

Appendix B - Housing Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report 2023/24

Portfolio holder's introduction

Successful complaint handling should enable us to address customer dissatisfaction and may also prevent the same thing happening again. Complaints give us valuable insight that we can use to improve our services and overall customer satisfaction, provide us with a first-hand account of our customers views and experiences, as well as highlighting problems we may otherwise be unaware of. Handling a complaint well can significantly improve a customer's view and experience of us as an organisation.

Over the past year there have been many areas of progress in improving our Council housing services, although there are still a number of areas where we need to continue to improve. We are working hard to improve our engagement residents and collect better information about how our services are perceived, including complaints handling which has been identified as a key area for us to work on.

This report is a transparent reflection of how we've handled housing complaints over the past year, and as well as being open and honest about times things haven't gone right, it's also an opportunity to set out learning and improvements we've made because of our tenants and leaseholders bringing things to our attention.

Thank you to everyone that's come to us with a concern about their home or the landlord services we provide. It's a critical part of what we do, and by raising your concern we're hopefully able to quickly resolve your problem and identify how to stop that problem occurring for other people.

Councillor Jackie Hollywell

Portfolio Holder for Housing and Member Responsible for Complaints (Housing)

Purpose of this report

The Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS) regulates dispute resolution for social landlords and requires us to publish an annual complaints performance and service improvement report, and to complete an annual self-assessment against their Complaint Handling Code.

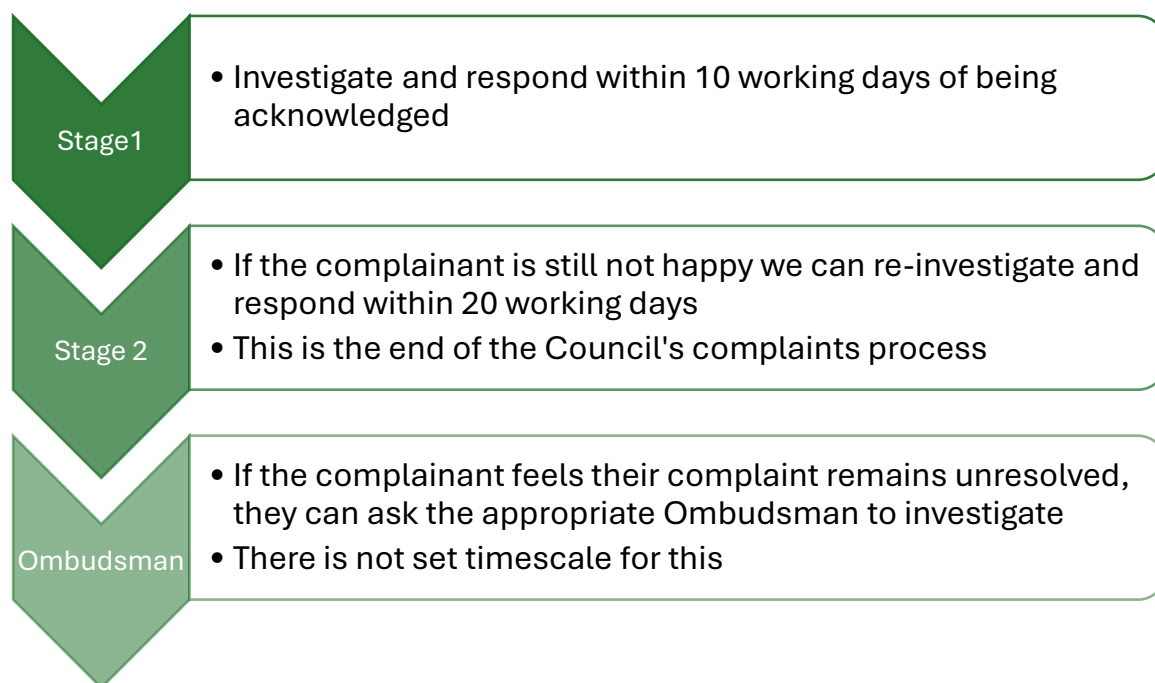
We are also required to submit these documents to the HOS and to make them available to our tenants, alongside any annual reports that the HOS prepares relating to our performance as a landlord.

This report covers the period April 2023 to March 2024 and gives us the opportunity to update tenants, leaseholders and other residents on how we have complied with the HOS Complaints Handling Code, how we have performed against key measures of success, report the determinations on cases that have been referred the HOS, as well as on measures we have taken to improve services as a result of complaints received.

We are dedicated to providing an excellent customer service. However, we recognise that there are times when our service fails to meet the high standards we have set. We value customer feedback and see compliments and complaints as an important part of gathering insight.

How the Council considers complaints

We operate a two-stage investigation process, with the option to refer to the Ombudsman if the complainant remains dissatisfied. Our Complaints Policy sets out the details of how we consider, investigate and respond to complaints.



The handling of complaints related to our landlord function is regulated by the HOS and by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) for all other matters including homeless and housing options services.

As well as being able to consider any complaints once our process is exhausted, the HOS also set out rules for us to follow called the Complaint Handling Code.

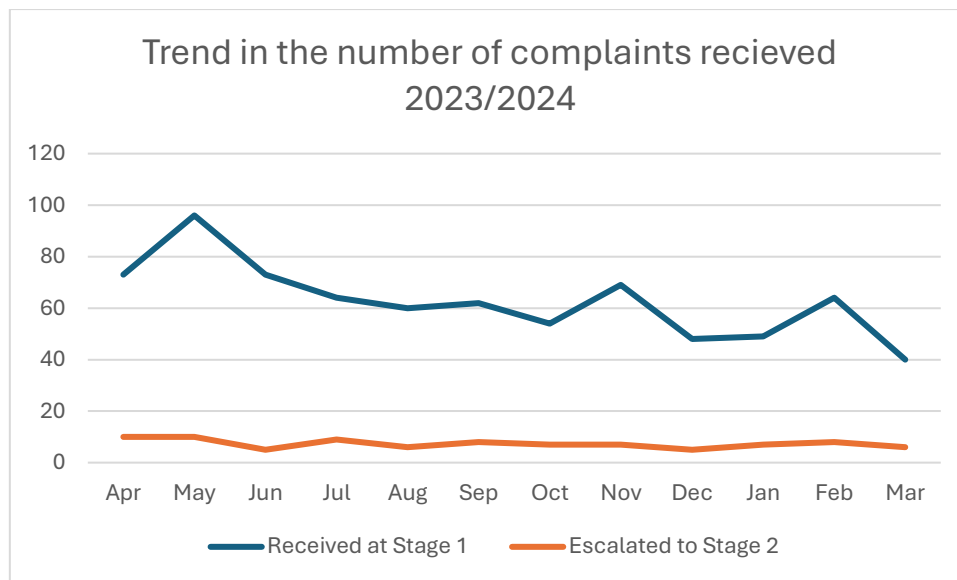
Our complaints handling performance

Key themes

At the start of the year our data told us that we were receiving a relatively high number of complaints into the housing service, mainly due to repairs and stock related issues. These findings are a national trait, as reported by the HOS, with the majority of complaints into their service also being related to repairs and maintenance. Due to regulatory changes within the social housing sector, high profile media cases and a drive to improve complaint handling across the sector, we did expect to see volumes rise.

Our data also told us that due to receiving a higher volume of complaints, it was difficult for us to respond within timescales, which caused us to receive further complaints in relation to our complaint handling process.

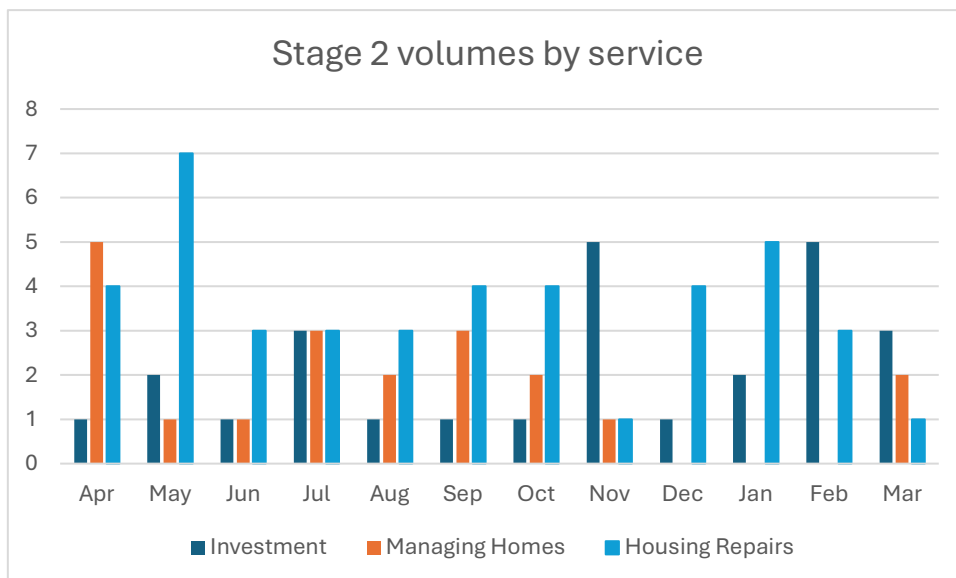
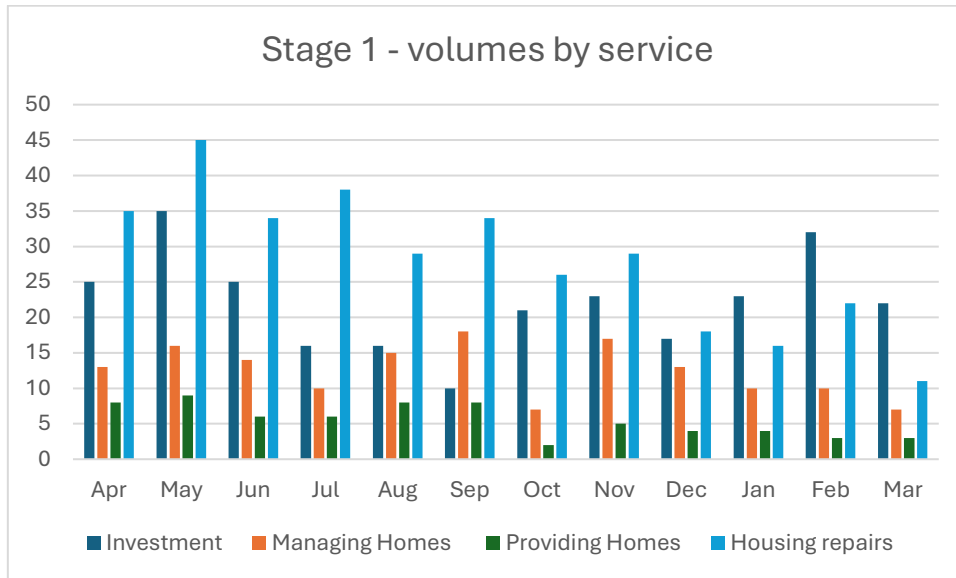
The data below demonstrates that we identified this learning early and made significant steps to a) reduce the number of complaints and b) significantly reduce response times to ensure that we were able to investigate and respond within the specified timeframes.



The trends show that once we identified common themes, we have been able to implement measures to reduce the number of complaints we received by making changes to service delivery. We also responded by providing additional resources and recruited a specialist complaints team to strengthen complaints handling and reach a resolution for the complainant much more quickly and effectively.

Our performance has improved throughout the year and in Q4 we outperformed the Q3 area median data for handling complaints within timescale, as supplied by benchmark specialists, Housemark. We will continue to put maximum effort into reducing the number of upheld complaints we receive as well as maintaining more consistent response times as we move through 2024/25.

Our tenant satisfaction perception survey results for complaints handling approach is lower than the area median provided by Housemark. To improve this, we have recently introduced a customer survey at the end of the complaints process to give us a deeper understanding based on feedback of whether dissatisfaction is related to the outcome of the complaint or the way in which we handled it.



* NB There were no stage 2 complaints regarding our Providing Homes service

Although relatively few complaints escalate to stage 2, resolution at stage 1 will remain a key focus for our complaints handling in the future.

Service Area	Stage 1			Stage 2		
	Closed on time	Total made	% on time	Closed on time	Total made	% on time
Housing Repairs	196	337	58%	21	42	50%
Investment	226	265	85%	23	26	88%
Managing Homes	144	150	96%	17	20	85%
Providing Homes	65	66	98%	0	0	NA
TOTAL	631	818	77.1%	61	88	69.3%

Overall, we upheld or partially upheld 78% of stage 1 complaints and 75% of stage 2 complaints in 2023/24. An area of focus for the coming year is to continue to build learning from our complaints to identify service improvements that reduce the overall number of complaints as well as the number that are upheld.

	Complaint Not Upheld	Complaint Partially Upheld	Complaint Upheld
Stage 1	22%	19%	59%
Stage 2	25%	21%	54%

Data will be captured about complaints that have been refused this year, so that we can provide more transparency.

Service Improvements and Learning

Complaints are monitored daily by our services, and as well as seeking to understand what's happened in a particular case and provide any remedies, we also see these as an opportunity to learn and improve our service for all our residents.

This year some of the key things we improved as a result of complaints include:

You Said	We Did
Our allocation policy is complex and difficult to understand.	A summary version of our new policy will be available in the summer of 2024.
We need to communicate the types of tenancy clearly.	A full explanation of the type of tenancy will be included when you accept a tenancy with us. We are updating our Tenancy Policy and will describe the types of tenancies we provide more clearly on our website.

You are waiting too long to receive a response to your complaint.	We resourced a specialist complaint handling team to ensure that we provide responses and resolutions within Complaint Handling Code timescales.
It takes too long to fix a fence.	To tackle a large number of outstanding fence repairs we appointed new contractors and a programme of work is now in place.
It isn't clear what arrangements can be made if you have additional needs like a disability or health condition.	A new Reasonable Adjustments policy will be implemented in 2024. This policy will inform customers how to access reasonable adjustments from the Council.
When we visit your home, we do not always introduce ourselves properly or display our identification.	There are new guidelines and face-to-face training sessions a planned for officers. This is aimed to improve our approach to visits and to help tenants feel more comfortable when officers visit.
Your homes are not completed to a good standard to move into.	An improved inspection and quality monitoring regime is planned for empty homes, we are consulting on and reviewing our lettable standard and we have improved communication between the empty homes and letting teams.

In response to customer feedback there are several initiatives across our Housing services which aim to improve service delivery and the experience of our customers.

Case study 1 – Fencing repairs

In 2022, a disproportionate number of complaints were relating to fencing repairs. Upon investigation, it was found there were a number of outstanding fencing repairs following several severe weather events.

To tackle the outstanding repairs, additional funds were allocated to implement a planned program. The approach involved reviewing all outstanding fencing repairs, distinguishing between repairs and replacements, prioritising jobs based on associated risk and procurement of another contractor to complete the necessary works.

Case study 2 – Door entry system

Several complaints arose due to persistent issues with the door entry systems in adjacent flat blocks. Recognising the impact of aging systems on residents, the Strategic Complaints Managers presented a case to the Assistant Director for Housing and as a result, a decision was made to completely replace the door entry systems in both blocks.

Each resident received a letter explaining that a replacement system will be installed. Consequently, the communication with residents and the reassurance that complaints are being taken seriously has reduced the number of complaints received about the door entry system.

Case study 3 – Housing allocations

As part of our ongoing analysis of complaints related to our Allocations Policy, we identified several phrases that are either confusing, misleading, or inconsistent with publicly available information, including Ombudsman Guidance. In response to this, the Senior Strategic Complaints Manager recommended simplifying the language used in our new Housing Allocations policy. We have also produced a simple guide as well as an infographic to explain the different bandings.

Ombudsman findings of non-compliance and other reports

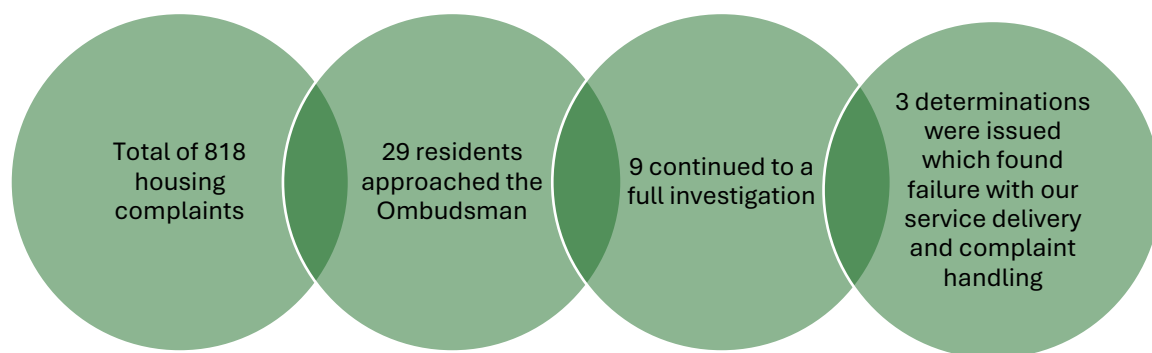
The HOS is a fair and impartial service which was set up by law to look at complaints about social housing landlords. Their service is free of charge to all tenants and leaseholders of social housing providers.

Complaints can be referred to the HOS for investigation if our complaint handling process has been exhausted and the issues have remained unresolved for the complainant.

At time of publication, we have not received an annual report from the HOS for the 2023/24 period, in future years this will be included in our annual report.

In 2023/2024 the HOS contacted us regarding 29 referrals into their service. The Ombudsman progressed nine to the formal investigation stage of which four determinations have so far been issued. We've provided summary details below:

1. Service failure found on three cases.
2. Maladministration regarding complaint handling on three cases.
3. Housing Ombudsman agreed that our compensation offer was reasonable.



In the 2023/24 year, we received three additional determinations from the HOS. These included one severe maladministration determination, along with two further maladministration determinations related to complaints that had been referred to them in a previous year.

On all determinations from 2023/24, we have accepted the Ombudsman's findings and incorporated their recommendations. Additionally, a case review is conducted for each determination to further enhance service improvements.

In summary, our key learning from the findings were:

- **Housing Repairs Service** – we need to make improvements to meet target response times.
- **Communication with residents** - better mechanisms are necessary to engage with residents who have complex needs.
- **Complaint handling** – Our processes should be improved to reduce delays, provide improved responses, and recognise when compensation should be offered to residents.

In response to the Ombudsman determinations:

Our approach to addressing reports of damp and mould is now comprehensive. We have dedicated resources to review all such reports, including building a case history incorporating property records. This information is then presented to the surveyor. Additionally, we've introduced new technology for property surveys, featuring an integrated inspection report completed on-site. Residents are involved in the process, agreeing to the proposed works, and receiving a full report.

During visits, if residents report any property or tenancy issues, these are escalated to the relevant teams by the surveyor. Furthermore, these visits serve as an opportunity to discuss any vulnerabilities that exist within the household.

To ensure consistent adherence to our processes, we've implemented a quality monitoring process specifically for damp and mould cases. Looking ahead, we are developing a new policy for damp and mould, which will incorporate regulatory and legislative changes, scheduled for implementation in 2024/25.

Significant improvements have been made to our complaint handling procedures since November 2022. A new system was implemented that allows customers to log and track their complaints. When complaints are raised via phone or other channels, they are registered in our system, which promptly sends an acknowledgement to the customer along with a target response date and a reference number.

Additionally, there are four Strategic Complaints Managers (SCM) working within the Housing service. These specialised roles independently investigate and address complaints while providing support to customers throughout the process. The SCMs oversee complex cases and conduct case review meetings that involve all service areas that are relevant to the complaint. This approach is aimed at ensuring we meet response targets and improving outcomes for residents.

Established a Member-led Housing Management Board to continue to monitor and drive good performance, compliance, resource allocation, risk management and tenant communications and engagement; and

Introduced fortnightly complaints clinics with the aim to ensure effective Member and management oversight and to look to continuously improve complaints handling across the housing service.

Links are provided to the Housing Ombudsman determinations below.

<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/2023/11/15/faulty-door-entry-system/> (Severe maladministration)

<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/decisions/stevenage-borough-council-202205029/> (Subsidence and complaint handling.)

<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/decisions/stevenage-borough-council-202119525/>)Asbestos works and a storage cupboard)

In April 2024, a reasonable adjustment policy was drafted in-line with the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling code. This sets out our commitment to

- Ensure the way we work does not place people with disabilities at a disadvantage.
- Make reasonable adjustments to our services when a person is disadvantaged because of their disability.

Self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code

The HOS requires us to review our complaints handling against the standard they set. This assessment is published alongside this annual report. Over the past year we've worked hard to improve our complaints handling and there are several areas we've strengthened, and at the same time we've also identified areas we need to continue to prioritise.

Key areas of improvement in 2023/24

- Prioritised complaint handling and establishment of a culture of learning from complaints. This has been recognised through additional resources to support complaints investigations and regular focused case review meetings.
- A new Corporate Complaints Policy was approved in line with the revised Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code and developed based on complaints learning, and the introduction of a new Member for Complaints (Housing) role within the Cabinet.
- Introduction of a fortnightly complaints clinic with the purpose of reviewing trends and undertaking route cause analysis to help drive improvements and learning. The introduction of the complaint clinic has had a positive impact on effective triage and resolution of complaints and seen a decrease in the number of complaints being made.
- Established a complaints task and finish group to oversee our complaints improvement plan and the procurement of a new complaint handling system to provide better oversight of our performance and opportunities to learn from our complaints.
- Adoption of a new Reasonable Adjustments Policy to ensure that disabled people seeking access to council services are not disadvantaged in doing so, and that reasonable adjustments are considered to remove or minimise the disadvantage.
- Made key improvements to our Repairs service in recognition of the trends in complaints received from our tenants, and developed using learning from the investigations:
 - Further training and expansion of the Customer Services knowledgebase has helped increase staff knowledge and access to timely information. New technology to make it quicker and easier for staff to book appointments has also been introduced. These improvements have helped to reduce the average call response and handling times for repairs.

- Changes to ways of working for the Repairs Supervisors and Maintenance Surveyors have been introduced to increase first time fix rates, productivity, and customer satisfaction.
- A service review of both Voids and Repairs, supported by use of complaints learning, was completed in 2023/24 along with scrutiny reviews of the Repairs and Void Service by the Community Select Committee. The agreed recommendations are being incorporated into improvement plans to be delivered over the next 12-18 months.
- Following a review of current arrangements, new interim contractors have been appointed to support the Repairs service, including for specialist works such as roofing, pending a procurement process to award longer-term contracts in 2024/25.
- A fencing programme has been established which carried out fencing works on 342 properties in 2023/24 and aims to clear the historic backlog of fencing repair jobs during 2024/25.
- Undertaken key tenant engagement actions to help provide better services that meet the needs of residents, to improve customer satisfaction and reduce the likelihood of complaints arising:
 - Commissioned TPAS to help us re-engineer our engagement framework to refresh and embed tenant voice throughout housing services. They have worked with ‘engaged’ and ‘non-engaged’ tenants through the discovery process.
 - Consultation has taken place with tenants living in high rise buildings to help inform our high rise building resident engagement strategy. Further consultation and tenant and leaseholder engagement will be undertaken prior to publication.
 - Resident consultation on a new Allocation Policy, due to be adopted in July 2024
 - Tenants were invited to participate in a Caretaking Service Review which allowed us to gain valuable insight into the perception of the service.
 - Pre-engagement work with Tenants was undertaken in preparation for the scoping of the Repairs & Maintenance Policy, this will be followed by a period of consultation with Tenants in Summer 2024
 - We have introduced transactional surveys for Complaint Handling and ASB to give us a deeper understanding of tenant views across these areas and to help us drive customer satisfaction improvements.

Key priorities for 24/25

- Procurement and implementation of a new complaints handling system that will enhance management and learning, improve insight into trends and causes of complaints, and make it easier to track complaints and monitor actions arising from complaints through to completion.
- Quality assurance checks that our complaint responses consider the individual needs and vulnerabilities of people approaching us.

- A review of all housing policies and procedures to ensure that we are managing our homes and housing related services in line with new consumer regulation and in accordance with legislation and best practise.
- Continue investment and service improvement in property maintenance to improve satisfaction and reduce the complaints in these areas, supported by an improvement plan for Repairs including:
 - Continue to upskill the workforce and working between teams to maximise productivity, improve diagnosis of repairs at first point of contact, and better experience for residents.
 - Make best use of technology and leverage the benefits of mobile solutions to capture tasks and manage workflow. Frontline teams to be enabled to view existing repairs and raise new repairs. Improvements to online repairs service to make it easier for tenants to use.
 - Procurement of support contractors to demonstrate Value for Money and ability to deliver to required quality and timescales in accordance with agreed service standards.
 - Customer engagement activities to help shape new service models and demonstrate learning from complaints. Improve communications with customers and their perceptions of and satisfaction with the service.
 - Deliver an improvement plan for voids including appointing a contractor and consideration of future delivery models.
 - Following a period of consultation, the new Repairs Policy and Service Standards will be presented to the Cabinet in July 2024 to clearly set-out the council's commitment to responding to repair requests and the service expectations.
 - Design and remedy plans for the modernisation of high-rise blocks are due to be completed in Quarter 2 2024/25, and procurement of specialist contractors will be undertaken shortly after
 - The Damp, Mould and Condensation Improvement Plan will be implemented to ensure compliance with soon to be introduced new statutory instruments linked to Awaab's Law.
- Continue to strengthen our tenant engagement activities to ensure our service are resident focused:
 - Following the discovery stage of re-engineering our engagement framework, TPAS will continue to consult with tenants to design and deliver a co-created approach to engagement and influence, following publication of the revised standards.
 - New framework and strategy to be introduced in July 2024, that will strengthen the council's approach to tenant and leaseholder participation, influence and scrutiny based on 'engaging, listening and acting'.
 - Tenant profiling to give us greater insight into the needs and preferences and help shape our service delivery.
 - Scrutiny groups will be re-invigorated to take a deep dive into service delivery, with suggested improvement action plans generated by tenants and leaseholders.

- Tenant Satisfaction Measures Plus Approach to be implemented during 2024/25 to further empower tenants and provide more contextual information on perceived service issues, opportunities, and successes.
- Implementation of a High-Rise Resident Engagement Plan to help inform the design and delivery of building safety works programme.
- A Communication Plan based on the feedback of tenants will set out the council's approach to meaningfully sharing updates about the council's improvement programme.

Response by the Executive Housing Work Group

The Council has an Executive Housing Working Group (EHWG), this group meets monthly with a formalised agenda and Terms of Reference the purpose of this group is to provide strategic oversight of Council's Housing Management Services. The Group is chaired by the Housing Portfolio Holder, with attendance from both the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council, along with the Strategic Director, Assistant Directors and relevant Service Heads forming the group.

This report has been reviewed by the EHWG, who have provided their response below.

The EHWG notes the Housing Complaints and Service Improvement report and would like to draw attention to the significant improvements made to the complaints handling process to ensure that we are a listening authority that welcomes feedback and one that can demonstrate that we embed our learning from complaints across the services we deliver.

Feedback from our tenants is welcomed and the key priorities for 2024/25 have been drawn from what our tenants have told us as well as what we have identified through service reviews. We will continue to monitor progress throughout the year and will also ensure that any trends that emerge are incorporated into the priorities.