

Annual Housing Complaints and Improvement Report

Ealing Council

2023 – 2024

HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENT

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report identifies the performance of the housing complaints function during 2023-2024, considers opportunities to improve, and outlines how we will implement these opportunities during 2024-2025. The report is produced in line with requirements set out in the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.
- 1.2 Under section 8.1 of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code (the Code), Ealing Council, in its role as a social housing landlord, must produce an 'Annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report' for scrutiny and challenge, which must include:
 - a. an annual self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman code to ensure our complaint handling policy remains in line with their requirements.
 - b. a qualitative and quantitative analysis of our complaint handling performance, which must include a summary of the types of complaints we have refused to accept.
 - c. any findings of non-compliance with the code by the Ombudsman.
 - d. the service improvements made as a result of the learning from complaints.
 - e. any annual report about the landlord's performance from the Ombudsman.
 - f. any other relevant reports or publications produced by the Ombudsman in relation to the work of the landlord.
- 1.3 In addition, section 8.2 of the Code states that the annual complaints performance and service improvement report must be reported to the landlord's governing body (or equivalent) and published on the section of its website relating to complaints. The governing body's response to the report must be published alongside this.

This report will therefore be presented, initially to Housing and Environment Senior Leadership Team (August 2024) and then subsequently to corporate Strategic Leadership Team (September 2024), and finally to our inaugural Housing Board (September 2024) prior to publication on the council's website¹.

- 1.4 This report identifies some of the challenges facing Ealing Council in effectively handling housing complaints, including themes and trends, present in multiple internal and ombudsman complaint findings, which are being addressed as a priority. Priorities for action lie both within the housing service and within the complaints team.
- 1.5 Ealing Council has become more self-aware through the process of self-assessment, trend analysis, and reflection on findings of maladministration. Clear action plans have been put in place, and are currently in delivery, to address weaknesses in key areas such as repairs, data availability and management, and complaints handling. Progress against delivery will be regularly reported: to Housing and Environment SLT; the Rebuilding the Housing Service Programme Board; the Lead Member for Safe and Genuinely Affordable Homes; and the Housing Board.

¹ For this year's report the governing body is our corporate Strategic Leadership Team, and they have provided a response to this report. In future years, it will be our Housing Board who is the governing body and who will respond to this report.

2. Complaints performance

Stage 1

| Stage 1 complaints | Number received 2023-2024 | % responded to in 10 working days | % upheld ² |
|--|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Asset management complaints | 523 | 54% | 36% |
| Neighbourhood management complaints | 33 | 52% | 42% |
| Safer communities complaints ³ | 20 | 45% | 13% |

Commentary

We had a high volume of stage 1 complaints in 2023-2024 and at the time, our complaints policy and timescale were not aligned with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code. Given the gap between our newly adopted response timescales and our performance, following the introduction of the new code, stand-ups were initiated in April 2024, alongside other improvement activity. By May 2024, this enhanced focus resulted in improved performance at stage 1 to 61% and the expectation is that performance for August 2024 will exceed the target of 90% answered within timescales.

² Some data cleansing is required so figures may be subject to change.

³ Not all the complaints for the safer communities team (stage 1 and 2) relate to our tenants. At the time of writing this report it has not been possible to drill down into Ealing Council tenants and residents of the borough. We have introduced a system change that took effect on 8 July 2024, we now need to review our data so that we can report on those complaints that fall under the jurisdiction of the Housing Ombudsman Service.

During 2023-2024 the Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) was unable to effectively categorise complaints, and this has meant that themes and trends have been identified based on officers' experience of complaint types most frequently upheld and triangulated with other service data (for example repairs performance).

From 7 July 2024, new CRM categories have been introduced, which will allow more methodical and rigorous analysis of complaint types in the future, and it is expected this can drive further service improvements to reduce overall complaints volumes.

Stage 2

| Stage 2 complaints | Number received 2023-2024 | % responded to in 20 working days | % upheld ⁴ |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Asset management complaints | 113 | 54% | 64% |
| Neighbourhood management complaints | 3 | 66% | 0% |
| Safer communities complaints | 3 | 33% | 0% |

Commentary

21.6% of our asset management complaints escalate to a stage 2 response, the majority of these escalated either because the resident was not satisfied with the amount of compensation offered at stage 1, or the repairs remained outstanding. Consequently, we have reviewed the compensation payments we offer in the complaint handling process, to make sure it reflects the Housing Ombudsman Service guidance on remedies and considers the individual circumstances of each situation to provide financial redress to recognise a particular adverse effect and impact on the resident and their household.

⁴ Some data cleansing required so figures may be subject to change.

In relation to our repairs performance, we have onboarded a new repairs contractor from April 2024 and going forward, performance will be improved as a result.

11% of our housing management complaints escalated to a stage 2, as we had not resolved the complaint to the customers satisfaction. We have introduced a new sign-off process where all stage 2 complaints are reviewed by an assistant director as part of quality assurance. In addition, we have strengthened our complaints training to ensure we are reducing the volume of complaints escalating to stage 2 by getting our responses right first time.

15% of our anti-social behaviour complaints escalated to a stage 2. In all cases, this was because the anti-social behaviour and nuisance case was still ongoing.

In 2022-2023, 49% and 48% of our stage 1 and stage 2 complaints were answered in time. This compares to 55% and 54% in 2023-2024 respectively, which represents a small improvement. This is however not satisfactory, and significant work has been done to drive performance from April 2024. By May 2024, stage 2 responses on time were running at 74% and the expectation is that they will exceed 90% by August 2024. We have introduced daily meetings with the complaint handling team and the repairs team to look at all open complaints (enhanced work is also taking place with other teams) and to make sure we focused our attention on improving our response times and the quality of our responses to our residents.

Housing Ombudsman adverse service determinations received

| 2023-2024 | Maladministration (%) | Severe maladministration (%) | Overall maladministration rate (%) |
|-----------|-----------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 24 | 75% | 25% | 89% |

Commentary

The majority of these complaints were concerning repairs, we experienced issues with our previous repair’s contractor, and in response procured the services of two new repairs contractors: one contract commencing in June 2023, the second in April 2024.

There is a secondary finding relating to our complaints handling in a number of the adverse ombudsman determinations and an improvement plan is in place to address these and is gaining traction through the early part of 2024-2025.

We are disappointed by our level of maladministration in cases that have been considered by the Housing Ombudsman Service, however, their detailed investigation reports and identified learning have helped us make service improvements as detailed below.

3. Housing Ombudsman determinations 2023-2024

3.1 We received 24 determinations by the Housing Ombudsman Service in 2023-2024, 18 maladministration and 6 severe maladministration. The nature of these cases is summarized in the table below:

| Year of complaint and total amount of compensation | HOS ref number | Nature of complaint | Complaint handling | Knowledge and info | Repair handling | Other |
|--|----------------|--|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| 2021-2022 £800 | 202117829 | Roof leak and associated repairs | £200 | £0 | £200 | £400 |
| 2021-2022 £400 | 202114284 | Neighbourhoods - obstruction mobility store | £400 | £0 | £0 | £0 |
| 2021-2022 £600 | 202121301 | Various repairs – electric, windows, and ceiling | £200 | £0 | £400 | £0 |
| 2021-2022 £900 | 202127721 | Repairs condition of property MEX | £200 | £0 | £700 | £0 |
| 2021-2022 £950 | 202115953 | Roof repairs and scaffolding delays | £250 | £0 | £600 | £100 |
| 2022-2023 £1200 | 202202235 | Repairs - leaks | £250 | £0 | £950 | £0 |
| 2022-2023 £625 | 202221355 | Broken communal door – lack of security | £125 | £0 | £200 | £300 |
| 2022-2023 £1200 | 202206459 | Repairs – leak and lift | £600 | £0 | £300 | £300 |
| 2022-2023 £550 | 20223734 | Delay repairs to lift noise from lift | £100 | £0 | £450 | £0 |

| Year of complaint and total amount of compensation | HOS ref number | Nature of complaint | Complaint handling | Knowledge and info | Repair handling | Other |
|--|----------------|--|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 2022-2023 £1800 | 20230321 | Repairs repeated floods (sewage) | £300 | £0 | £1500 | £0 |
| 2022-2023 £800 | 202206026 | Plumbing leak and associated repairs | £200 | £0 | £600 | £0 |
| 2022-2023 £650 | 202229501 | Water leak and roof maintenance | £50 | £0 | £600 | £0 |
| 2022-2023 £300 | 202210861 | Drainage problem | £150 | £0 | £150 | £0 |
| 2022-2023 £3800 | 202210609 | Damp and mould, decant and lack of communication | £600 | £0 | £800 | £2400 |
| 2021-2022 £950 | 202210459 | Leak and complaint handling | £250 | £0 | £700 | £0 |
| 2022-2023 £600 | 202314273 | Subsidence and complaint handling | £200 | £0 | £400 | £0 |

Severe maladministration

| Year and amount of compensation | HOS ref number | Nature of complaint | Complaint handling | Knowledge and info | Repair handling | Other |
|---------------------------------|----------------|--|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 2020-2021 £1000 | 202004414 | Location of communal bin store equality impact | £300 | £0 | £0 | £700 |
| 2022-2023 £3700 | 202214396 | Leak and repairs, priority banding | £500 | £200 | £3000 | £0 |
| 2022-2023 £5860 | 202213529 | Damp and mould, leaking taps, decant process | £0 | £0 | £3000 | £2860 |
| 2021-2022 £1250 | 202128445 | Damp and mould, complaint handling | £250 | £0 | £1000 | £0 |
| 2021-2022 £1250 | 202209234 | Leaks, repairs and complaint handling | £600 | £250 | £400 | £0 |
| 2022-2023 £3954 | 202226447 | Damp and mould and complaint handling | £200 | £0 | £3754 | £0 |

4. Compensation payments

- 4.1 There have been 576 number of stage 1 complaints in 2023-2024 with an average compensation payment of £83.33. The highest amount of compensation payment awarded at stage 1 was £300.
- 4.2 There have been 119 number of stage 2 complaints in 2023-2024 with an average compensation payment of £405.71. The highest amount of compensation payment awarded at stage 2 was £3,550.

- 4.3 We believe that there was broad consistency in the amounts of compensation awarded to complainants at both stage 1 and stage 2 during 2023-2024. This process has however been enhanced from the start of 2024-2025 with the introduction of a compensation calculator.

5. Themes and trends from complaints in 2023-2024

5.1 Repairs

A large number of complaints in 2023-2024 were about repairs (91% of stage 1 and 95% of stage 2), with a large proportion of these about leaks from pipes, leaks (water penetration from roof and guttering) and reports of damp and mold.

We had limited service from an underperforming term contractor in 2022-2023 and had a period of time in early 2023 when we were in the process of disengaging from the contract and appointing the first of two new contractors. With regard to our stock, we are undertaking an asset review to ensure our capital investment programme is invested in the right areas and improves tenants' homes. This should in turn reduce the number of complaints about leaks we receive.

Delays in carrying out roofing repairs were caused by the lack of a supply chain and limited contractor availability which has been addressed by procuring additional contractors.

5.2 Communication

Poor communication is another theme of our complaints with contractors and staff at Ealing Council, not keeping residents informed of the progress of the work being carried out in their home.

With our new contractor on board, we are ensuring performance monitoring is more robust and follow-up appointments are made while the contractor is in a person's home, where possible. We have redesigned a new engagement team to ensure we are getting closer to the heart of residents' issues and working more collaboratively with them. We have regular tenant engagement sessions and as repairs is a topic at all sessions, we have ensured repairs staff are present at these meetings.

We have a new suite of reporting for repairs performance that is reported corporately, so our senior leadership team and members can be aware of the service and customer challenges and hold the service to account in improving the repairs service.

5.3 **Timeliness**

We are not responding to our complaints in a timely way and haven't always kept residents informed of the progress of their complaint.

The complaint handling team are working to deliver an improvement plan and we have identified a number of ways of improved working, reporting and escalation, as well as training that ensures performance is improved and residents are kept informed. Whilst there has been a turnover in staff, we have invested in onboarding a new Head of Service for performance and strategy and further invested in systems and reporting to allow us to better track and respond to residents' complaints.

We have been working with assistant directors of services to ensure learning from complaints is distilled within their service improvements and can evidence this through our "Rebuilding the Housing Service" programme.

For asset management and the management of repairs there are several projects in this programme looking at stock condition surveys and our investment in our stock, there is a project looking at the end-to-end delivery of repairs and maintenance with the outcome of delivering a better end to end service and improving our Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) scores.

For housing management our projects are focused on improving the service following direct feedback from our residents from complaints, TSM scores and other engagement.

Our activity includes two pilots on estates in relation to deepening the customer voice and we have a new engagement strategy in draft, which has been codesigned with residents. We are also working with residents on anti-social behaviour and to better understand and respond to issues on estates and in the community.

5.4 Data availability and accuracy

The investigation of complaints has frequently been hampered by poor data availability or accuracy, and this has been reflected in some of the ombudsman's findings of maladministration. Our Open Housing system has historically not been robustly managed which has caused these problems. Addressing this is a primary focus of our Digital ICT programme across Housing services, and this work includes cleansing historic data, revising user permissions, and implementing improved processes with IT systems that are properly aligned.

There have been additional problems with our corporate CRM, in terms of categorizing and allocating complaints, as alluded to above. New categories were introduced from 7 July 2024 which will enhance our ability to effectively manage complaints, identify themes and trends, and improve tenant satisfaction.

6. Complaints made that were not accepted

- 6.1 168 complaints were not accepted in 2023-2024 and the key reasons that they were not accepted were that they were enquiries or service requests, wrongly lodged via the complaints process and that required redirecting, or that they related to issues controlled by other organisations.

7. Service improvements realised in 2023-2024 and planned for 2024-2025

7.1 Service improvements 2023-2024

- Recruitment of full complement of surveyors to ensure timely inspection of properties
- Application software introduced for surveyors to fully record details of inspections of residents' homes. These can be downloaded as a pdf and stored in the repairs system to ensure all information is uploaded in a timely and consumable format, making it easier to book follow on appoints and to raise job orders
- Developed detailed reporting - iLumen8 PowerBI system - which is supporting staff to monitor the timelessness of repairs and jobs that are overdue
- Appointment of second contractor to ensure we spread the risk and mitigate against delays in the completion of urgent works
- Completed a review of our complaints policy and procedure, to ensure alignment with the Housing Ombudsman Service Complaint Handling Code. We recognise we have more work to do to move beyond our current performance and to deliver a service staff and residents can be proud of

7.2 Service improvements 2024-2025

To address the themes and trends identified in section 5, and to strengthen the customer focus and responsiveness of our housing landlord function, the following improvements are planned and underway in 2024-2025:

- CRM changes – categories were revised from 7 July 2024 to facilitate the effective allocation of complaints and to strengthen our ability to report on trends and themes and to segment volumes effectively

- Complaints team action plan – a programme of activity is underway in the complaints team, reported to the Rebuilding the Housing Service programme board, to improve the quality and timeliness of complaints responses and enhance our customer focus overall. This includes better customer contact at the start of the complaints process, enhanced processes between the complaints service and operational services, a rolling staff training programme, and ongoing focus on action planning and embedding learning back into services
- Digital IT programme – being delivered across housing services to cleanse historic data, revise user permissions, and implement improved processes with IT systems that are properly aligned. This will improve data availability and accuracy, allowing better customer insight, quicker resolution of issues, and the ability to be right first time
- Sign-off process and management oversight – have been enhanced in 2024-2025 with regular Head of Service presence at stand-ups and team meetings and Assistant Director oversight of stage 2 complaints responses
- More robust performance management and dashboards – this work is continued from 2023-2024 and the use of the illuminate reporting functionality, to ensure real-time data availability, reduce manual reporting and the associated risk of error, and to enhance the ability to analyse themes and trends and take appropriate action
- Embedding learning – lessons from complaints have started to be more systematically fed back into services, incorporated into project plans, and reported through the Rebuilding the Housing Service programme board
- Stock condition survey - this is to be completed by the end of 2024-2025 and will enable the effective targeting of capital budgets and the prioritization of scheduled repairs which should reduce reactive repairs and associated complaints

- Tenant engagement – we are actively seeking to deepen the customer voice in housing services, both through the creation of a dedicated tenant engagement function and through delivering neighbourhood pilots. This is part of an active commitment to understand and work with our tenants, to strengthen connections in the community, and to hear and resolve their concerns and frustrations at the first opportunity to prevent them from escalating and needing to become complaints

8. Benchmarking with other London boroughs

8.1 Comprehensive 2023-2024 housing complaints benchmarking information was not available at the time of writing this report. An online review (September 2024) has however identified a number of CIPFA comparator authorities who have now published their Annual Complaints and Service Improvement Reports. A summary of this information is provided below.

| Borough | Approx. number of properties | Number of Stage 1 complaints (2023-2024) | Number of Stage 2 complaints (2023-2024) |
|------------------|---|---|---|
| Barnet | 15000 | 714 | 140 |
| Ealing | 11643 | 586 | 119 |
| Greenwich | 20000 | 1283 | 203 |
| Harrow | 4800 | 456 | 82 |

| Borough | Stage 1 complaints as % of properties |
|------------------|--|
| Barnet | 4.8% |
| Ealing | 5.0% |
| Greenwich | 6.4% |
| Harrow | 9.5% |

The number of Stage 1 housing complaints received by Ealing is broader comparable, given the number of tenancies it manages.

| Borough | Stage 2 complaints as a % of Stage 1 |
|------------------|---|
| Barnet | 19.6% |
| Ealing | 20.3% |
| Greenwich | 15.8% |
| Harrow | 18.0% |

The proportion of housing complaints in Ealing that escalate to Stage 2 is marginally higher than these comparators, suggesting that we are less effective at resolving complaints at the first point of contact.

| Borough | % Stage 1 answered in time | % Stage 2 answered in time |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Barnet | 69% | 78% |
| Ealing | 54% | 54% |
| Greenwich | 73% | 72% |
| Harrow | 81% | 76% |

Ealing performs relatively poorly in terms of timely responses at both stage 1 and stage 2, and this is a key focus for the improvement activity described in 7.2.