



Annual complaints report 2023/24



Nottingham
City Council

Housing
Services

Summary

This Annual Complaints Report provides data and commentary relating to the Nottingham City Council Housing Services complaint handling process.

The aim of complaint handling is to make sure customers are listened to. Wherever possible, our key focus is taking early intervention and having a proactive approach to resolve the issues. It is also important as a learning organisation that we make sure that we identify any learning outcomes and service improvements and embed these into the culture and processes of the organisation quickly to prevent further dissatisfaction.

There has been a marginal increase in total complaint volumes logged this year. Throughout the year we have provided information to customers on reporting dissatisfaction, and improved signposting and information online and in newsletters. It is important that we are transparent and are visible to supporting customers in how to let us know when they are dissatisfied or feel let down by a service.

One of the biggest challenges we faced this year was the implementation of an integrated repairs system. While the system would be beneficial to service efficiency and improved effectiveness of repair appointments and information in the longer term, during implementation there were some operational issues. This temporarily affected the day-to-day repair service. There is a correlation between those issues and the number of complaints being logged relating to delays in works and appointment times. This was reflected in an increase in logged complaints compared to the previous year.

The main reason for the increase in complaints escalating to Stage 2 was a failure to deliver on the actions committed to within the Stage 1 response. This is an area which we are now targeting to make sure that all promises, and actions set out are undertaken in a timely manner and fully completed within the timescales agreed with customers as part of the response. We anticipate that a spotlight on this area will improve customer trust and reduce the need for escalation by customers.

We are still on the complaints handling journey and commit to making sure that we continue to learn from feedback, improve communication throughout the complaints process and keep customers informed about actions and outcomes of complaints. We're also making sure we have relevant and up to date information around the needs and requirements of our customers. This, along with effective record keeping, will make sure we are equipped to provide an excellent complaint handling service and one where customers feel listened to and valued.

Corporate Performance Target – Complaints per 1,000 properties

As part of the Corporate Performance Plan, we measure against a target for number of complaints per 1,000 properties. The target put in place for 2023/24 was no more than 60 complaints per 1,000 properties.

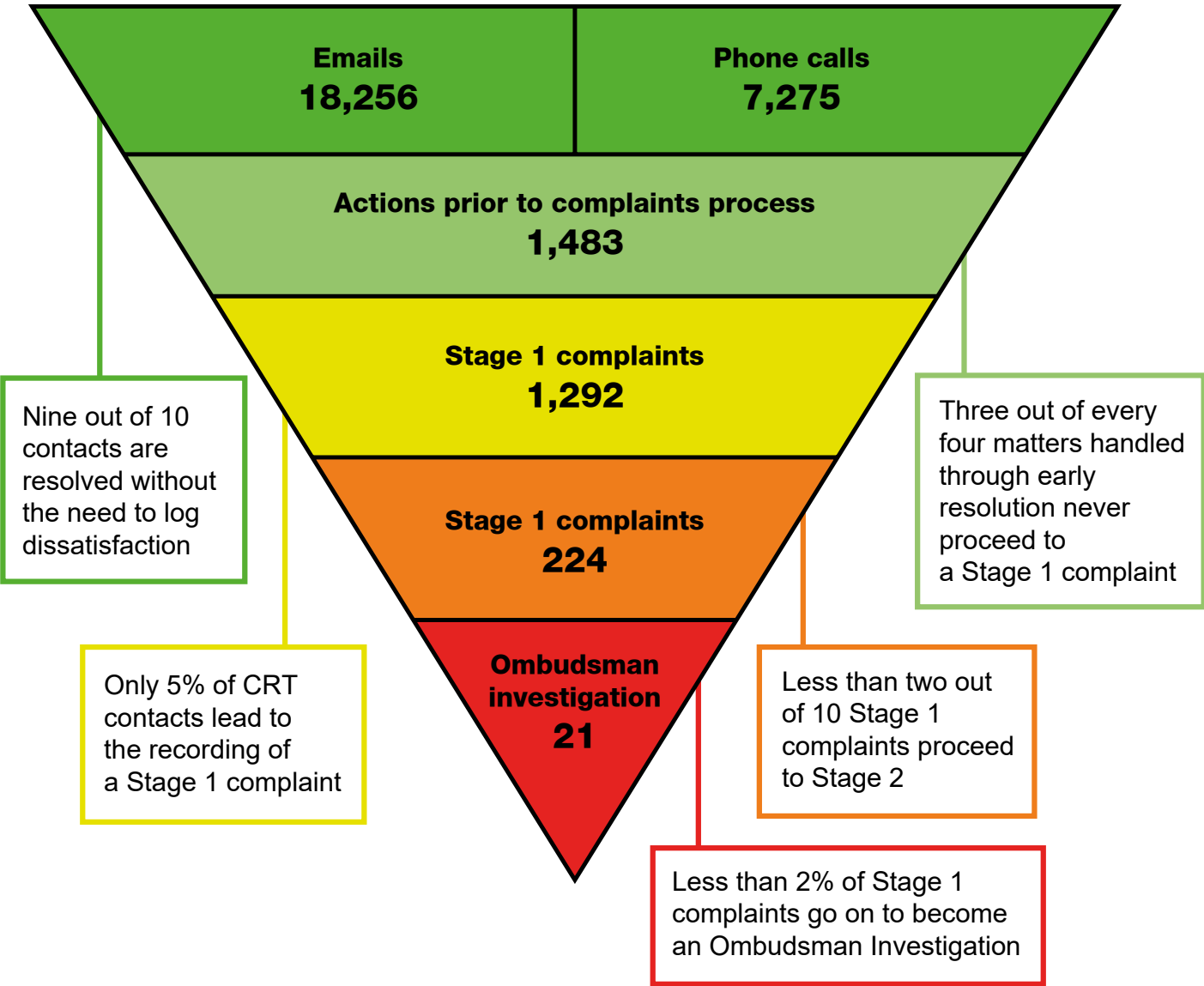
During this period, NCC Housing Services recorded 52 Stage 1 complaints per 1,000 properties, putting us comfortably within target for the year.

Customer contacts

The Customer Relations Team (CRT) handles a large number of incoming contacts and queries beyond those recorded as complaints. These range from general queries about services to potential complaints in need of investigation. The CRT handles these contacts through a mix of signposting, information sharing and pre-emptive actions to try and resolve issues to the customer's satisfaction.

The figures below show the number of incoming contacts throughout the year (and the means by which they are made) and then indicates the number that proceed to the various stages of the process.

'Actions prior to complaints process' would be considered any matter that we document as dissatisfaction prior to the customer requesting to enter the formal complaints process.



Stage 1 complaints

Complaint volumes

Table 1 below shows complaint volumes by directorate over the last four years.

Table 1	Service area	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Property Services	Asset Management	51	31	43	46
	Business Services*	-	-	159	348
	Commercial Services	3	1	4	6
	Development and Aquisition	2	13	3	4
	Mechanical and Electrical	349	191	127	103
	Planned Maintenance	176	123	86	69
	Responsive Repairs	599	450	575	515
Property Services total		1,180	809	997	1,091
Housing and Customer Services	Customer Excellence**	98	76	93	73
	Estate and Caretaker Services	6	4	1	2
	Housing Options	23	22	17	13
	Rents and Leaseholders	19	13	14	4
	Tenancy and Estate Services	80	92	115	69
	Voids	22	31	15	12
	Supported Housing	2	3	2	3
Nottingham On Call	6	5	5	7	
Housing and Customer Services total		256	246	254	183
Corporate Services	Customer Relations Team**	12	3	-	-
	Risk Management and Governance	1	4	2	-
Corporate Services total		13	7	2	-
NCC	Garden Assistance	12	20	14	18
GRAND TOTAL		1,461	1,082	1,275	1,292

*Business Services complaints relate to issues with administration and planning. They were previously handled as part of the relevant part of Property Services (i.e. Mechanical and Electrical, Planned or Repairs) but as of 2022/23 are now handled separately.

**The Customer Relations Team formerly reported as part of Corporate Services but now forms part of Customer Excellence along with the Customer Service Centre.

While overall volumes have stayed fairly consistent from 2022/23, there has been a shift in the areas they relate to. In 2022/23, Property Services accounted for 78.2% of all complaints, but this has increased to 84.4% in 2023/24.

Across Housing and Customer Services, there have been notable reductions in volumes, particularly across Tenancy and Estate Management, which dropped from 115 to 69 and Customer Excellence, dropping from 93 to 73. Lettings has also seen the ongoing trend of reducing volumes continue for another year, now down to just 13.

Within Property Services, complaints specifically for Mechanical and Electrical, Planned Maintenance and Responsive Repairs have all dropped from last year. While part of this may be due to service improvements and better handling of issues prior to entering the complaint process, it is important to note the increase in complaints for Business Support, who provide planning and administrative support to these areas. Business Support complaints have increased by 119% from 159 to 348.

Factors causing this include:

- Overall dissatisfaction with increased waiting times.
- Poor communication around appointment dates and changes to appointments.
- The process changes separating Business Support complaints from Mechanical and Electrical, Planned and Repairs (as more complaints are now being identified as planning issues and correctly allocated to BS).

Complaint performance

Table 2 shows total complaint volumes by year, as well as the percentage of complaints responded to within target. Please note the target for 2020/21 was 15 working days but reduced to 10 working days for 2021/22 onwards.

Table 2	Complaints	In Target	Over Target
2020/21	1,461	80.6%	19.4%
2021/22	1,082	81.8%	18.2%
2022/23	1,275	92.4%	7.6%
2023/24	1,292	88%	12%

While the year started strongly, with performance increasing to 96% in Q1 and remaining high in Q2 with 94%, performance saw a drop in the second half of the year, decreasing to 85% in Q3 and 82% in Q4, giving an overall performance for the year of 88%. The issues causing this progressive drop have been addressed within the Q4 quarterly report and actions are already in place to make sure improvement moving into the 2024/25 financial year.

As Property Services account for the vast majority of complaints (84%), there has been a strong focus on improving performance in this area. These improvements have included a weekly complaints clinic which sees staff from key areas of Property Services attending to review all outstanding complaints, plan suitable actions, make sure performance targets are met and identify key trends and potential risks.

Other areas have also worked closely with CRT to identify problem areas, with steps put in place such as rotas for handling of complaints and closer scrutiny of complaint allocations, to make sure the right staff are dealing with issues in the first instance.

The Customer Relations Team (CRT) will continue to work with all business areas to make sure best service is provided to customers and that complaints are handled in line with timescales set out in policy and legislation, and that we continue to be fully compliant with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code self-assessment process.

Complaint reasons

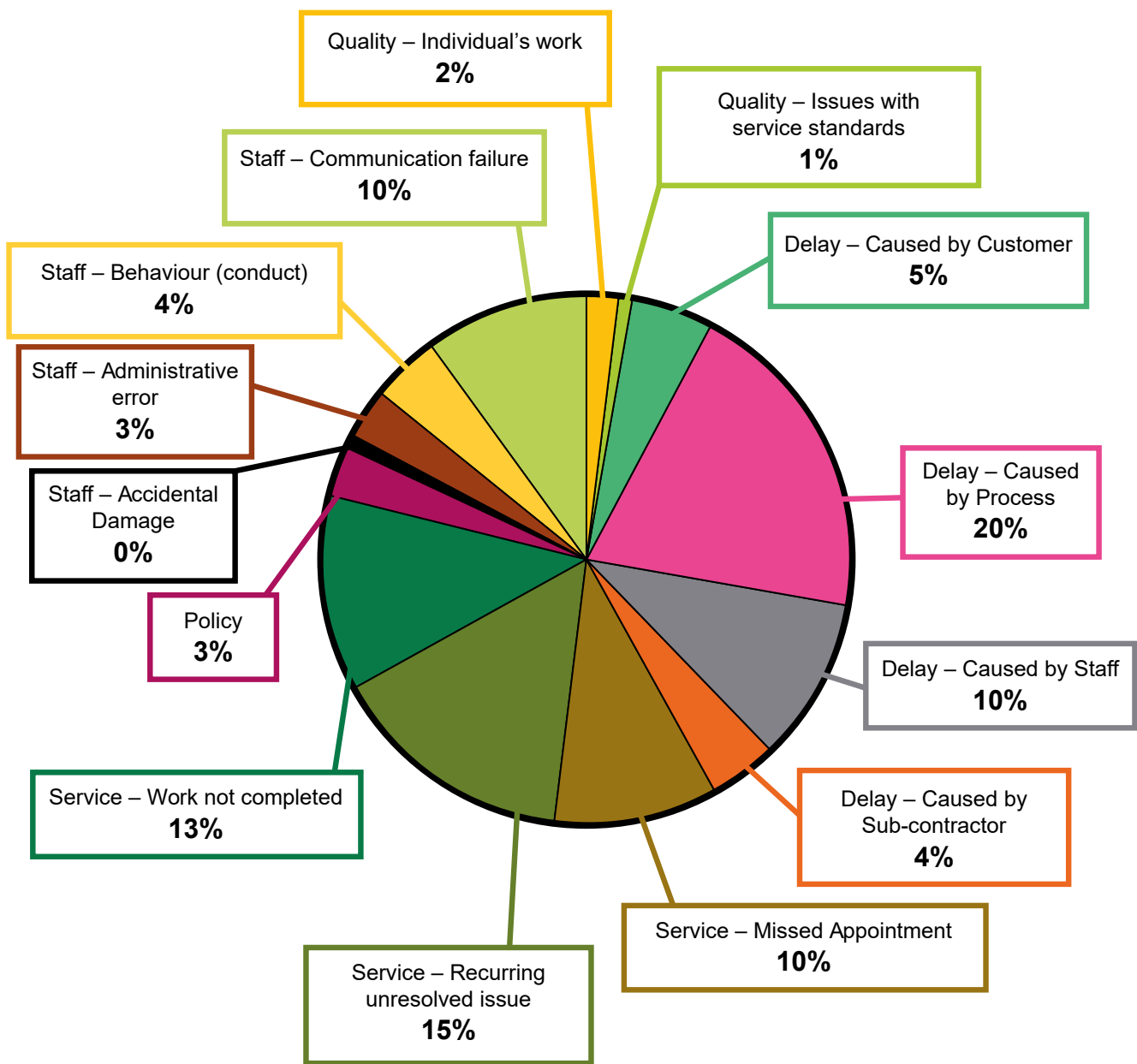
Upon closure, complaints are categorised by the primary issue that has driven the customer's dissatisfaction. There are five over-arching categories. Table 3 below shows the percentage of complaints that fit into each of these headings along with brief details of what they constitute.

Table 3	Definition	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Delay	Dissatisfaction with time taken to start or complete work, due to staff, customer, process or sub-contractor error.	57.8%	54.3%	51.5%	38.3%
Policy	Caused by NCH policy and may include either correct or incorrect use of policy.	2.7%	3%	2.5%	3.3%
Quality	Quality of work completed by an individual, or issues with work carried out to published service standards.	4%	3%	2.2%	2.6%
Service	Issues driven by service failures such as a missed appointments, incomplete work or unresolved recurring issues.	17.7%	18.1%	23.6%	38.5%
Staff	Actions of individual staff member such as alleged / actual misconduct, accidental damage or communication failure.	17.7%	21.4%	20.2%	17.4%

Complaint causes through the 2023/24 financial year have seen a gradual shift. While the year started with a continuation of the historic trend towards 'Delay' related issues, there has been a gradual shift towards 'Service' related complaints. These have been primarily within Property Services and have been caused by a combination of failure to attend appointments, work not being fully completed and recurring repair issues. These trends have been reported within the quarterly reports and work is in progress across the repairs services to address them.

Related to the above issue, and also affecting complaints outside of Property Services, communication remains a key driver of complaints. From a customer perspective, this relates to poor communication about what we are doing, when we are attending or why a decision has been made. From a business perspective, this relates to poor communication between teams, often leading to missed or delayed actions for customers. Communication must remain a key focus moving forward in order to improve customer satisfaction and reduce complaints.

While the above headings give a clear indication of the overall issues driving dissatisfaction, these results are broken down further as part of our continuous learning process. Each heading is broken down into various sub-categories which help us see a clearer picture of specific issues. The chart on the next page shows the breakdown of these sub-categories for the year.



Complaint outcomes

Table 4 below shows the outcomes of all complaints for the past four years. Upheld complaints are those where we have found we have made an error or taken incorrect actions, part-upheld complaints are issues with minor fault or with a potentially better solution. Not upheld complaints are matters where we are not at fault in any way.

Table 4	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Justified	50%	56%	56%	60%
Part-justified	29%	29%	28%	27%
Unjustified	21%	15%	16%	13%

The reduction in 'Not Upheld' complaints is the result of the continuing work by CRT to mitigate unnecessary complaints, rather than an increase in issues where we are at fault. We are obligated to record a complaint if requested by a customer to do so, but these figures show the work being done to improve customer understanding of the complaint process.

Stage 2 complaints

Table 5 below shows the number of complaint investigations requested to escalate to the Tenant Complaint Panel (2020/21) and how many Stage 1 complaints requested to escalate to Stage 2 (2021/22 onwards). Figures do not include Stage 2 requests that were refused and did not proceed.

Table 5	Early intervention	Proceed to TCP	Total
2020/21	65	13	78
	Withdrawn	Stage 2 response	Total
2021/22	20	116	136
2022/23	23	185	203
2023/24	23	201	224

While 2023/24 has seen a further increase in volumes, it is not a significant change. However, this means that we remain at a point where approximately one out of every five Stage 1 complaints is escalated to Stage 2. While there are a range of reasons for escalation requests, some within our control and some not, the primary driver of Stage 2 complaints remains the failure to complete actions set out in Stage 1 responses.

Within Property Services, which accounts for around 84% of Stage 2 escalations, Stage 2 complaints are discussed within their weekly complaint clinic, to make sure matters are fully addressed in a timely manner, causes for the escalation are identified and addressed, and any trends are pulled out to address as part of continuous learning.

Performance is measured by the percentage of cases answered or withdrawn within the 20-working day target timeframe. Overall performance for the year across all Stage 2s was 88%. While this is a drop from the 95% achieved in the previous year, this is largely due to issues during quarter 4 which have been addressed, with improvement expected as we move into 2024/25.

Housing Ombudsman

Table 6 below shows number of enquiries received from the Housing Ombudsman, as well as how many proceeded to a determination and how many of those determinations resulted in a finding of maladministration.

Table 6	Contacts	Investigations concluded	Findings* of maladministration
2020/21	17	3	1
2021/22	45	8	2
2022/23	48	17	6
2023/24	57	19	25

The Housing Ombudsman (HO) have continued with their strategy implemented alongside the Complaint Handling Code to increase their own visibility and accessibility to customers. We have played a part in this by making sure details of the Housing Ombudsman are included in all relevant templates and letters, as well as directing customers to them when we feel we cannot assist any further with an issue. As a result, Ombudsman contacts have increased slightly, along with determinations received.

It is important to note that figures for investigations do not necessarily represent the current status of customer satisfaction. As the Ombudsman continues to work through a historic backlog of cases, determinations are sometimes received for issues that occurred 18-24 months earlier. As such, this often means service improvements have already been put in place by the time Determinations are received.

*The Ombudsman now assess each point of a complaint separately, which may mean multiple determinations on a single case. As such, for the 19 cases where investigations concluded during this year, there were 50 separate findings, broken down in Table 7 below.

Table 7	Volume
Appropriate redress	4
No maladministration	9
Service failure	12
Maladministration	25
Severe maladministration	0

Compensation forms part of most Ombudsman determinations, with a total of £11,905 ordered to be paid through the reporting period. All actions ordered within these determinations have been complied with, meaning no complaint failure order has ever had to be issued to us.

Complaint handling code self-assessment

Further to the Self-Assessment mandated to be carried out when the Complaint Handling Code was implemented, further manual re-assessment is required annually. Re-assessment was carried out and we remain fully compliant with all requirements and best practices set out within the Code. The latest self-assessment is published on our website and a copy is included with this report as Appendix 1.

Continuous improvement and learning from complaints

General improvements have been made throughout the year as a result of customer feedback, including:

- Integrated systems to record and retrieve information more effectively.
- Dedicated Resolution Officer for complaints in Property Services.
- Implementation of a weekly complaint clinic within Property Services to discuss and resolve complaints and identify key learnings or trends.
- Directors taking the lead role in serious case reviews around HO determinations. This has included reviews of policies and service delivery around areas including:
 - vulnerability
 - record keeping
 - contactability
 - service offer around communal areas.
- Complaints now form part of monthly check ins with colleagues.
- Training around empathy, customer care and effective letter writing.
- Improved process for Housing Ombudsman investigation data gathering, including a step requiring sign-off by senior management.
- Improvements to process for complaints crossing multiple departments, intended to improve communication and provide a more efficient resolution to customers.

In addition to these, more specific actions as a result of complaints and Ombudsman determinations have also been carried out, as follows.

Communicating better by letter

Following a recent maladministration case, the Ombudsman has asked us to review the way we write letters, looking in particular at things like the kind of language we use and how we demonstrate understanding, empathy and compassion.

Letters are still one of the main channels we use to communicate with residents, about everything from rents to repairs, and from employability to involvement. Every letter we send says a lot about us as an organisation. If we improve the way we write letters, we can help transform the way residents see and interact with us.

As part of the review, we delivered a series of training courses around writing great letters – displaying empathy and compassion, communicating effectively, and also making sure that we’re complying with data protection principles and record keeping processes.

32 people attended the course, at the end of which they could write letters to residents using:

- Plain English and an appropriate tone of voice.
- Appropriate language demonstrating compassion and empathy with residents’ issues.
- Appropriate levels of detail, clear signposting, and details of action to be taken.

Following issues discussed at the training, a new Customer Experience Improvement Group has been established.

Complaint handling

As a result of a small number of complaints relating to miscommunications around recording of complaints, Customer Relations Team colleagues have been coached to make sure they clearly communicate the process. Customers are now more clearly advised of their options when expressing dissatisfaction, more clearly advised when a matter has formally been logged as a Stage 1 complaint, and when we are taking actions to try and resolve issues through early intervention. This includes making sure customers remain fully aware of their option to log a Stage 1 complaint at any stage, at their request.

Decent Neighbourhoods

Complaints had been made about a lack of communication about improvement works. As a result, we have made updates to our website to highlight programmes being undertaken which will further promote improvements being carried out. This has been used to signpost customers/elected members and stakeholders to relevant information, keep them informed and make sure they have access to provide feedback. Each programme also now has an Environmental Impact Assessment completed so that all projects are aware of and consider any impact on residents and tenants.

Damp and mould

In response to complaints around handling of damp and mould issues, Surveyors now provide a clear schedule to tenants, so they are well informed and clear on remedial works following an inspection to be carried out and an of timeframes for delivery.

We've carried out improvements into the handling and reporting of Damp and Mould concerns from tenants. This has included surveyors video triaging with tenants looking at their concerns, which for many cases has removed a need for inspection visits. Aside from a more efficient service to our customers, it allows us to more swiftly raise necessary works, use an in-house response team to respond and remove any immediate risks, undertake a risk-based approach to prioritise works based on vulnerability and reduce waiting times for high-risk works.

To improve communication on this issue we have also provided information on a dedicated webpage with information and links associated with Damp and Mould. It also provides customers with the opportunity to report and raise inspection requests through an interactive portal.

During the data gathering carried out on our behalf by Acuity as part of the Tenant satisfaction Measures, Acuity now contact us where damp and mould is mentioned and we contact the tenants to determine any outstanding issues. We have found that around half of those contacted in this way have issues which have not actually been reported to us. When this happens, a damp and mould inspection is arranged. As such, we have taken a proactive approach to tackling damp and mould, allowing for swifter resolutions for customers and more intelligent use of data gathering services.

Permissions

Following a complaint around permissions, improved information and signposting has been provided on webpages to highlight works undertaken by Asset Management. It provides contact details of officers managing works and projects, so customers have improved contactability and transparency.

We have also improved partnership working with the Highways team for driveway requests, to link the drop curb replacement and agreed a standard specification for driveway requests. We introduced a dedicated resource for permissions to improve communications and reduce waiting times.

Housing Options

It is positive to see a continued trend for reduced complaints within Housing Options, incorporating Lettings, HomeLink and Temporary Accommodation. Where we do receive complaints, we use these as an opportunity to learn and improve services for customers.

Learning from a complaint and Ombudsman Investigation has provided the opportunity for us to improve the service delivery of a third-party company who provides some of our temporary accommodation for homeless families. The complaint was a result of their delays in carrying out repairs to the accommodation and a failure to meet their obligations under the service level agreement. We have reinforced the requirements and expectations for timely repairs and their communication and service delivery has improved.

Within the Lettings Team, we have improved our communication with customers through ensuring that all refusals of offers of accommodation are confirmed in writing. This was implemented following a complaint where a customer disputed their verbal refusal after the property was offered to another applicant, a situation that understandably caused distress to both parties.

We continue to review and implement learning from complaints with regards to the Allocations Policy and access to the Housing Register. We have always provided rights of appeal where the Allocations and Tenancy Management Panel do not award priority access to the housing register.

However we now give the appeal rights to all applicants where they fall into Reasonable Preference Categories, even if it is a positive decision. This was amended further to best practice recommendations from the Ombudsman.

Roofing and repairs

Previously, when complaints relating to roofing repairs requiring scaffolding were made, it could take some time for a date to be provided to the customer. Now the process has been streamlined to allow for a date to be provided much quicker. Additionally, the use of a complaints tracker has been implemented to make sure these actions are followed through to completion.

Defects and latent defects

Following on from previous years' learnings on defects and Ombudsman determinations, as well as reviewing complaints made, colleagues from the New Build Team and the Customer Service Centre have held meetings with a view to improving the service we provide to customers. Linked to that, Customer Service Centre colleagues have visited new build sites to further understand the new homes we build, and the outcome of the visits has been shared with the wider team.

We also look to speak to all new build tenants personally and undertake a home demonstration visit with them with the aim of making sure they know how their home works, and thus preventing potential defects emerging. To enhance this further we intend to introduce a video for new build tenants to provide a thorough insight into their new home.

Complaints Clinics

Directorates have set up weekly complaint's clinics with senior managers and officers assigned complaints to make sure effective resolution and that target timeframes are met to provide timely responses to customers. As the clinics continue, more focus will be placed on learning from complaints and identifying trends to make sure complaints remain an effective tool in driving continuous improvement.

A tracker is also being implemented as part of these clinics to make sure actions promised at Stage 1 are seen through to completion. Aside from providing better customer service, this will also result in a reduction in the number of complaints escalated to Stage 2 and Ombudsman services.

Tenancy and Estate Management

Complaints within our Tenancy and Estate Management Team are now reviewed for any potential learnings. This has previously led to changes to the way customers contact Housing Patch Managers (HPMs), which resulted in a reduction in complaints around communication with HPMs.

Further reviews of recent complaints have resulted in the following learnings / actions:

- Managers need to use more professional curiosity when investigating Stage 1 complaints and not just listen to officer's account.
- Roll-out the introduction of service offers across blocks.
- Make sure staff are aware of the need to agree wording of Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) action plans with complainants.
- Make sure ASB case outcomes and reasons are clearly communicated to the complainant.
- Make sure all letters and contact with all involved parties is recorded in the ASB case notes.

Improvements in Progress

- Making sure we maintain contact throughout the complaint with the customer remains a key focus, alongside making sure that all issues raised are fully addressed to the customer's satisfaction. In addition to forming part of standard complaint response quality checks, we are now additionally monitoring this through the inclusion of specific questions on complaint handling surveys. These are sent to all complainants after the conclusion of all Stage 1 responses. Survey responses will be included as part of quarterly reporting and will feed into any improvement actions plans.
- We have brought together key stakeholders as the Customer Experience Improvement Group. Their objective is to raise and address any barriers to excellent customer service and make sure we are providing the best experience to our customers, across all areas of the business.
- We are reviewing systems to consider how we can make better use of IT to assist with issues such as:
 - Recording customer contacts and making sure information relevant to customers is available to all service areas.
 - Tracking, recording and reporting key issues such as damp and mould or disrepair.
 - Making sure customer data is updated and accurate.

Appendix

Appendix 1 – Housing Ombudsman complaint handling code self-assessment



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June 2024