

Housing Complaints Review: 2023 - 2024

This report outlines the complaints received in relation to housing services during the financial year 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 and covers the following;

- Number of complaints recorded;
- Number of complaints handled at each stage of the process;
- Complaints by type/service area;
- Complaints performance.

Background

The Council has retained its housing stock and currently manages over 3,000 homes as well as more than 400 leasehold properties and 389 garages.

In July 2020, the Housing Ombudsman published a new Complaint Handling Code providing a framework for high-quality complaint handling and greater consistency across landlord's procedures. Its aim was to enable landlords to resolve complaints raised by their residents quickly and to use the learning from complaints to drive service improvements

This code was revised in 2022 to make it explicit about what was mandatory and where it was appropriate for landlords to use their discretion to achieve best practice in complaint handling.

Prior to the implementation of these revisions, complaints against the Council, as a landlord, were dealt with under the Corporate Complaints Policy. However, the revision of the Code and subsequent self-assessment resulted in a stand-alone procedure being developed for handling complaints received regarding the Council in its capacity as a landlord to ensure that it meets all of the requirements of the code.

The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 introduces new social housing consumer standards that contain specific expectations registered providers of social housing must comply with and detail the outcomes that providers are expected to achieve.

In relation to complaints, the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard states that,

Registered providers must ensure their approach to handling complaints is simple, accessible and publicised.

Registered providers must provide accessible information to tenants about:

- a) how tenants can make a complaint about their registered provider;
- b) the registered provider's complaints policy and complaints handling process;
- c) what tenants can do if they are dissatisfied with the outcome of a complaint or how a complaint was handled; and
- d) the type of complaints received and how they have learnt from complaints to continuously improve services.

The Housing Ombudsman Service provides redress for individual tenant complaints. However, its Complaints Handling Code became statutory from 1st April 2024 and provides a single, robust set of standards for complaints procedures to be accessible, fair and efficient. A legal duty is also placed on the Ombudsman to monitor compliance with the Code, regardless of whether it receives individual complaints from residents about a landlord.

The revised Complaint Handling Code requires landlords to produce an annual complaints performance and service improvement report for scrutiny and challenge which includes a self-assessment against the Code as well information regarding complaints received.

Complaints received

Complaints received	Number
Total number of complaints received: April 2023 to March 2024	124
Total number of complaints received: April 2022 to March 2023	74
Total number of complaints received: April 2021 to March 2022	36

There has been significant increase in the complaints recorded since the introduction and adoption of the Housing Ombudsman's definition of a complaint which is:

'An expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the organisation, its own staff or those acting on its behalf, affecting an individual resident or group of residents'.

Complaints are accepted in a variety of ways and the complainant does not have to use the word complaint in order for it to be treated as such.

Although the Housing Ombudsman's revised Complaint Handling Code is only applicable to the Council's role as a landlord and those complaints which have an escalation route to the Housing Ombudsman's remit, our Housing Complaints Policy has been applied more broadly to include complaints regarding Housing Register applications and homelessness approaches. This ensures that all tenants, potential tenants and applicants receive the same standard of service in terms of response times and standard of response.

However, complaints that have an escalation route to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman are investigated and responded to at Stage 2 by the Council's Leadership Support team. Whether these complaints are included or excluded from the figures given on the following pages will be specifically stated.

Complaints received by stage

	Under the HO remit	Under the LGSCO remit
Stage 1	65	39
Stage 2	13	7 *
Total	78	46

* Includes 5 complaints referred to Leadership Support for investigation and response.

Complaints received by type / service area

Service area	Stage 1	Stage 2
Responsive repairs	31	4
Planned maintenance	4	1
Rents and arrears	2	0
Tenancy matters	20	5
Neighbourhood issues	6	2
Homelessness application	18	4
Housing Register applications	21	3
Housing transfers	2	1
Total	104	20*

* Includes 5 complaints referred to Leadership Support for investigation and response.

Outcome of complaints

Stage 1

	Upheld	Partially upheld	Not upheld
Responsive repairs	21	7	2
Planned maintenance	1	3	0
Rents and arrears	2	0	0
Tenancy matters	8	2	10
Neighbourhood issues	2	2	2
Homelessness application	3	2	15
Housing Register applications	0	2	19
Transfers / mutual exchanges	1	1	0
Total	38	17	48

One Stage 1 complaint remained under investigation as at 31 March 2024.

Stage 2

	Upheld	Partially upheld	Not upheld
Responsive repairs	3	1	0
Planned maintenance	0	0	0
Rents and arrears	0	0	0
Tenancy matters	0	0	5
Neighbourhood issues	1	1	0
Homelessness application	0	0	2
Housing Register applications	0	0	0
Transfers / mutual exchanges	1	0	0
Total	5	2	7

One Stage 2 complaint remained under investigation as at 31 March 2024

The totals given above also excludes the outcomes of the five Stage 2 complaints investigated and responded to by Leadership Services.

In accordance with the revised Complaint Handling Code, from 1 April 2024, a complaint will no longer be able to be recorded as partially upheld. If an organisation has got something wrong, it must record the complaint as being upheld, even if there are elements of the complaint it has not upheld.

Complaints response times

	2023
Acknowledgement (or full response) sent in 5 working days (Stage 1 & 2)	98.5%
Response to Stage 1 Complaint – 10 working days	76%
Response to Stage 2 Complaint – 20 working days	73.4% *

* Excludes complaints referred to Leadership Support for investigation and response.

Tenant Satisfaction Measures

From 1 April 2023, all social housing providers have been required to start collecting data for tenant satisfaction measures on areas such as repairs, safety checks and complaints.

The measures are aimed at helping improve standards for people living in social housing, by:

- Providing visibility, letting tenants see how well their landlord is doing. And enabling tenants to hold their landlords to account
- Giving the Regulator insight into which landlords might need to improve things for their tenants

There are 22 Tenant Satisfaction Measures and, in relation to complaints, the relevant measures are:

- Satisfaction with the landlord's approach to handling of complaints (measured by tenant perception survey)
- Complaints relative to the size of the landlord (measured by landlord's management information)
- Complaints responded to within Complaint Handling Code timescales (measured by landlord's management information)

These measures only relate to complaints that fall within the remit of the Housing Ombudsman Service and its Complaints Handling Code. For 2023, this covered 67 Stage 1 complaints and 13 Stage 2 complaints regarding the Council in its capacity as a landlord.

A report on the Council's performance in relation to all of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures will be presented to the Council's Cabinet in June 2024.

Any findings of non-compliance the Housing Ombudsman's Code

The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 places a duty on the Housing Ombudsman to monitor compliance with its statutory Complaint Handling Code. This means that the Housing Ombudsman is required to ensure that all landlords meet the standards set out in the Code for complaint handling. To assist with this, all landlords are required to submit their self-assessment by 30 June each year, commencing in 2024.

Should the Housing Ombudsman identify any concerns with a landlord's compliance with the Code, they will engage with them to bring them back into compliance promptly. If there is evidence of ongoing failures in compliance, the Ombudsman will consider using their wider powers including Complaint Handling Failure Orders.

However, our Housing Complaints Policy has been reviewed and revised to ensure that it meets the requirements of the Complaints Handling Code.

Learning from complaints

It was identified that systems need to be put in place to ensure that tenants are kept informed about the progress of repair items and that outstanding actions are tracked. This role is now being carried out by the Technical Officers team in Building Services who chase outstanding and overdue repairs and keep tenants informed of progress and delays.

The form used by Surveyors inspecting properties has been revised to ensure that this captures as much information as possible to enable the efficient and accurate raising of repair orders.

All Investigating Officers to be reminded of the requirement to inform the complainant about any extensions required to the specified response times and to provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details should additional or advice be required.

Our Damp, Mould and Compensation Policy and procedures has been developed and influenced with the benefit of learning from complaints

We have developed the following policies in response to the requirements of the revised Code and the Housing Ombudsman's recommendations in the Spotlight report on Attitudes, Respect and Rights:

- Reasonable Adjustments Policy
- Vulnerability Policy
- Unacceptable Customer Behaviour Policy

Planned improvements

We intend to:

Include details about how to complain and the Housing Ombudsman service in our annual service charge statements to leaseholders

Produce guidance for those provided with temporary accommodation under homelessness legislation to improve their understanding of their rights and responsibilities

Produce an annual newsletter for those on the Housing Register to manager their expectations about the supply and availability of Council housing in the district.

Introduce a new repairs reporting form on our website to enable tenants to more accurately describe the repair that is required in their property.

Publish an online Repairs Handbook to assist tenants with the accurate reporting of the repairs required in their homes.

Regularly include information about how to complain and the role of the Housing Ombudsman in our tenants' newsletter and on our website.

In future, this report will also include any annual reports about our performance that have been received from the Housing Ombudsman as well as any relevant reports or publications produced by the Ombudsman in relation to the work of the landlord.