



Annual complaints report 2022/23



Nottingham
City Council

Housing
Services

Summary

During the timeframe this report covers, housing services were provided by Nottingham City Homes (NCH). On 1 April 2023, NCH became Nottingham City Council Housing Services, and moved from being an organisation that operated at arms' length from Nottingham City Council to being part of the Council itself.

This Annual Complaints Report shows figures and findings for the second year of the new complaint handling process introduced in April 2021. One of the key goals of the new process is increased accessibility and visibility for customers using the process, and the available escalation options.

Introducing this process resulted in a significant drop in the number of Stage 1 complaints recorded in the previous financial year, as more customers were assisted prior to a Stage 1. Numbers have increased slightly this year compared to the previous year. However, this may be an indication of improved accessibility and transparency in relation to the amount of information and signposting offered to inform our customers around the complaints process, their rights and options including early contact and support from the Housing Ombudsman.

To provide context, the complaint volumes handled remain significantly lower than the volume of complaints recorded in years prior to the pandemic, and the new process being implemented.

One of the biggest challenges we faced this year was the volume of complaints proceeding to Stage 2 of the process. While the increased transparency of the process has played a part in this, factors within our Stage 1 complaint handling that have also contributed.

The strategy for increasing engagement with customers has mirrored that of the Housing Ombudsman, who have been actively campaigning to attract customers to their service. As a result, the number of queries and investigations coming from the Housing Ombudsman continued to rise throughout the year. This trend is evident across the whole social housing landscape, not just NCC Housing Services.

Learning from complaints remains a focus both internally and from the Housing Ombudsman, with increased expectation of improvements following on from complaint outcomes. While we have made and continue to make changes because of feedback received through complaints, it remains an area in need of work. This can only be achieved through a concerted and combined business-wide effort.

Internally, process improvements and communication improvements have been a key part of this year's focus. We have looked for new ways to work with other service areas to make sure that performance is improving. Quality of complaint responses remains a priority, along with learnings and positive outcomes. Co-operation with other teams has resulted in better performance and subsequently better service for our customers.

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 2022/23 was no more than 82 complaints per 1,000 properties.

During this period, Nottingham City Homes recorded 51 Stage 1 complaints per 1,000 properties, putting us very comfortably within target for the year.

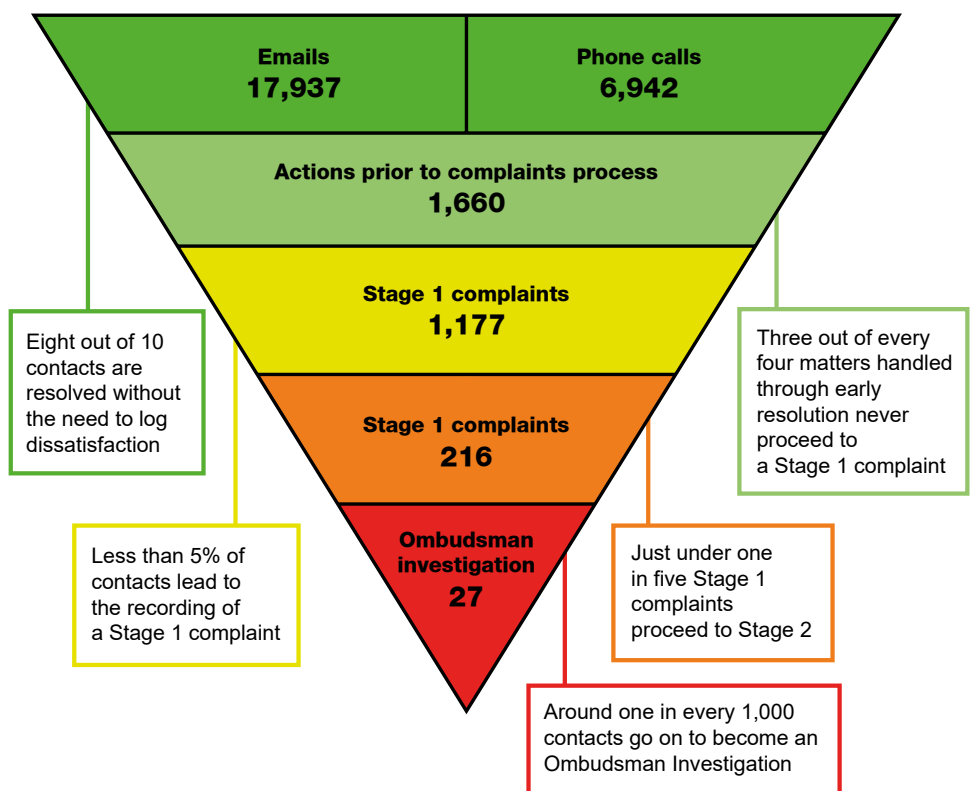
Customer contacts

The Customer Relations Team (CRT) handles a large number of 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 how they were received).

It also indicates the number that proceed to the various stages of the process.

'Actions prior to complaints process' would be considered any matter 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	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Property Services	Asset Management	92	51	31	43
	Business Services*	-	-	-	159
	Commercial Services	2	3	1	4
	Development and Aquisition	4	2	13	3
	Mechanical and Electrical	283	349	191	127
	Planned Maintenance	430	176	123	86
	Responsive Repairs	919	599	450	575
Property Services total		1730	1180	809	997
Housing and Customer Services	Customer Excellence**	161	98	76	93
	Estate and Caretaker Services	6	6	4	1
	Lettings	27	23	22	17
	Rents and Leaseholders	19	19	13	14
	Tenancy and Estate Services	77	80	92	115
	Voids	31	22	31	15
	Supported Housing	4	2	3	2
	Nottingham On Call	12	6	5	5
Housing and Customer Services total		337	256	246	254
Corporate Services	Customer Relations Team**	11	12	3	-
	Risk Management and Governance	5	1	4	2
Corporate Services total		16	13	7	2
NCC	Garden Assistance	73	12	20	14
GRAND TOTAL		2156	1461	1082	1275

*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. M&E, Planned or Repairs) but as of 2022/23 are now allocated and handled separately.

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

While overall complaint volumes have increased from the previous year, they remain lower significantly lower than previous years. A number of factors influence these volumes, including:

- More transparent and swift handling of matters prior to the complaints process.
- Improved handling of dissatisfaction prior to complaint process, allowing for resolutions to be put in place without the need for a Stage 1 complaint.
- General improvements to services provided by service areas across the business.

The rise from 2021/22 comes primarily from Property Services, and with a large number of issues being related to delays (see later section for further details. Much of the dissatisfaction comes from time waiting to start or complete repairs and maintenance within homes.

These issues are reflected countrywide across most social housing providers, with recent Ombudsman findings determining that services are still feeling the impact of the severe delays caused by both the pandemic and the subsequent supply issues with trade materials.

The increase in complaints for Tenancy and Estate Management (TEM) are also consistent with industry-wide trends, with increased instances of anti-social behaviour (ASB), subsequently leading to an increase in complaints about handling of ASB.

Complaint performance

Table 2 shows total complaint volumes by year, as well as the percentage of complaints responded to within target. Note the target for 2019/20 and 2020/21 was 15 working days but this was reduced to 10 working days for 2021/22 onwards.

Table 2	Complaints	In Target	Over Target
2019/20	2156	81.7%	18.3%
2020/21	1461	80.6%	19.4%
2021/22	1082	81.8%	18.2%
2022/23	1275	92.4%	7.6%

2022/23 has seen significant improvements in complaint performance, with 197 complaints answered out of target the previous year, dropping to just 97 complaints for 2022/23. While this is a great improvement that should be celebrated, improvements are still required to bring this number lower.

Improved monitoring is now in place with key areas to identify and address potentially issues before they go over target. This is especially important with recent Ombudsman determinations identifying unreasonable lateness as a potential cause for maladministration findings and compensation payments.

Communication was shared business-wide with all Resolution Officers (the designation given to anyone responsible for resolving a complaint) reminding them of the need to make sure target dates are met. This communication also included reminders of the 'interim' process, which allows for target dates to be extended up to 10 working days if there is a valid reason to do so and the reason for the extension agreed with the customer.

The Customer Relations Team (CRT) will continue to work with all business areas to make sure the 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	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Delay	Dissatisfaction with time taken to start or complete work, due to staff, customer, process or sub-contractor error.	45.7%	57.8%	54.3%	51.5%
Policy	Caused by NCH policy and may include either correct or incorrect use of policy.	1.1%	2.7%	3%	2.5%
Quality	Quality of work completed by an individual, or issues with work carried out to published service standards.	2.4%	4%	3%	2.2%
Service	Issues driven by service failures such as a missed appointments, incomplete work or unresolved recurring issues.	39.3%	17.7%	18.1%	23.6%
Staff	Actions of individual staff member such as alleged / actual misconduct, accidental damage or communication failure.	11.5%	17.7%	21.4%	20.2%

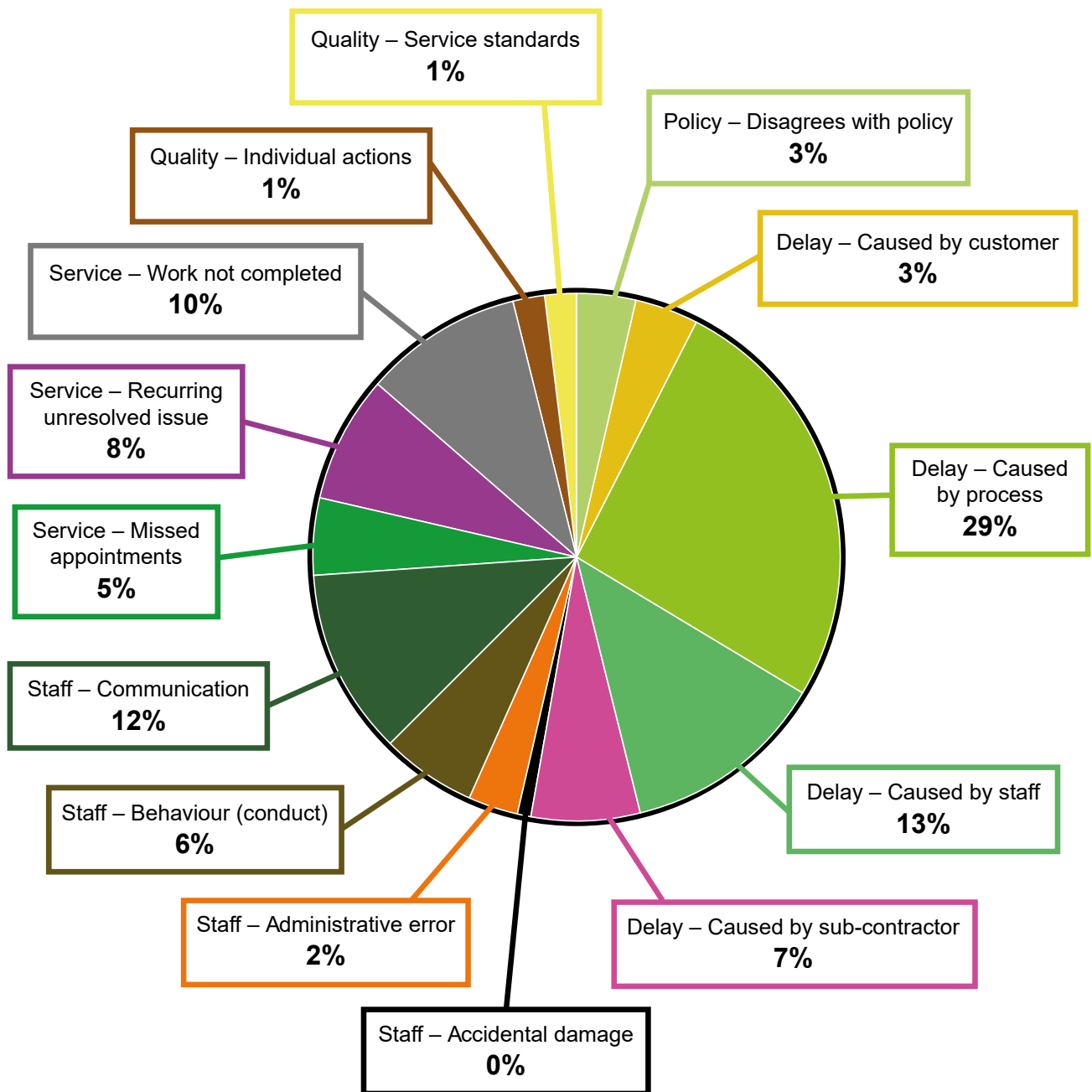
Although we identify the 'main' cause of a complaint, it is important to note that matters rarely fit neatly into one section and often will have multiple threads to it. One key issue that crosses through most complaints is communication. Speaking to our customers and keeping them informed, regardless of whether we are sharing good news or bad, will usually have a positive impact on customer experience and decrease levels of dissatisfaction.

The pandemic had a significant impact on the services we provide and waiting times for actions, as shown in the 'Delay' figures above for 2020/21. Although there has been a gradual improvement in this as we continue to work on improvements, 'Delay' remains the most prominent driver of complaints, with more than half indicating dissatisfaction driven by time taken to start or complete actions.

The increase in complaints relating to 'Service' often relate to Property Services matters where we have attended in a reasonable time, but then failed to complete actions on first contact, or problems have subsequently re-occurred.

The exceptionally low percentage of 'Quality' issues is a great result and a strong indicator that work being carried out by staff is to an acceptably high standard.

While these five key areas are effective for considering overall trends in dissatisfaction, we narrow the findings down further through the use of sub-categories. We use this to provide more targeted feedback to service areas on complaint drivers. The chart below shows how complaints for the year broke down into these fourteen sub-categories.



Complaint outcomes

Table 4 below shows the outcomes of all complaints for the past four years. Upheld complaints are those where we have found NCH to have made an error or taken incorrect actions.

Table 4	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Justified	52%	50%	56%	56%
Part-justified	28%	29%	29%	28%
Unjustified	20%	21%	15%	16%

The Housing Ombudsman made some recommendations around terminology in complaint handling. As a result, matters previously referred to as 'Justified', 'Part-Justified' and 'Unjustified' are now referred to as 'Upheld', 'Partially Upheld' and 'Not Upheld'. This more fairly represents the fact that all complaints are treated equally, regardless of findings.

Stage 2 complaints

Table 5 below shows the number of complaint investigations requested to escalate to the Tenant Complaint Panel (2019/20 and 2020/21) and how many Stage 1 complaints requested to escalate to Stage 2 (2021/22 and 2022/23). Figures do not include Stage 2 requests that were refused and did not proceed.

Table 5	Early intervention	Proceed to TCP	Total
2019/20	59	25	84
2020/21	65	13	78
	Withdrawn	Stage 2 response	Total
2021/22	20	116	136
2022/23	23	185	203

The continuing increase in Stage 2 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 customers around their rights to escalate complaints within process. Customers are now 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 customers to make informed decisions.

However, overall volumes of Stage 2 escalation requests would still be considered high compared to the volume of matters entering Stage 1 of the process. With 1,275 Stage 1 complaints for the year and 203 proceeding to Stage 2, this equates to 1 in every 5 complaints not being resolved to the customer's satisfaction at Stage 1.

Throughout the year, we have consistently 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. CRT very strongly recommends that consideration be given to an upgrade to existing systems to allow for actions promised at Stage 1 (and Stage 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.

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 95%.

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
2019/20	8	6	0
2020/21	17	3	1
2021/22	45	8	2
2022/23	48	17	6

The Housing Ombudsman has 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 Housing Ombudsman details 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 remained relatively consistent. The number of cases proceeding to a full investigation has almost doubled in the last 12 months. Again, this trend is one which is comparable to other social housing landlords.

It is not feasible to accurately show the investigation figures by year as the Housing Ombudsman have continued to work through a backlog of cases, some spanning up to 18 months. This also means that service improvements have often already been put in place by the time Determinations are received. Of the sixteen determinations received during this year, six cases were found to have an element of maladministration while a further five were identified as service failures.

The issues identified within maladministration findings included:

- repairs, such as fire doors, heating systems, internal doors, windows, cladding, toilets and loft insulation, leaks from neighbouring properties and communal doors
- asbestos issues
- complaint handling
- temperature and insulation
- damp and mould.

In addition to recommendations and orders around service and process improvements, determinations have also included orders to pay compensation, totalling across all cases to £6,170. All orders and recommendations have been fully complied with to the satisfaction of the Housing Ombudsman and within the agreed timescales.

Complaint handling code self-assessment

Further to the Self-Assessment mandated to be carried out last year, the Housing Ombudsman requires social housing providers to re-assess annual against the code. We carried out this re-assessment 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.

Achievements

- Further improvements to make sure ease of access for customers to self-serve from information held on the website around service requests and complaint handling and service dissatisfaction.
- External audit which resulted in full compliance and minor observations which have been complied with.
- Early intervention and proactive approach in ensuring at first contact early resolution can be achieved with the customer and the concerns being discussed.
- Reduction in the overall volume of complaints being logged at Stage 1.
- Continued improvements in Stage 2 process, resulting in improved service and transparency for customers, and overall improved performance.
- Further improvements to Stage 2 Complaint and Ombudsman case monitoring and management.

Learning from complaints

Property Services

A transformation project is underway, looking at ways of improving communication and information both across the service area, the organisation and importantly to the customers.

Many of the initiatives and improvements have been borne out of customer satisfaction around level of communication, appointments and waiting times for repairs, as well as our service standards. This has also included improving dialogue around customer expectations and the responsibility and obligations they have as tenants and leaseholders in making sure the properties are maintained.

Integration of systems and record keeping 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. We're addressing this with the introduction of a new NEC system.

Customer engagement and communication around repairs have also led to the introduction of a repairs working group. This is a focus group of customers and colleagues who work together to highlight areas of good practice and concerns to work collaboratively to improve service outcomes.

As a learning from complaints, we've undertaken a review of our approach for dealing with defects and latent defects in new-build housing. Three training sessions have been held to date, helping us understand how issues should be dealt with. To make sure we take a consistent approach, the process maps we use have also been reviewed. The resulting actions aim to make sure we provide customers with a joined-up approach as and when they encounter issues.

Tenancy and Estate Management

We've assessed the few complaints received around caretaking and taken these into account when recruiting. We're making sure colleagues can be proactive and feel empowered when faced with concerns and issues, and wherever possible look at early resolution for the customer to make increase customer satisfaction.

Feedback from complaints and customer insight gave us useful information on trends around dissatisfaction for customers with tenancy related matters, including delays in waiting to hear from housing patch managers (HPMs). Following consultation, we've implemented a new approach around improving contactability and readiness for customers to receive a response from the team on the reported issues. This has helped to improve communication and early engagement and after implementation of Phase 1 of the HPM contactability project.

- Staff communication is no longer the main cause of complaints (as it was for at least the previous 3 quarters before implementation) and doesn't feature in the top 3 reasons as the driver for complaint.
- There was also an 84% decrease in 'upheld' complaints as compared to the previous three quarters.

Asset Management

Following learning and service improvements directly linked to complaints and customer service regarding damp and mould complaints, we have introduced video triaging to try to reduce inspection times.

Other improvements include setting up a damp and mould response team who will be tasked with engaging customers who have reported issues and work by targeting works to address and remove any risks quicker. We have created a Decent Neighbourhood webpage for Councillors and staff to promote the process and program which will improve communication with all stakeholders.

Housing Operations

Where customers have contacted us in the past regarding access to the housing register, we have advised them if we feel they will not be eligible, with the intention of saving them the time, effort and potential disappointment of not receiving a positive outcome. However, as a result of complaints, we have realised that we are denying such applicants their right to a review of appeal of this decision. We now make sure that all customers are directed to make a formal housing application to fully assess their circumstances and give the right of an appeal if they are not initially granted access.

There have been some challenges to NCC's Housing Allocations Policy. We have identified that the wording has lacked clarity and can be confusing to applicants who do not understand the criteria they must meet. This has enabled us to amend the policy to make sure it is transparent and clear to both applicants and officers alike. This will also feed into the wider review of the policy that is currently underway.

As a result of learning from complaints, we have fully reviewed the Mutual Exchange Inspection Survey Report this year to very clearly identify any conditions of the exchange that need to be passed onto the mutual exchange applicant in writing. This will reduce the risk of applicants claiming they were not aware of recharges, repairs or conditions which then impact on costs to the business.

Customer Experience

Customer Relations Team

Further to feedback received from Housing Ombudsman cases and customer satisfaction we have improved our website to make sure clear information is provided around complaints. This explains the processes and stages involved, and closely links the information with the guidance from the Housing and Local Government Ombudsman Services.

Other improvements have been a review of the Complaints Policy to provide clarity around grounds for escalation requests and also around steps involved when customers request that complaints be withdrawn or closed. Again these are directly linked to customer and Ombudsman feedback and findings.

Team Leader Complaint Duty rota

We've implemented a rota which makes a specific CSC Team Leader accountable for handling any pre-complaint or formal complaint that is allocated to the CSC on a weekly basis. The Team Leader group pays close attention to the rota to make sure annual leave and other off-work activities are covered appropriately.

By implementing the above, we have seen a heightened level of Team Leader awareness regarding who is responsible for handling complaints at any given time. This has resulted in a significant decrease in complaints being handed back to CRT outside of required timeframes.

More to do in 2023/24

We've 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.

Directorates are setting up weekly complaints clinics with senior managers and the officers assigned complaints. This will make sure trends and reasons for complaints lead to change both within service improvements / communication and processes are reviewed. Complaints actions and reasons are recorded on a list and will only be removed and 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 response as part of the outcome for the customer.

Other improvements are around making sure contact is maintained throughout the complaint with the customer, and particularly in discussing the response in detail before issuing to make sure full explanation of findings are verbally shared.

Peer reviews from managers within teams make sure we are putting ourselves in customers shoes to review reasonableness and transparency of responses and actions taken as part of the investigation. A group of colleagues discuss and develop a model of customer excellence standards, looking into and sharing good practice both internally and learning from others outside the organisation.

We're improving IT systems to accommodate a promise checker to make sure all actions are delivered and recorded around complaints. A single platform portal has the capacity to include Stage 1 complaints records, Stage 2 escalations, and ongoing Ombudsman enquiries and investigations for greater transparency within the organisation.

Appendices

[Appendix 1 – Housing Ombudsman complaint handling code self-assessment](#)



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