more enforcement action on leaseholder breaches concerning property access for emergency/maintenance purposes.   Other improvement action includes strengthening data capture on leaseholders, gathering information on sub-tenants, with a particular focus on equalities monitoring (for example age, mobility issues) to support health and safety regulations.  We have introduced a leaks procedure to ensure clarity and consistency when handling these types of complaint and anticipate creating a working group to address complex leak issues. In addition, the capacity of our repairs team has increased, and we have hired more maintenance surveyors. |
| **Failure of addressing issues of damp and mould and remedy quickly** | We improved our damp and mould services by reviewing complaints and created an expert dedicated Damp and Mould Working Group – this has meant better diagnosis of damp and mould in residents’ homes, carrying out repairs quicker and improved communication so that residents are kept updated. We recognise the impact that damp and mould can have on residents’ health and prioritise those who have ongoing medical conditions in our assessment. In addition, we are implementing recommendations from the HO’s spotlight report on damp and mould. |
| **Failure to provide updates with timescales for resolving issues with communal heating and hot water system​** | Our contractors have provided additional resources to support clearing the backlog of complaints which was created from failures in some of our boiler houses. Compensation has been provided to those affected via rent rebate/service charges. |
| **Inadequate compensation offered for distress and inconvenience** | We are currently revising our redress policy for housing complaints in line with the HO’s compensation guidelines and methods of calculation. This includes clarifying a number of areas to aid understanding. |

## Section 4: Service improvements based on customer insight

During the year, five core areas for service improvement were identified through complaint trend reporting and customer feedback. These lessons and a summary of the action taken are as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Lesson learnt** | **Action taken** |
| **Repairs**  **handling** | Refresher training has been provided to all our complaint handlers in line with the HO’s Code to help ensure the effective ownership of complaints and improve focus on record keeping.  We have transferred the responsibility of Stage 2 review to our Housing Management service and increased the size of our complaints team to respond to complaints within timescales.  We have put in place more effective contract monitoring arrangements to make sure they meet the repairs service standards our residents deserve. The expectation is that these measures should result in more repairs being completed on time, more appointments being kept, and improved quality.  We have increased the capacity of our repairs service including operatives and scheduling colleagues.  We improved our damp and mould services by reviewing complaints and created an expert dedicated Damp and Mould Working Group. This has meant better diagnosis of damp and mould in residents’ homes, carrying out repairs quicker, and improved communication so that residents are kept updated. We recognise the impact that damp and mould can have on residents’ health and prioritise those who have ongoing medical conditions in our assessment. In addition, we are implementing recommendations from the HO’s spotlight report on damp and mould.   Leaks are the main cause of repair issues. We have introduced a leaks procedure to ensure clarity and consistency when handling these types of complaint. |
| **Record keeping** | The Customer Relations Team has delivered training to all our new contractors on the use of our system (iCasework) to effectively log all correspondence and record appropriate notes and actions for auditing purposes. The Customer Relations Team has also engaged in a programme of audits to ensure casework is being managed in a compliant manner.  We have carried out an initial self-assessment against the HO’s spotlight report on record keeping, which has been provided to the HO. Record keeping has been identified as a sector wide issue in the HO’s report and is an area we are still reviewing and implementing recommendations from the report. |
| **Communications** | We have delivered refresher training to all complaint handlers and reviewed our internal processes. We are also closely monitoring compliance of activities such as calls offered to complainants and utilising our technology better to ensure residents are regularly updated in the event of a service outage. |
| **Complaint handling** | We have introduced feedback calls/emails to all complainants to gauge their satisfaction with our complaint handling, and to ensure any requests for escalation are actioned at the end of Stage 1. As part of this process, we also work closely with individual service areas to maximise opportunities to enhance any offer of redress where this is appropriate to prevent an escalation. |
| **Compensation** | We are currently updating our housing complaints redress policy in line with the HO’s compensation guide on dispute resolution principles. Staff training has also been delivered to ensure complaint handlers take into consideration the individual circumstances of the complainant, therefore helping to put things right for residents more quickly and reducing the need for escalation of complaints from Stage 1 to 2. |

## Conclusion

The Council has made significant changes to improve complaint handling and the delivery of services to residents. We are currently undertaking an end-to-end review of our repairs service to identify opportunities to improve the customer journey and expect this to be reflected in subsequent year’s performance. Nonetheless, we operate in a very challenging, densely populated environment with stock which requires significant investment. We recognise that until the condition of our stock significantly improves, we can expect to see the high levels of demand on our responsive repair service. This is why our Cabinet approved £140 million additional capital investment to improve the condition of our homes.

We are committed to improving the condition of our housing stock and will be prioritising investment in the following areas: modernising and maintaining the performance and safety of an ageing asset base; harnessing technological advances in repairs and property management; decarbonising our homes and providing services in a sustainable way and meeting the standards set out in the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill, as well as complying with building and fire safety actions.

We will be enhancing our website to ensure it is more user-friendly and outlines our service standards to helps raise awareness amongst residents about our repairs process. We have several service improvement workstreams in progress. These revolve around updating our technology and data capture to accurately monitor inspection programmes, remediation works and ensure compliance.

Most importantly, we will continue to learn from the feedback we receive, positive and negative, to focus our efforts on the areas that matter to our residents.