



Complaint and Service Improvement Report 2023

WestKent

Places to live. Space to grow.

Foreword to the annual complaint performance and service improvement report 2023/24

Introduction

An updated version of the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code was published in February 2024 and became lawful in April 2024. The Code aims to encourage best practice within social housing and ultimately help housing associations provide a better service for residents. West Kent Housing Association's (West Kent) Board have completed a self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code and have considered our complaints performance and the effectiveness of the improvements made in 2023-24.

We have a strategic objective to deliver excellent services and improving the way we handle complaints is part of that. As an organisation we view complaints as an opportunity to learn and improve services for our residents and customers. Operationally, feedback from complaints is an important source of customer insight, which we use to improve the customer experience and shape priorities.

This report contains West Kent's annual complaint performance and service improvements for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, and outlines West Kent's plans for continued service developments, focused on the voice of the resident for 2024/5.

Piers White, MBE

Chair of Board Management and Member Responsible for Complaints



How the Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC) has scrutinised the self-assessment

In February 2024 we undertook a self-assessment, which revealed some minor gaps in our processes. As a result the complaints policy and procedure were updated and formally agreed in April 24. The complaints policy and procedure were reviewed to ensure compliance with the code and the new policy was reviewed by the MRC and the Communities and Housing Committee and agreed in April 2024.

The key changes to the policy were:

- The removal of the quick fix or informal stage of the complaint.
- Amendment of timescales to include five days to acknowledge complaints and extending the timescales for considering a complaint to 12 months from the issue giving rise to the complaint.

Our teams work closely with our independent Resident Scrutiny Panel, who review our complaints performance on a quarterly basis. These are tracked and reported to our Communities and Housing Committee.

Self-Assessment: risks and lessons learnt

The self-assessment was also considered by the Communities and Housing Committee, who review complaints handling performance quarterly.

In considering the year 2023/24 areas of concern were:

- We received our first ever Ombudsman report on performance for 2022-2023 due to having over five cases determined on in the period, the report advised on a 55% maladministration rate due to six findings of service failure.
- In 2023-24 we received our first maladministration determination. In total we received 16 determinations in this year. Within these determinations we had 13 findings of maladministration and four of service failure.

This increase in our maladministration determinations and the wider change in the Ombudsman approach has focused our service improvement efforts.

The lessons learnt from complaints are detailed in the service improvement section of this report. We consider each complaint in a fair way and do our best to put things right for the resident. Where there are failings, we undertake a root cause analysis and learn from any failings that are identified. Each case referred to the Ombudsman is considered at Executive Director level to ensure a satisfactory resolution, as are Ombudsman findings. The MRC considers each finding and challenges the Executive Team on whether changes proposed will stop recurrence.

Initial assessment against the code found we were 90% compliant. Changes to policy and procedure were made in April 2024 ensuring 100% compliance with the complaint handling code.



Achievements and Challenges in 2023/24

Increase in complaints and Ombudsman determinations

In the last year, we managed 558 complaints and closed 180 more complaints than the previous year. The number of Ombudsman determinations increased from 6 to 16. The increase in the number of complaints and the number of Ombudsman determination was a major challenge in 2023/24. The increase in the number of complaints is a trend that is seen across the sector, and it is likely that this will continue.

Despite this there have been improvements in complaints handled within the initial timescales from 40% in quarter 1 (April-June 2023) to 66% in quarter 4 (January-March 2024). The average number of days to respond to a complaint reduced from 15 days in quarter 1 to 13 days in quarter 4.

A cross departmental group was set up to ensure our complaint handling was improved. Improvements this year included:

- Complaints response training arranged for Customer Resolution Team for December 2023 to improve the quality and impact of complaints responses.
- Quality assurance introduced to ensure that all stage one responses are checked by a senior member of the team and stage two by the relevant head of service.

- Weekly panel meeting with heads of service/directors to review complex stage 1 and all stage 2 complaints, agree actions and responsibility.
- Capacity increased within the team to allow a reduced caseload to ensure that all complaints can be managed within timescales.
- Action tracker to ensure all complaints commitments are delivered and reduce the number of complaints escalating.

Introduction of new housing management system

Moving to a new system was always going to be a challenge for the team, with operational teams focused on the immediate delivery of service more than responding to queries from the resolution team. New reporting has been developed providing dashboards to monitor individual and team performance on complaints handling and to enable the team to more effectively manage the workload and easily see the trends, themes and emerging issues. As a result, overall response time improved over this period.



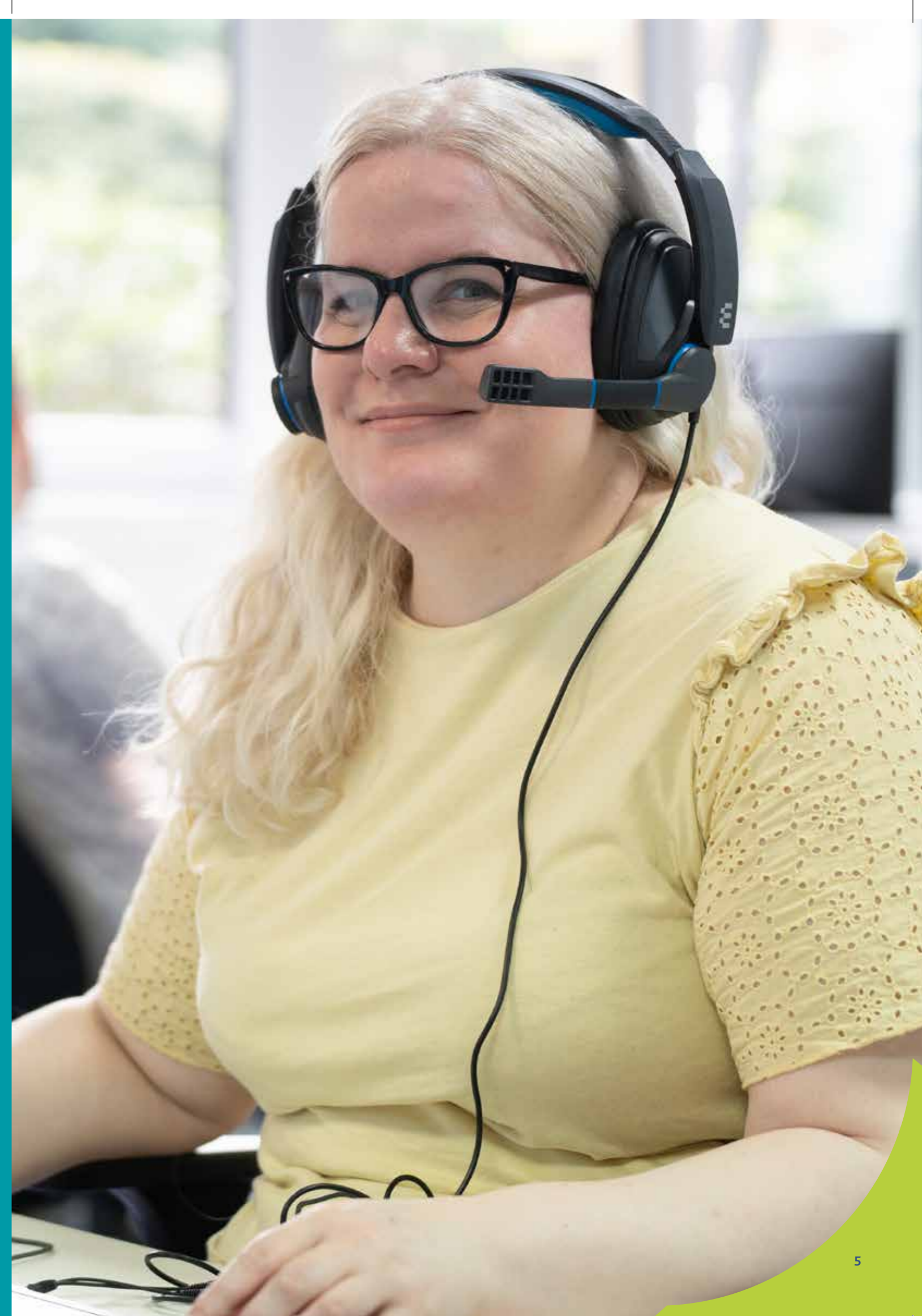
13 days

The average number of days to respond to a complaint reduced from 15 days in quarter 1 to 13 days in quarter 4.



66%

of complaints handled within timescales.



Complaints handling performance: April 2023-March 2024

Key data (all complaints managed)	April 23 to March 24	Commentary
Complaints managed	558	Stage one – 440, Stage 2 – 102, Housing Ombudsman – 16.
Complaints managed within timescales-including allowed extensions	91%	We have closed 492 out of 542 stage one and stage two complaints within the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code timescales. 50 complaints were closed outside of the timescales, of which 42 were stage one and 8 were stage two. Where timescales are extended these are agreed with residents.
Complaints managed within initial HOS timeframe of 10/20 working days	67%	We have closed 181 complaints outside of the initial HOS timescales. 150 at stage one (beyond 10 working days) and 31 at stage two (beyond 20 working days).
Complaints (stage one and two) agreed	66%	329 out of 500 stage 1 and stage 2 cases where we made a decision were agreed. This figure is based cases that we have considered through the complaints process at stage 1 or 2. It does not include the 16 Ombudsman cases or the 42 cases that were withdrawn rejected or refused.
Complaints not accepted	4%	21 out of 542 stage one and stage two complaints were not accepted. More details have been provided for reasons that complaints were not accepted.
Average days to respond	13	Days are within expectations and have been improving since a new housing management system was introduced, with enhanced reporting.
Escalation rate to stage two	23%	Throughout the year nearly a quarter of all cases have escalated to stage 2. 3% of all cases went to the Housing Ombudsman.
Complaints satisfaction score out of 5	2.4	Measured through Rant and Rave transactional survey, this figure is based on responses from customers who have been through the complaints process. The response rate to these surveys is 22% with 81 responses from 372 surveys. Our performance for the previous year was also 2.4.
Compliments	411	The main recipients were customer services and iNHomes.

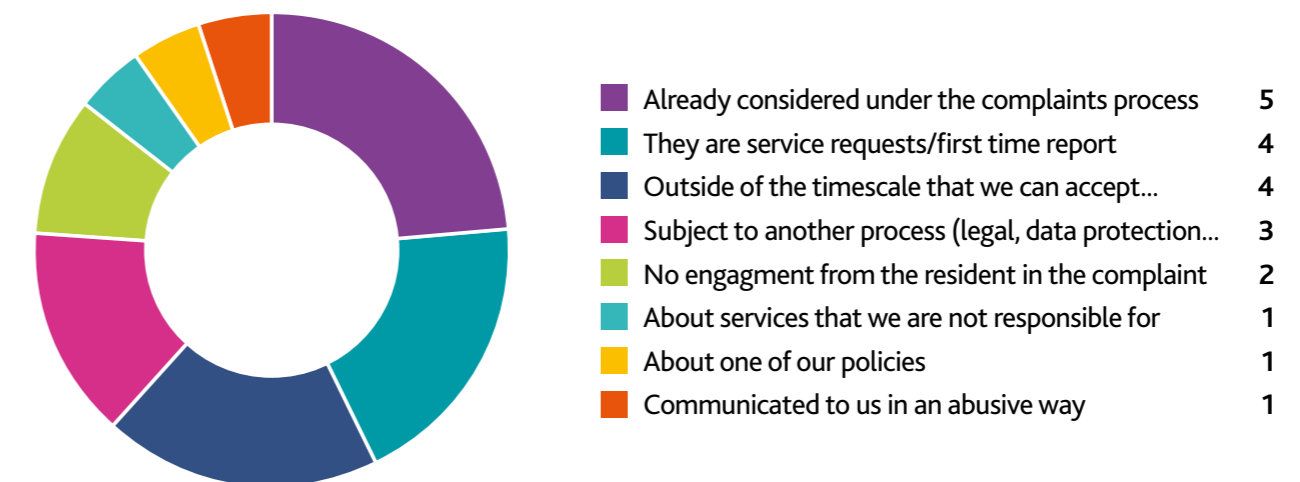
Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM as defined by Regulator these figures only include complaints from tenants and shared owners)

Measure	Rented	SO	Commentary
Satisfaction with Complaints Handling	44%	22%	The Low-Cost Rental Accommodation (rented) score is in the upper quartile and Low-Cost Home Ownership (Shared Owners) score is in the median quartile. This is in comparison to other providers who use the company Acuity for surveys.
Stage one complaints per thousand homes	48.0	35.9	The most frequent reason for complaints was repairs. A detailed breakdown of drivers of complaints is provided on the next page.
Stage two complaints per thousand homes	10.4	12.7	Repairs were the most frequent reason for complaints cases that were escalated to stage 2.
Stage one complaints handled within Housing Ombudsman Timescales	92%	88%	353 out of 386 stage one complaints were closed within the Housing Ombudsman's complaint code timescales.
Stage two complaints handled within Housing Ombudsman Timescales	91%	75%	78 out of 88 stage two complaints were closed within the Housing Ombudsman's complaint code timescales.

Please note the TSM definition of complaints only includes tenant and leaseholders, excludes complaints logged before April 2023 and includes those still open after the 31 March 2024. Therefore, the numbers of complaints referred to in the two tables are not exactly the same.

21 complaints not accepted

21 out of the 558 complaints not accepted as per the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code.



Complaint and compliment trends

Trends

- Complaints have increased across the housing sector over the last year, and we have seen an increase in the complexity of the cases. This has increased the number of cases completed outside the Housing Ombudsman Service timescales, although the performance improved towards the end of the year.
- We have managed 67% of complaints within the initial Housing Ombudsman timescales with the resolution team's performance in this area improving throughout the year. Complaints handled within the initial timescales increased from 40% in quarter 1 (April-June 2023) to 66% in quarter 4 (January-March 2024). The average number of days to respond to a complaint reduced from 15 days in quarter 1 to 13 days in quarter 4.
- Where we use the allowed extension period of 10 working days, 91% of all complaints were managed within the timescales. Where we need to extend a complaint, we always gain our customer's consent.
- The number of complaints agreed has increased slightly to 66% (an increase of 6% on 2022/23).

In light of the increased number of complaints, we have appointed an additional Customer Resolution Officer on a six-month fixed term contract whilst we introduce improved processes for the team.



The main source of complaints continues to be repairs and maintenance where the underlying factors are mainly:

- The length of time to resolve the issue.
- The scheduling difficulties that we have experienced following the introduction of a new housing management system has contributed to the overall number of repairs complaints, due to missed appointments and repairs taking longer.

- During the year we also saw an increase in the number of complaints about grounds maintenance. This was linked to issues with the mobilisation of the newly appointed contractor.

Our complaints satisfaction score measure through transactional surveys dipped slightly from 2.75 to 2.4 out of 5 in the last year. The low scoring comments often relate to the outcome of the complaint rather than the handling. Discussions on improving the satisfaction score and response rate is ongoing. The team received nine positive compliments in the last year.

Complaint categories and sub-categories

Repairs 269	Length of time	95
	Damage to goods or compensation	51
	Quality	40
	Communication	38
	Policy	26
	Other	19
Housing and Estate Management 110	Grounds maintenance	49
	ASB	34
	Other	22
	Cleaning	3
	Parking	2
Staff 71	Staff Attitude	35
	Other	16
	Timeliness	13
	Incorrect information	7
Charges 36	Rent charges	16
	Rent account	13
	Recharges	4
	Other	1
	Void	1
	Direct Debit	1
Moving Home 21	Mutual exchange	11
	Other	5
	Decant issues	3
	Transfer issues	1
	Management transfer or Direct let	1
Other 21	Other	21
Defects 12	Length of Time	6
	Other	2
	Damage to goods or compensation	2
	Quality	1
	Communication	1
Home Ownership 2	Other	2



Compensation

We made over 500 compensation payments between 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024 totalling £92,236.77. £5,260 of that amount was ordered by the Housing Ombudsman where we had failed in the management of their case, these amounts were in addition to any amounts previously ordered. £6,616 was paid to residents of one of our Emerald schemes where we had failed to deliver a service that we had charged for in previous years which was an on-site scheme manager.

Approximately 27% of the all compensation payments made were for £100 and under and were for more minor issues such as missed appointments, short term loss of heating and gestures of good will to put something right for our residents.

Non-compliance with Ombudsman code

Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS): Determinations made (April 2023 – March 2024)



Maladministration	13
No maladministration	5
Reasonable redress	5
Withdrawn or out of jurisdiction	4
Service failure	4

Maladministration and Service Failure by Business Areas (April 2023 – March 2024)



Complaints handling	7
Repairs	3
Policy	3
Defects	2
ASB	2

Key Learning and Service Improvements from the Housing Ombudsman Determinations

Determinations

We have received 13 findings of Maladministration and four findings of service failure between April 2023 – March 2024 from the 16 cases considered. Each finding is reviewed, and the learning is tracked. There were no findings of Severe Maladministration.

The key learning from the determination's includes for the following areas:

Defects

Learning:

- That we needed to provide more transparency with regards to the ownership, accountability and responsibility when we experience issues with the developer. Better management of development contractors at handover required, and clarity in communications with owners to manage expectations.

Response:

- All current contracts were reviewed by the employer's agent.
- Quarterly meetings for all sites.
- New snagging procedure has been implemented.

ASB

Learning:

- That we need better understanding of the impact of low level ASB on the resident.
- To ensure that the customer is fully aware of the escalation process.

Response:

- Introduced a proportionality-based risk assessment.
- Ran focus sessions with all front-line housing staff.
- The ASB service was reviewed by the resident scrutiny panel in 2023. Following this we have improved the information on our website with links to the community safety policy.

Leasehold

Learning:

- That we held limited information on our systems about properties where we were not the freeholder.
- That there is a gap in leasehold knowledge within the organisation when it comes to leasehold issues.
- That there can be delays in escalating issues through the complaints process.

Response:

- The introduction of a specialist within the finance and governance team to coordinate and advise on leasehold issues.
- Completed refresher training with the teams on complaints handling to ensure appropriate escalation.
- New Head of Rents and Service Charges post also created which will oversee this knowledge and resourcing gap.

Key service improvements from complaints

Our lessons learned framework looks at the learning from each complaint and identifies actions for each business area involved in the complaint with a focus on improving the services to stop the same issues from reoccurring. Examples of lessons learned are as follows:

Issue one

We received multiple complaints regarding the grounds' maintenance service throughout the summer period in 2023 following the appointment of a new contractor.

Resolution

- We worked with the contract management team and the contractor to ensure that the concerns were raised with the contractor.
- We appointed additional resource from another contractor in the Swanley area to release capacity.
- We prioritised grass cutting to ensure a safe environment for residents.

What we learned

- That a longer mobilisation period is needed to embed a new contract.
- That we need to review our estate management obligations.

What we implemented

- A longer mobilisation period for upcoming contract changes.
- An estate services review to take place in 2024.
- Reintroduced the resident inspectors to feedback on performance of contractors on their estates and blocks.

Issue two

Throughout the year we had received multiple complaints where our communication had been poor which includes where we have not kept residents up to date with repairs, we have not followed up on surveys, or we have not kept a record of conversations.

Resolution

Each complaint that has an element of poor communication is fed back to the business area involved. We resolve each complaint on a case-by-case basis and put right where we have failed.

What we learned

That that poor internal and external communication continues to be a key driver of dissatisfaction.

What we implemented

- We have continued to embed our Making the Difference programme for all staff to ensure delivery of excellent customer service across the business.
- Implemented a new housing management solution to improve workflow and ensure call backs complete.
- We have introduced a tracker, managed by the Resolution Team, to ensure that all actions arising from complaints are completed in line with commitments to the customer.

Issue three

We have received multiple complaints where the residents' vulnerability has not been considered at the point of service delivery.

Resolution

- We have managed each complaint on a case-by-case basis.
- We have provided reasonable adjustments.
- We have reviewed whether compensation should be provided to reflect the additional impact of the failings where we have not recognised the impact of an individual's needs.

What we learned

That in some cases we have followed the policy without considering the needs of the resident and If we should make reasonable adjustments to our approach.

What we implemented

- Training sessions with the senior team on empowering teams to flex policies.
- Training with the wider teams on considering vulnerabilities.
- Revised the Equality Diversity and Inclusion framework which focuses on dignity and respect.
- This will be a focus for further improvement in 2024.

Issue four

We received seven determinations of maladministration in complaints management the last 12 months and satisfaction feedback scores regarding complaints handling has remained low.

Resolution

We worked on a complaint's improvement plan to improve complaints handling.

What we learned

That we need to improve the quality of our correspondence, respond within committed timescales and do what we say we are going to do.

What we implemented

- Changes to the complaints policy.
- Letter writing training which has led to improved responses.
- Instigated a quality assurance process for responses.
- Increased engagement and oversight with complaints at a higher management level.
- Delivered complaints training with the team.
- Delivered compensation training to the team.
- We have introduced a tracker to ensure that all actions arising from complaints are completed within a reasonable timeframe.
- We have introduced a lessons learnt framework and tracker to ensure that all learning from complaints is captured.



Housing Ombudsman spotlight reports

The Housing Ombudsman issues spotlight reports to share best practice with the sector. We have carried out a self-assessment against each of the categories and the actions we were taking or had planned to improve services were in line with their recommendations.

Damp and mould

Update on progress made in 2023-24 against existing improvement plans:

- We used data and reporting to shape our approach to damp and mould.
- We identified properties at risk of damp and mould and cross referenced with resident who had not contacted us.
- We held training sessions with a damp and mould specialist for inhouse repairs teams, contractors and housing staff.
- We visited 50 residents who had not previously contacted us. They were given support and follow on works as appropriate.
- We created a dedicated website page which included videos and tips on how to deal with and report damp and mould.
- We ran a staff campaign to spot it check it and report it.
- A session on damp and mould was held with the Board.

Knowledge and information Management (KIM)

Update on progress made in 2023-24 against existing improvement plans:

- We have introduced data ownership and identified data and process owners for core data in parallel with the introduction of our new housing management system.
- We launched a new EDI framework with a section on data.
- We introduced data quality rules into our housing management system to improve data accuracy.
- We implemented a new contract management framework and procurement policy.
- Training sessions on the housing management system with subject matter experts.

Actions following Ombudsman Annual Report 22-23

The Housing Ombudsman issues an annual report for all organisations where they consider 5 or more cases. We received our first Landlord Performance Report for 2022-2023. The report identified that in 2022/23 we had 6 out of 11 findings of service failure (a type of maladministration). This equated to a maladministration rate of 55%.

Each of the findings of service failure had been reviewed at the time of the determinations and we were making the following service improvements:

Communication

- **Learning:** That we should provide responses to requests for information within appropriate timescales.
- **Response:** A Customer Service Standard has been introduced that provides clarity to staff on timescales for responses.

Vulnerability

- **Learning:** To ensure that when we communicate with residents that we do so in line with the adjustments needed according to their vulnerability.
- **Response:** Appropriate use of system for flagging adjustments highlighted to all front-line teams.

Complaints handling

- **Learning:** To ensure that the stage 2 for the complaints process is used revisit the stage 1 outcomes to consider if anything has changed or should have been done differently.
Do not reject stage 2 escalations without proper review.
- **Response:** We removed the ability to reject an escalation to Stage 2 from our policy, as we had received a service failure determination for rejecting an escalation without full consideration of the Stage 1 response.

Links to required documents

- 2023-2024 self-assessment.
- 2022-2023 Housing Ombudsman annual report.
- Complaints policy.





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