

Swindon Borough Council - Housing Annual Complaint Performance and Service Improvement Report 2023 – 2024

1. Introduction

1.1 This report provides an analysis of the complaints, compliments and comments received by the Council during the period of **01/04/2023 – 31/03/24**. The report not only focuses on volume and timeliness of the responses but also aims, where possible, to identify themes and lessons learnt that result in service improvements.

1.2 The approach to handling complaints within our policy, embeds the underlying principles as set out within the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code around accessibility, transparency, and fairness for our customers. Within the new approach there is an emphasis on early intervention and being proactive with the customer to ensure their issues and concerns wherever possible are resolved at the earliest opportunity.

1.3 Swindon Borough Council's Customer Feedback Policy includes information on how to complain and the process and timescales including Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints. The Policy also includes information on what complaints will not be accepted and details of how to contact the Housing Ombudsman Service.

1.4 In addition, the report includes a summary of performance, decisions and learning from the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS) complaints during the same period.

2. Background

2.1 A new Complaints Team has been introduced in Swindon Council and will be responsible for recording and acknowledging complaints, more scrutiny has been applied to the decision-making process to ensure that customer complaints are not unfairly re-categorised as service requests. A complaint can only be re-categorised as an enquiry or service request if it is a first-time request for information or a service.

2.2 The Council previously had a three stage complaints procedure. Following the new handling code the Council replaced this with a two-stage complaints process with a target response time of 10 working days at Stage 1 and 20 working days at Stage 2.

2.3 Changes to our customer management system are in progress to support with more accurate recording for next year's report.

3. Performance Analysis

3.1 This section of the report provides information on complaint volumes, escalations to Stage 2 and 3, the outcome of complaints and the percentage of complaints responded to on time.

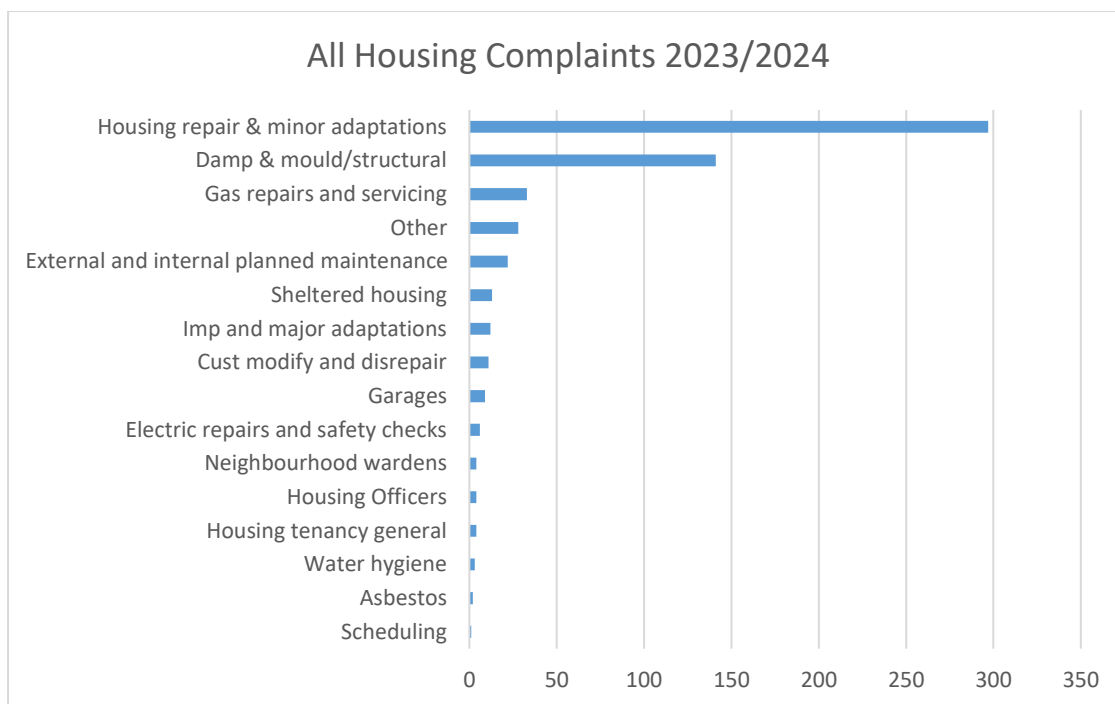
3.2 Volume - The Council received **591** complaints in 2023-2024, compared with **522** in the previous year 2022/2023 which is an increase of **12%**.

Some of the increase in complaints may be explained by actively promoting our complaints process to customers. Customers are encouraged to contact the Council when the service has failed. There are also challenges in dealing with the numbers of damp and mould incidents reported and although we have a strategy in place and adopted the learning from the Housing Ombudsman Spotlight report the failure to respond to tenants concerns in a timely manner has led to more complaints being received. This issue will be addressed by adding more staff to the damp and mould team and further improvements to the processes.

3.3 Category of complaints – The tables & graph below shows the breakdown per area for the **591** complaints received in 2023-2024

Housing Tenancy	
Housing general	4
Housing officers	4
Neighbourhood wardens	4
Garages	9
Sheltered housing	13
Other or not sure	28
Total	62

Housing Repairs	
Scheduling	1
Asbestos	2
Water hygiene	3
Electric repairs and safety checks	6
Cust modify and disrepair	11
Imp and major adaptations	12
External and internal planned maintenance	22
Gas repairs and servicing	33
Damp & mould/structural	141
Housing Repair & minor adaptations	297
Total	529



3.4 Of the **591** complaints housing received in 2023/24. **532** were resolved as stage 1 and **59** were escalated to stage 2. In 2022-23 we recorded **522** complaints of which **461** were resolved as stage 1, and **60** were escalated to stage 2.

The numbers of complaints for 2022-23 were collected on resolved complaints rather than received in the year but this can still be used as a comparable exercise.

- Number of stage one complaints received per 1,000 homes: **51.1**
- Number of stage two complaints received per 1,000 homes: **5.7**

3.5 Complaints responded to within Complaint Handling Code timescales

Stage 1 – The proportion of stage 1 complaints responded to within the Housing Ombudsman’s Complaint Handling Code timescales: **82.1%**. This was **437** complaints, we failed on **95** complaints. In 2022/2023 this was **74%** so an improvement over the last 12 months has been achieved.

Stage 2 - Proportion of stage 2 complaints responded to within the Housing Ombudsman’s Complaint Handling Code timescales: **79.7%**. This was **47** complaints within timescale, **12** were out of timescale.

In 2022/2023 this was **59%** showing an improvement has again been achieved.

4. Quality Assurance & complaint improvements

4.1 The introduction of the Complaints Team, amendments to our IT complaints system and associated procedures are an improvement in practice and culture within the Council. The initial focus was to support, encourage and engage services to appreciate the importance of recording complaints and responding in a timely way.

4.2 The Complaints Team will carry out informal quality assurance activities and address learning and improvement opportunities through bespoke training, briefing sessions, attending team meetings and by providing extensive 1:1 support.

4.3 Quality assurance activities will be recorded and reported in the quarterly complaints report. The next section reflects on the learning that has been identified and associated improvements that have been made.

4.4 A new complaints action plan is in place following a service review. Improved templates and management review meetings of complaints (HO and Stage 2).

4.5 A review of our compensation policy to ensure this is still fit for purpose and relevant.

4.6 Two new complaints meetings will be set up in 24/25, one monthly to look at specific learning from complaints, one quarterly to look at data and trends. These meetings will be with Housing Heads of Service and the monthly meeting invite will include tenants from the Tenant Scrutiny Panel.

4.7 Complaint trends will be discussed with tenants of sheltered housing and multi-storeys throughout the year.

4.8 Improvements in relation to Housing Ombudsman reports and publications:

- A) Damp & Mould Spotlight report - this has been reviewed and a self-assessment completed and actions ongoing.
- B) Data & Information Management Spotlight report – this has been reviewed and self-assessment completed and actions ongoing.

5. The Housing Ombudsman Service

5.1 The Housing Ombudsman contacted the Council about **5** complaints during 23/24.

The number of Complaint Handling Failure Orders the Housing Ombudsman has issued against the landlord = **1**

5.2 The below table shows Maladministration trends

Findings of Maladministration	Orders
<p>Complaint 1</p> <p>1. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Scheme, there was maladministration by the landlord in relation to its handling of the resident’s reports of anti-social behaviour.</p> <p>2. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Scheme, there was maladministration by the landlord in relation to its handling of the resident’s complaint.</p>	<p>a) The landlord to pay the resident £800 compensation</p> <p>b) A senior manager at the landlord to provide the resident with a written apology for the impact these issues had on her.</p> <p>c) The landlord to provide evidence of compliance with the above orders to this service within 28 days of this report.</p>
<p>Complaint 2</p> <p>1. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme there was maladministration in respect of the landlord’s response to the resident’s request for a sole tenancy at the start of</p>	<p>a) Senior Officer is to issue the resident with a written apology within 4 weeks.</p> <p>b) The landlord to pay the resident a total of £1600 in compensation within 4 weeks.</p>

the tenancy.

2. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme there was maladministration in respect of the landlord's response of the resident's request for support, guidance, and improved communication.

3. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme there was maladministration in respect of the landlord's response to the resident's concerns about the condition of the property at the start of the tenancy.

4. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme there was maladministration in respect of the landlord's response to the resident's reports of repairs.

5. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme there was maladministration in respect of the landlord's complaint handling.

Complaint 3

1. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, there was maladministration in the landlord's handling of requests for repairs to windows in the property, as well as the landlord's response to requests for replacement of the kitchen and bathroom.

2. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, there was severe maladministration in respect of the landlord's complaint handling.

- c) The landlord is to carry out a full review of this case to identify learning and improve its working practices, within 4 weeks.
- d) The landlord is to provide refresher/training to staff on complaint handling, specifically on the two stage process, escalation and corresponding timelines, with reference to the Code and its recommended procedures and the timescales for responses.
- e) The landlord is to provide evidence of compliance with these orders within 4 weeks

- a) The landlord should apologise to the resident for its handling of the repair issues and its poor handling of the complaint.
- b) Within 4 weeks of the date of this report, the landlord should pay the resident a total of £1,350 in compensation
- c) Within 4 weeks of the date of this report, the landlord should carry out a self-assessment of its complaints handling processes against the Code and provide this to the Ombudsman.
- d) Within 4 weeks of the date of this report the landlord should ensure that its online complaints handling system, policies and procedures, complaint response templates, documents, and customer facing complaints information and leaflets are compliant with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.

Complaint 4

1. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, there was severe maladministration in the landlord's handling of repair to damp and mould in the resident's home.

2. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, there was service failure in the landlord's complaints handling.

3. In accordance with paragraph 39(k) of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme the resident's complaint about the landlord's handling of her transfer application is outside of the Ombudsman's jurisdiction.

- a) Within 4 weeks of the date of this report, the landlord is ordered to:
 - a. Apologise to the resident for the failures identified in this case, including the avoidable delays, and the significant impact this will have had on her. The apology must be sent by the landlord's chief executive.
- b) Directly pay the resident £2773.38 in compensation
- c) Within 8 weeks of the date of this report, the landlord is ordered to:
 - a. Provide the Ombudsman and the resident with a full schedule of works for the property, including timescales. The schedule of works should address each of the findings made in the surveys carried out 31 March 2023, 7 June 2023, and 20 February 2024.
 - b. The landlord should provide a full explanation to the resident in writing for any repairs it does not intend to, or cannot, complete.
 - c. Inspect the pointing and brickwork at the property to confirm if further repointing and repair is needed.
 - d. Given the extent of the works required internally, the landlord should consider the order it carries out repairs in the resident's home, to minimise the impact these will have on the resident. If it cannot do the repairs roomby-room, it should consider whether a decant would be appropriate.
 - e. Maintain regular contact with the resident in a way that is convenient to her until the works are completed.
 - f. In accordance with paragraph 54
 - g. of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, conduct a senior management case review of the landlord's handling of this case.

Complaint 5

1. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, there was maladministration by the landlord in relation to its response to reports of D&M.

2. In accordance with paragraph 42(j) of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme the complaint in respect of the landlords handling of the resident's rehousing request is outside the Ombudsman's jurisdiction.

3. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, there was maladministration by the landlord in relation to its response to reports of rats in the property.

- a) Within 4 weeks of the date of this determination, the landlord should:
 - a. Apologise to the resident
- b) Pay the resident a total of £4,270 compensation.
- c) Identify which of the D&M proposals it is going to complete (both from the December 2022 survey and the October 2023 email). It should then issue a schedule of works to the resident, identifying what these are and when they will take place.
- d) Survey all of the windows in the property and raise a schedule of repairs, with completion dates, as necessary.
- e) Issue repairs and complaint handling staff with a reminder of the provisions set out in its 5-stage D&M process.

4. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, there was maladministration by the landlord in relation to its complaint handling

5. In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, there was maladministration by the landlord in relation to its record keeping.

- f) Review the rat prevention measures and consider if further actions are needed. The outcome should be reported to the Service and the resident.
- g) Issue complaint handling staff with a reminder of the provisions set out in its complaint handling policy, and the Code 2024.
- h) Within 8 weeks of the date of this determination, the landlord should review its current record keeping practices and systems in relation to repairs
- i) Complete the self-assessment tool against the KIM spotlight report
- j) Consider whether system improvements are required
- k) Consider whether staff require further training to ensure that they are keeping and maintaining an accurate audit trail.
- l) Within 4 weeks of this report the landlord should contact the resident to enquire whether there continues any issues with the drains at the property. An inspection or repairs should be raised, as necessary Signs of rat infestation. If so, the landlord should arrange to inspect the property, and instruct a pest control company, as necessary.
- m) Within 4 weeks of this report the landlord should consider sharing the relevant sections of the December 2022 D&M survey with the resident

5.3 All the above recommendations have either been completed or are being processed.

6. Lessons learnt from complaints

6.1 The Council has a commitment to learning and improvement. Complaints and other formal enquiries are important information, providing an opportunity to understand where and why things sometimes go wrong and provide a basis for us to make positive changes, informed by data and the resident voice. Complaints are a way in which we can gain insight into how we need to improve the experience that residents have with the Council.

6.2 We are unsure of how many of our Stage 1 and 2 complaints were recorded as upheld or partially upheld. However, this is being addressed as part of the implementation of the improvements to our CX system.

6.3 Whilst our housing service endeavour to focus on providing a response that resolves all the issues raised and finding a suitable outcome in a timely way, we recognise that more work needs to be done to ensure that the complainant feels informed and is kept up to date with progress.

6.4 The Council recognises that we need to take learning from our customer satisfaction surveys. The survey is currently being re-created and once we have sufficient information, the results will form part of this report.

6.5 The main theme of the overall learning from complaints was the need to improve communication, and to keep the residents updated with actions taken, as well as the next steps. This

helps to manage the resident expectation and can be used to keep the officer accountable for their response. There have been a few changes in staff and as a result, some colleagues are unsure of who to liaise with on various issues. This has an impact on the more complex complaints that cut across housing teams. Teams have begun to hold regular weekly meetings with complaints colleagues, to review such cases, and coordinate responses as and when required.

8. Overview

8.1 This report has provided an overview of housing complaints based on cases received by the Council. In comparison to 21/22, 23/24 saw an increase in our complaint numbers and member enquiries.

8.2 We continue to report to the Corporate Performance Board quarterly on the key performance indicators which has a strong housing landlord influence. The report will be uploaded onto our website for our customers to see. We strive to provide an excellent quality of service to all our customers but understand our service will sometimes fall short of a customers' expectations. We will continue to use our complaints to identify areas for improvement in our processes and procedures.

8.3 There is always room for improvement with complaint handling and over the last 12 months we have looked closely at what needs to be done to deliver a better service to customers. The complaints action plan and the increased capacity of our complaints team will ensure we continue to improve and meet the expectations of customers and the Housing Ombudsman Service.

9. Next Steps

9.1 The annual complaints performance and service improvement report will be reported to the Cabinet Member for approval and to be published on the section of the website relating to complaints. The Cabinet Member's response to the report will also be published alongside this.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Self assessment of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code 2024