

Annual Complaints Report

Purpose	DISCUSSION / INFORMATION		
Date	April 2024	Reference	
Appendices (1, 2, 3...)	None	Author	Meena Lota
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		Links	N/A

Purpose of the report

The purpose of this report is to provide the Management Team with an overview of the volumes and themes of complaints received within the Housing Department in 2023/24. In order to allow comparisons, the report also contains complaints data covering the previous financial year 2022/23.

Introduction

We are committed to providing an excellent service for our customers, but we know we don't always get it right and we recognise our customers have a right to complain when they feel we have fallen short. As well as giving us the chance to put things right, complaints give us valuable feedback on our services that help us improve.

The Council's corporate policy sets out a two-stage escalation process for corporate complaints, including timescales the council aims to adhere to when responding to complaints.

This report provides data on the volume and types of complaints recorded and our response timescales across a number of housing related services and includes: -

- Technical Services – Repairs and maintenance of Housing Revenue Account (HRA) properties
- Landlord Services – Management of tenancies within the HRA
- Housing Services – Allocations, homelessness and housing advice

Although categorised by Specialist Service, the complaint enquiry could equally relate to work that is undertaken with Customer and Case, finance or other services that support the overall provision of the service.

Complaint volumes

The table below shows complaint volumes by categories over the last two years.

Type	2022/23					2023/24				
	<u>Q1</u>	<u>Q2</u>	<u>Q3</u>	<u>Q4</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Q1</u>	<u>Q2</u>	<u>Q3</u>	<u>Q4</u>	<u>Total</u>
Service requests	4	6	10	5	25	1	4	1	0	6
Stage 1	17	31	43	50	141	60	66	64	56	246
Stage 2	1	0	0	2	3	4	1	10	5	20
MP/ME enquiries	2	28	46	46	122	22	14	47	53	136
Ombudsman Cases	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	2

Analysing the above data, the total number of complaints has increased from 292 in 22/23 to 410 in 23/24.

Stage 1 complaints in 23/24 have increased by just over 78% (105) from the previous year. Stage 2 complaints have increased by over 500%, with the main increase being in quarter 3 of 23/24.

The increase in Stage 2 complaint volumes is expected. It is in-line with industry wide trends driven by the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code, which encourages sharing more frequent and transparent information with tenants around their rights to escalate complaints within process.

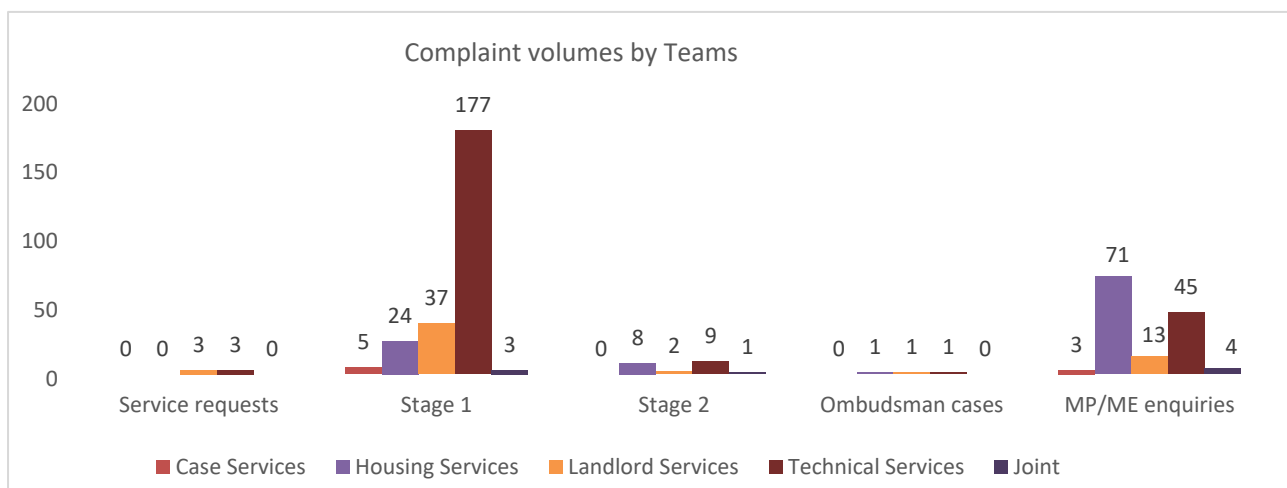
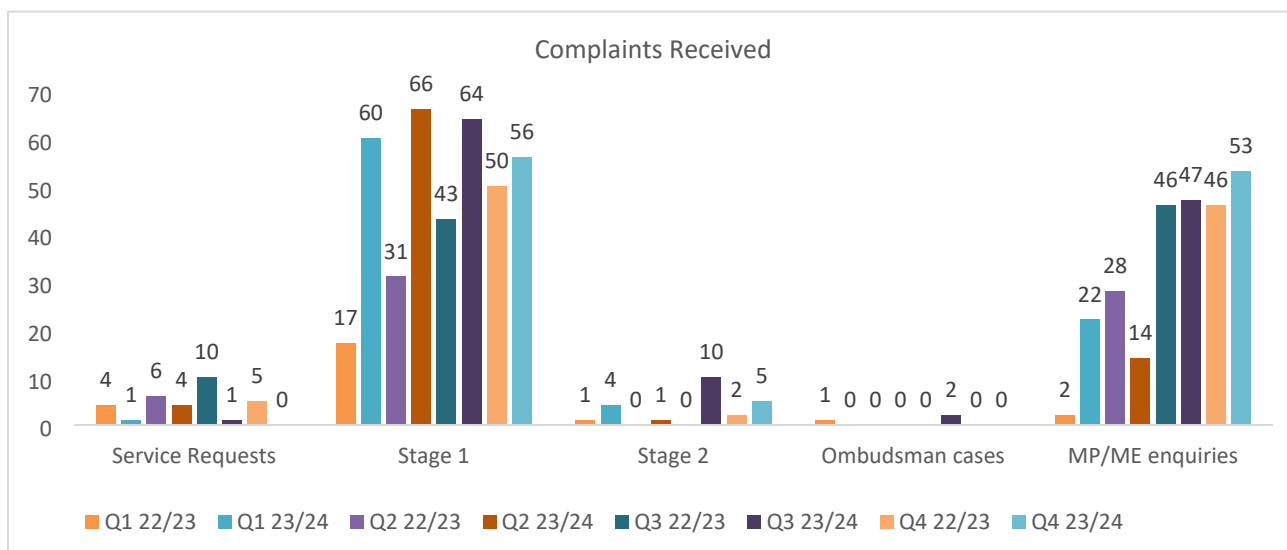
Tenants are advised at every stage of the process what their options are for escalation. To an extent, an increase in Stage 2 complaints is a healthy indicator that our process, and publicity around it, is allowing tenants to make informed decisions.

We have identified that a leading cause of Stage 2 escalations is failure to carry out works or actions promised at Stage 1. This trend is continuing, meaning we are driving these increased levels by failing to do what we have promised to do. From a service improvement point of view, it is strongly recommended that consideration must be given to upgrade the existing E-case system to allow for actions promised at Stage 1 and 2 to be logged, tracked and held accountable. The process currently in place has proven to be insufficient and action is needed to drive improvements and reduce Stage 2 escalations.

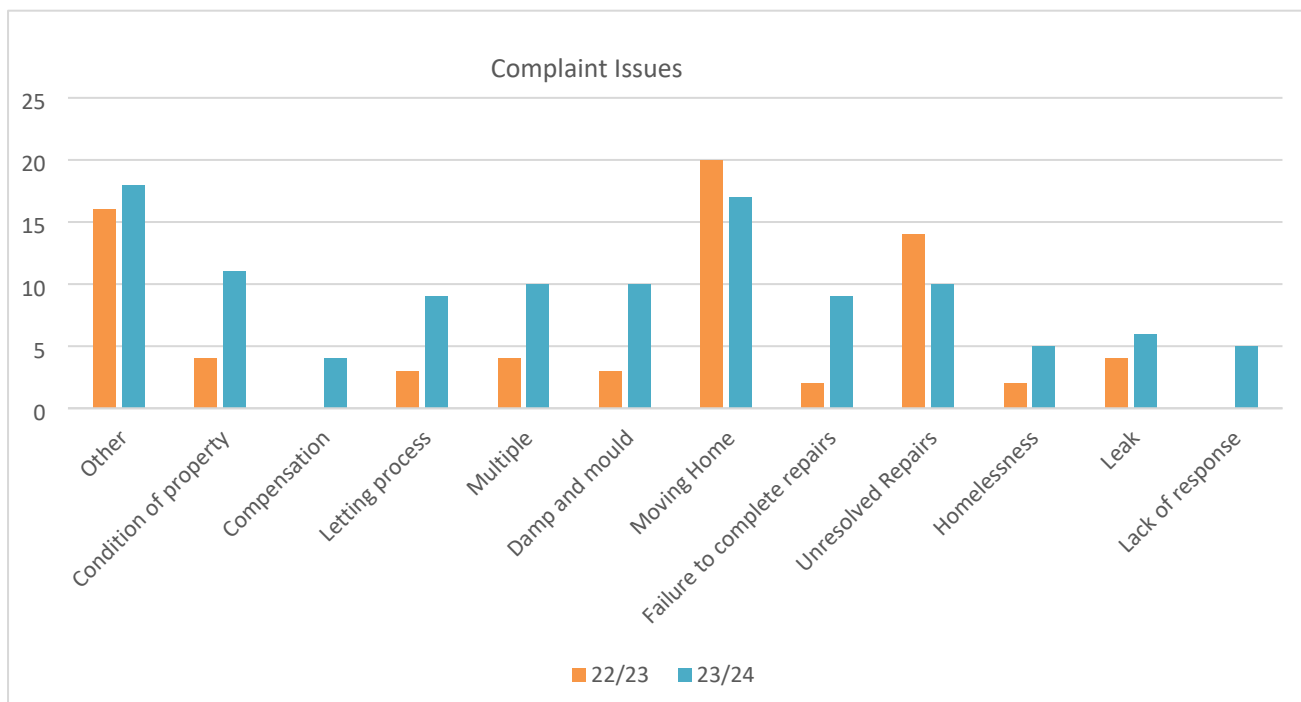
MP/ME enquiries have increased by 11.5% on 22/23 levels, mainly due to a spike in Q1 of 23/24.

The total number of service requests has dropped by 75%, down to a total of 6 across the year.

The charts below show the complaints received across all categories, volumes by teams and issues.



The majority of complaints at Stage 1 are for the Technical Services Team. Due to the recent challenges with the repairs service, this is unsurprising. Since the peak in Q2, the trend for Stage 1 complaints is downwards, which reflects the interim measures and tighter controls put in place. There is still likely to be a residual complaints hangover from the period in question.



In terms of issues, other than 'other', the most prevalent reason to complain is 'moving home'. The greatest increase has been seen with issues relating to damp and mould (230% increase) and failure to complete repairs (350% increase).

Complaints responded to out of target

Due to the challenges in the Technical Services Team, 90% of the complaints were responded out of target date. Many cases were responded to very late and would consequently skew the average time taken to respond to all complaints of the period.

Ombudsman Complaints

Complaint Handling Code 2024

The Complaint Handling Code will become statutory from 1 April 2024, meaning that landlords will be obliged by law to follow its requirements. The Code aims to achieve best practice in complaint handling and ultimately to provide a better service to residents. Key areas of the Code include:

- universal definition of a complaint
- providing easy access to the complaints procedure and ensuring residents are aware of it, including their right to access the Housing Ombudsman Service
- the structure of the complaint's procedure - only 2 stages necessary and clear times set out for responses
- ensuring fairness in complaint handling with a resident-focused process
- taking action to put things right and appropriate remedies
- creating a positive complaint handling culture through continuous learning and improvement
- demonstrating learning in annual reports

- annual self-assessment against the Code

New Code timescales for complaints

Landlords have to provide a two-stage complaints process as part of the new Code.

A landlord must acknowledge a complaint at stage 1 of its process within 5 working days and supply a written response within 10 working days from the date of acknowledgment.

If the complainant is still dissatisfied after they have received a stage 1 response, they can request to progress the complaint to the final stage (stage 2). A landlord must acknowledge a stage 2 complaint within 5 working days and supply a written response within 20 working days.

Complaint Handling Failure Order Report

The Housing Ombudsman has released its latest Complaint Handling Failure Order report, sharing learning where it has seen poor complaint handling in the previous quarter.

There was a significant reduction in the number of orders issued in this quarter compared to the previous one, with 25 landlords that had an order in the last period not receiving any this time.

However, eight landlords did receive orders in both periods and the report includes case examples to support improvement, including compliance with the orders.

Ahead of the Complaint Handling Code becoming statutory on 1 April 2024, the ombudsman has shared key lessons from the past quarter – for example, on accepting complaints, agreeing extensions and providing evidence.

As of 1 April 2024, all landlords will have to adhere to the new provisions in the code. Whilst there are minimal changes for the landlords who are already compliant, the ombudsman is urging all landlords to review the new code in readiness and ensure self-assessments are submitted on time.

Learning from Complaints

Complaints provide valuable feedback, and we encourage staff to view these as a positive opportunity to learn from experiences to drive continuous improvement and prevent similar issues happening again.

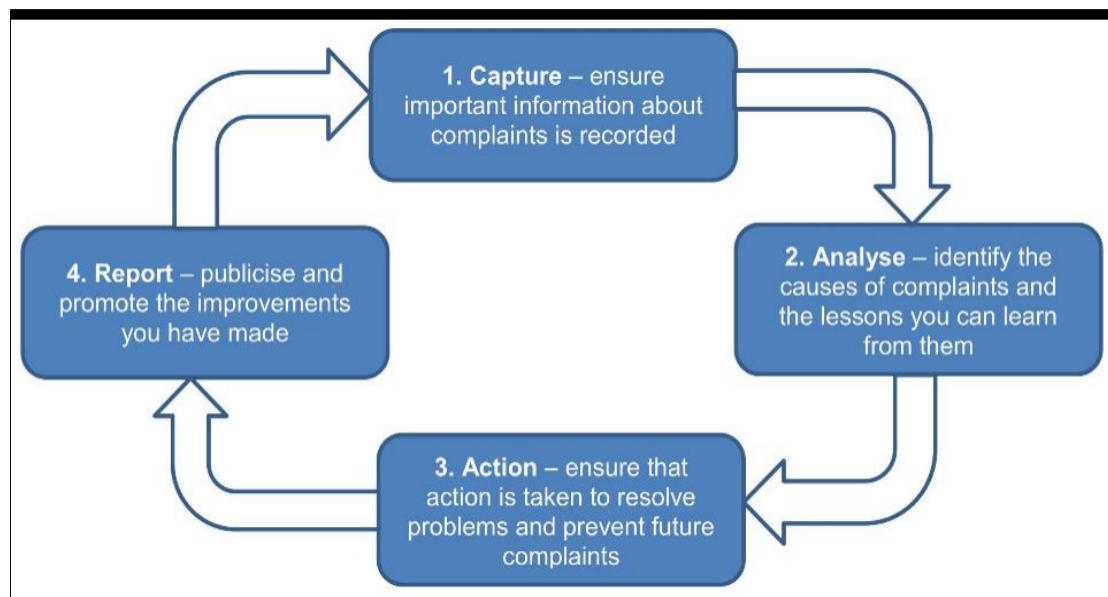
For staff, complaints provide a first-hand account of the customer's views and experience, and resolving complaints early saves resources and creates better customer relations.

The following learning was identified:

- Systems and record keeping have been identified as an area for improvement. Failings around service and complaint handling have often been where continuity of works, retrieval of records and work planning across several work streams have led to poor service delivery and customer service.
- Importance of communication and keeping tenants updated.
- Recommendations and agreed actions need to be tracked at stage 1 and stage 2 to ensure that we keep our promises to tenants and reduce the escalation rate.
- Ensuring that GBC policy and procedures are followed.

Service Improvements

We acknowledge that complaints are a valuable source of information about our services which can help us to identify recurring or underlying problems and potential improvements. Coupled with the results of benchmarking exercises and our recently introduced satisfaction surveys, complaints can help to build up an accurate picture of how our services are performing and to develop improvement plans that are based on sound evidence. Having good data is imperative to this plan and following the process below, outlined by the Chartered Institute of Housing, we are focussed on learning the lessons from complaints over the last 18 months, which is an activity we have not been able to provide much resource to during the period.



We have identified a number of areas where we can make immediate improvement as we move into the new period:

- Complaints handling and communication - Complaint handling is a key area for improvement because most complaints over the period were responded to beyond the target date. A new resource is available within the Repairs team to investigate complaints.
- Management awareness – Managers have reported being unaware of complaints as they were not made aware of the complaint when it was received (mention work with loggers to action asap and cc managers and housing complaints, as well as setting up weekly reports to be sent from e-case)
- Tracking outstanding actions – a dedicated Complaints Tracker to be set up to monitor all complaints actions and sent weekly to managers to update and complete.
- Quality of data inputted – we need better oversight in terms of what is meant by ‘Other’ complaint issues so that we can capture the root cause of the complaint and look to identify trends.
- Policy and procedure - ensuring that GBC policy and procedures are followed.
- Systems and record keeping – this has been identified as an area for improvement. Failings around service and complaint handling have often been where continuity of works, retrieval of records and work planning across several work streams have led to poor service delivery and customer service.

Actions for 2024/25

We have identified further work around learning from complaints to make sure we improve service delivery and prevent the same driver around complaints and dissatisfied customers being logged.

Implement tenant perception surveys to fulfil the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard - Tenant Satisfaction Measures. In addition, carry out complaints satisfaction surveys as feedback will allow us to ensure that we are dealing with complaints in a suitable manner. We want to learn from the feedback, work with teams to embed changes and a culture of continuous improvement.

Record complaint follow up actions on the complaints tracker and will only be removed or completed internally once all actions have been undertaken. This should result in a reduction in cases being escalated due to us not doing what we stated in our responses as part of the outcome for the customer.

Other improvements are around making sure contact is maintained throughout the complaint, including updating the customer when and why their complaint is going to be extended beyond the target date.

IT (E-case) system requires updating to encompass a single platform portal that has the capacity to include Stage 2 complaints, MP & Councillor enquiries and ongoing Ombudsman enquiries and investigations for greater transparency within the organisation.

Work with colleagues across the organisation to ensure we are compliant with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code 2024.