



Housing Management – Annual Complaints Report 23/24

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Council produces an annual complaints report to present complaints performance trends for 23/24 in relation to all complaints received. The report also sets out performance information in relation to cases determined by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.
- 1.2 From 1st April 2024 Social Housing Landlords are required to complete an annual report on housing complaints. Given that complaints about Housing Services from residents, which include tenants and leaseholders, represent 62% of all complaints received by the Council, this bespoke Housing Complaints report aims to provide more detailed information about complaint handling performance in 23/24 compared to 22/23.
- 1.3 Overall, the Council received 2,852 complaints of which, 1,774 complaints were about Housing landlord services including repairs, compared to 1,338 in 22/23. At stage 1 the timeliness of response for all stage 1 complaints was 41% and 28% at stage 2.
- 1.4 For social housing complaints and under the definition of the tenant satisfaction measures, 47% of stage 1 complaints and 26% of stage 2 complaints were answered on time.
- 1.5 The Housing Ombudsman Service reached determinations on 51 complaints. Overall, the maladministration rate was 79%. Although this is higher than 61% in 22/23, it is similar to the maladministration rate in landlords of a similar size and type. We also received one Complaint Handling Failure Order which is reported on in section 5 of this report.
- 1.6 Housing Services have been focused on identifying learning opportunities from complaints and resident feedback to shape and drive improvements within the service, particularly on identifying and supporting vulnerable people, improving performance in relation to the repairs and complaints service and strengthening its approach to managing and responding to reports of anti-social behaviour. This is detailed in section 6 of this report.

2. Background

- 2.1 It is acknowledged that performance in relation to complaint handling, particularly around the timeliness of response has been inconsistent in previous years. This has contributed to poor resident satisfaction in relation to Housing Services.
- 2.2 In recognition of the ongoing challenges being faced, in April 2023 a council-wide Housing Improvement Programme was introduced to deliver the step change required in the delivery of housing services. The improvement programme was informed by:
 - Recommendations made earlier in the year by the Future of Westminster Commission.
 - The lived experience of residents, including learning from complaints.
 - The findings of the Housing Ombudsman, which highlighted cases where services have regrettably failed residents, so that the Council can make sure similar cases never happen again.



- 2.3 The Council has also made structural changes to provide additional senior leadership focus and capacity in housing. Housing have made several improvements in the delivery of services, although recognise that there is still more for the Council to do. Progress with improvement plans is demonstrated by Tenant Satisfaction Measure (TSM) results which in many areas are in line with average national benchmarks. The TSM's provide an opportunity for tenants to have greater transparency about how their landlord is performing compared to other landlords, for their voice to inform improvement plans and to reflect on which services are working well.
- 2.4 The Council has implemented a repairs service improvement plan which has seen formal action taken to drive improvements in contractor performance, this has been complimented with enhanced weekly oversight of contractor performance and has seen a reduction in the number of aged repairs and reasonable tenant satisfaction in this area. However, this remains a key focus for the team and who will continue to driver further improvements in this area and the recent procurement of additional contractors will further support the repairs service to manage increase demand in repairs.
- 2.5 The Council will continue to focus resource on the handling of complaints and recognise that end of year performance was well below expectations. We also know that the volume of complaints has increased significantly in the last six months of 23/24. Housing services are reassured that internal and external consultation and engagement activity has helped to raise awareness of the complaints process, encouraging residents to give feedback but we know that receiving these volumes also coincided with staffing changes, and the implementation of a new CRM system which has impacted our ability to respond to residents in a timely fashion.
- 2.6 To ensure that we improve performance and resident satisfaction, we have implemented a daily, Director led oversight meeting with senior managers to ensure that all complaints are correctly allocated and responded to within timescales. A historic backlog of complaints has been cleared and mechanisms are in place to ensure continued oversight and improvement in the quality and timeliness of responses.
- 2.7 At the end of July 24/25, year to date performance on the timeliness of stage 1 responses was 59%, compared to the end of year position of 41%. Similarly, for stage 2 complaints, the timeliness of responses was 41% compared to 28% at the end of 23/24.
- 2.8 Whilst we accept that this is still far below the level of responsiveness that we strive to achieve, Housing Services are confident that we will achieve month on month improvement in this area which will also help to rebuild trust with residents and improve resident satisfaction.

3. Complaints process update

- 3.1 The Council operates a two stage complaints procedure. At stage 1, we aim to respond to complaints within 10 working days of receipt and at stage 2, within 20 working days from receipt. If more time is needed to provide a response, it is expected that the resident would be notified of a new date that the response will be issued. In most cases this would be no more than 10 working days.
- 3.2 In September 2023, the Housing Ombudsman Service launched a consultation on a complaint handling code, aimed at putting this on a statutory footing. It was developed



jointly with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman to enable consistency in approach across Housing and other key services. The code came into effect on 1st April 2024.

- 3.3 All social landlords are required to submit a return to confirm whether it complies with the requirements and to explain any areas where these are not met. In addition, landlords must publish their self-assessment against this code to ensure it is publicly available. The assessment was completed in June 2024 and can be found on the Council website: <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/media/document/housing-ombudsman-complaint-handling-code---self-assessment-june-2024>
- 3.4 This complaint handling code covers various requirements about how landlords should:
- Apply the definition of a complaint and how these must be identified.
 - Meet certain criteria to improve accessibility and awareness of complaints.
 - Follow a prescribed two stage complaints process.
 - Report on the performance of complaints to ensure sufficient scrutiny and oversight.
- 3.5 These prescribed timescales are a welcome change, which will support better triage and acknowledgement of complaints. It is also noted that the additional five working days to acknowledge complaints will give time to build more resident engagement on complex complaints to facilitate better investigations, remedies and responses.
- 3.6 As these timescales only came into effect on 1st April 2024, the performance information reflected in section 4 of the report is based on the Council policy that was in effect at the time (as set out in section 1).
- 3.7 In the Autumn of 2023, Housing Services consulted on a new Housing specific compensation policy. This was intended to ensure that where things have gone wrong, and compensation is offered to help put things right, any awards are fair, transparent and consistent.
- 3.8 There is strong evidence to show that through both internal and external consultations, there has been a general increase in awareness of the complaints process which is a positive step forward in ensuring that residents are equipped with the right information and empowered to give feedback.

4. Performance overview

Volumes

- 4.1 As set out in section 3.2 and 3.7, there has been an increase in publicity about the Housing sector with a particular focus on the quality of social housing and concerns around damp and mould. External consultation on the revised consumer standards and the Housing Ombudsman Service's complaint handling code, as well as the council's consultation on the housing compensation policy has helped to raise awareness of the complaints service and is aimed at building transparency with communities about their right to good quality, safe and affordable homes.
- 4.2 In 23-24, Housing Management accepted 1,774 complaints for investigation under the complaints procedure. This is a 32.6% increase on the volume seen in 22-23, when 1,338



complaints were considered. Based on externally published social housing complaints performance, there is a reported rise in complaints being received, and this is reflected in the Housing Ombudsman Service’s Q1 23/24 report which indicates they have seen a 69% increase in complaints they have determined. This is indicative of a sector wide increase in complaints.

4.3 A total of 423 complaints were escalated to stage 2, which represents an escalation rate of 24% which is consistent with the previous year. Of the 1,774 complaints, 1,059 complaints were received from our tenants, and 240 complaints were escalated to stage 2.

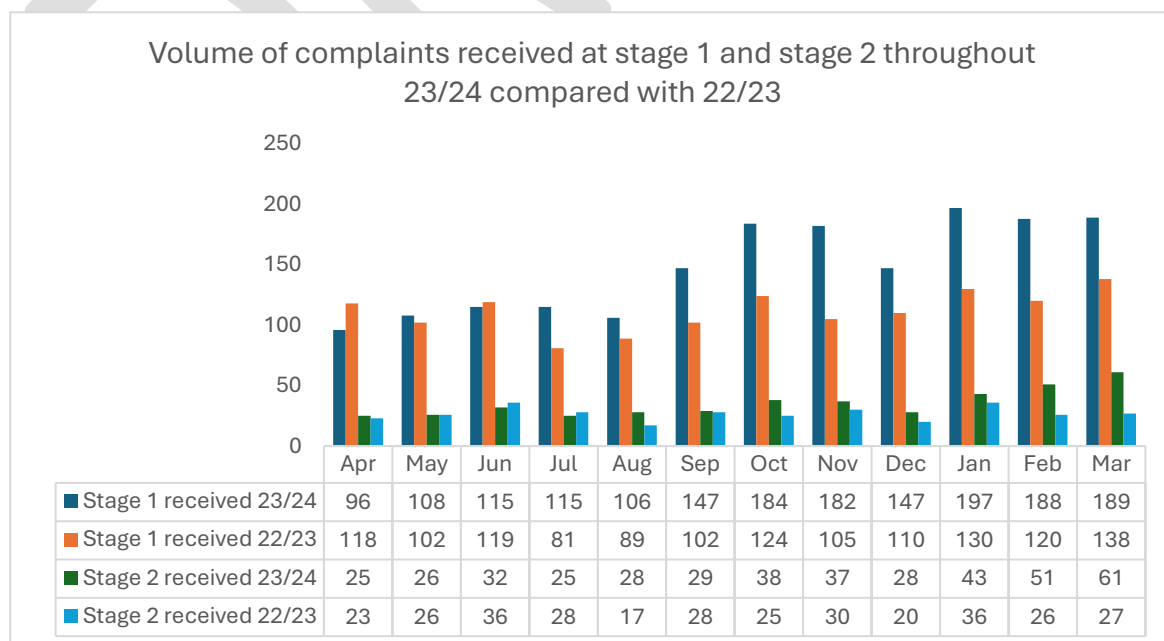
4.4 It is not possible to separate out complaints that were rejected as being out of the complaints remit, as this information has not previously been held in a reportable format. It should also be highlighted that quality assurance activity from October 2023 onwards indicate that some complaints were being inaccurately accepted into the complaints procedure despite them being out of jurisdiction.

4.5 To put context around this, in Q1, 142 complaints have not been accepted into the complaints process. This is primarily because they were:

- An enquiry or first-time request.
- A duplicate complaint that is currently or has already been through the complaints process.
- Out of scope as the matter/reported failure was not within the Council’s jurisdiction.

4.6 It is important that the Complaints policy is applied fairly and carefully to the complaint issue to reduce avoidable frustration and inconvenience to the resident in pursuing a matter which cannot be resolved through the complaints process, and to ensure accurate reporting of complaints.

4.7 Of the 1,774 complaints that were accepted into the procedure, the chart below shows the monthly volume of complaints received at both stages during 23/24 compared to the volumes received in 22/23.



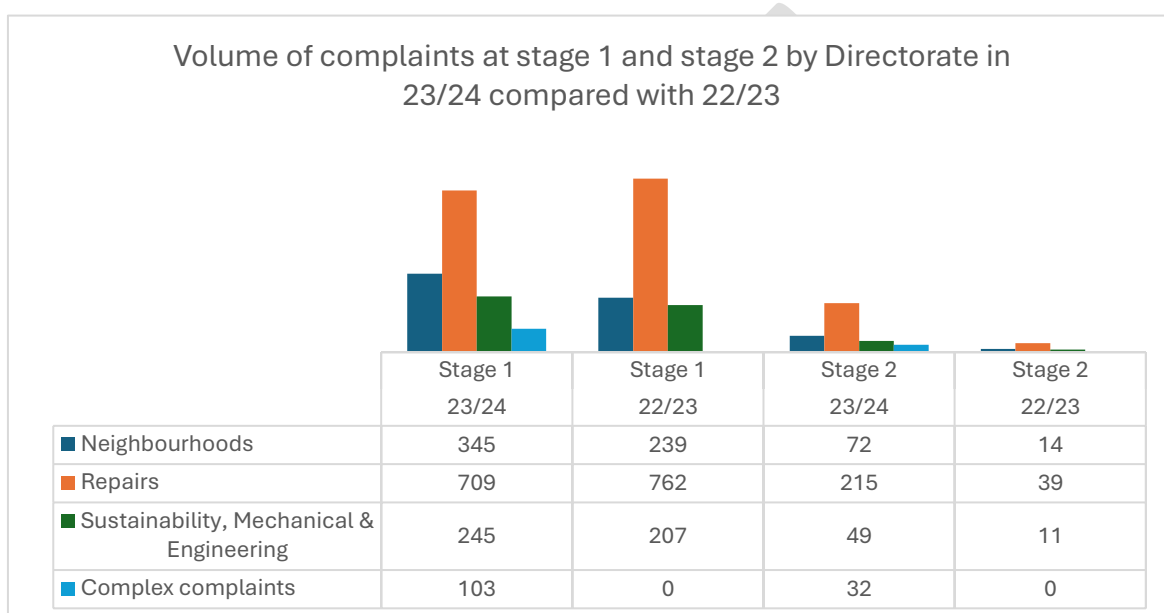
4.8 The sharp increase in complaints at stage 1 during October and November is likely a close link to consultation on the Housing compensation policy which raised general awareness of



the complaints process. This is also the time of year when communal heating systems are being switched on and due to changes in weather, such as colder temperatures and more rainfall, which results in more reports about leaks.

4.9 A high volume of complaints and escalations to stage 2 continued through the Winter and early Spring period. Whilst this increase is not unusual when compared to the previous year, the general volume of complaints is significantly higher.

4.10 The information below shows the breakdown of complaints by Directorate and again shows the increase in complaint volumes across most Service areas.



4.11 The breakdown of complaints across the three key service areas is set out below.

- 51% about responsive repairs which relate to property conditions, voids, aids and adaptations (63% in 22/23)
- 24% were about Housing and Neighbourhoods, which includes Leasehold and Income Services, Estate Management, Housing and Anti-social behaviour, the Contact Centre and complaints from residents in properties managed by Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs). (20% in 22/23)
- 17% were complaints about health and safety, major works, or issues related to communal electrics, heating or lifts (17% in 22/23).
- 7% were complex complaints in 23/24. This was not a category in 22/23.

4.12 It should be noted that the creation of a Complex complaints category was intended to identify complaints that cut across different Services. Analysis of these complaints shows that in many cases, the resident is facing various difficulties co-ordinating resolution across different council departments which may be about repairs, asbestos surveys, concerns about overcrowding or other related or unrelated communal issues.

4.13 The proportion of complaints about Housing and Neighbourhood Services and those about Major Works and Mechanical and Engineering concerns remains stable.



4.14 It is promising that there has been a reduction in the overall percentage of repairs complaints. When analysing the root cause of these complaints between 22/23 and 23/24, the main reasons for dissatisfaction were because of:

- A delay in doing something.
- A failure to carry out an action.
- Issues with the quality of the works completed.

4.15 The table below shows how the volume of complaints about these service failures has changed.

Root cause of complaint in repairs	Volume in 22/23	Volume in 23/24
Delay in doing something	161	133
Failure to do something	106	37
Not to the quality or standard expected	39	19

4.16 A repairs improvement programme was implemented in 23/24 aimed at improving resident satisfaction with the repairs service. Some of the key changes that may have contributed to a reduction in complaints over the course of 23/24 are set out below, but a full list of improvements is set out in section 6 of this report:

- Enhanced contract management with our main repairs contractor to include weekly leadership meetings, leading to agreement of a service improvement plan from the contractor to improve the number of jobs in target.
- Increasing the number of appointments that can be booked by our contact centre.
- Text message updates to confirm repairs appointments and to track the progress of repairs.

Timeliness

4.17 On average 41% of all stage 1 complaints were answered on time. When looking at timeliness of response for tenant only complaints, this was 47%.

4.18 On average, 28% of stage 2 complaints were answered on time, and 26% of complaints from tenants alone were answered in target. This is far below the target response time.

4.19 It is disappointing that residents who have had cause to complain do not receive a timely response to their concerns. This has been an area of continued focus in 23/24 as we know that dealing with complaints quickly and effectively is valued by residents and a key driver of resident satisfaction.

4.20 It is important to explain that capacity to address and respond to this significant and steep rise in new complaints and escalation to stage 2, was not proportionate to the level of complaints requiring investigation. This has impacted on performance throughout 23/24 and has also formed a key part of the service review to ensure that the complaints team is well resourced, skilled and supported to address complaint influxes.

4.21 Below is a summary of the average timeliness across each Directorate. Complex complaints represent complaint issues that cut across different Service areas and we know



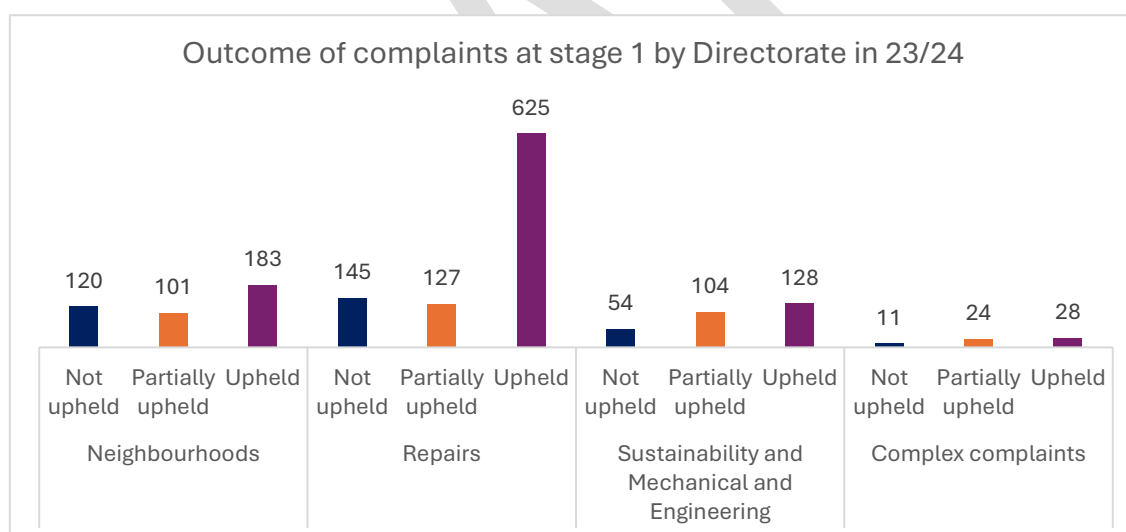
that ensuring a comprehensive response to these multi-service complaints can be difficult to achieve within 10 working days.

Division	Timeliness at stage 1	Timeliness at stage 2
Neighbourhoods	43%	46%
Repairs	50%	18%
Sustainability, Mechanical & Engineering	57%	36%
Complex complaints	10%	N/A

Outcomes

4.22 On average 79% of all stage 1 complaints were upheld or partially upheld. This indicates that in the most complaint investigations, the Investigating Manager is actively looking for any service failures and acknowledging where things have gone wrong. This is an important part of the investigation as being transparent about where service delivery has fallen short of the approach or resident’s expectation can help to ensure that things are put right quickly and resolve at stage 1.

4.23 The chart below shows the outcome of complaints recorded at the end of March 2024. This includes complaints investigated at stage 2.



Escalation to stage 2

4.24 In 23/24, 423 complaints were escalated to stage 2, of which 240 were from our tenants. This represents a 24% escalation rate. This is an area of concern as resident concerns should be addressed fairly and thoroughly at an early stage to reduce the customer effort in having to pursue their complaint to achieve resolution.

4.25 Importantly, of the 83 complaints that were not upheld at stage 1 and a stage 2 was received, 55 resulted in a change in outcome to either upheld or partially upheld. This represents a 66% overturn rate.



4.26 Although we cannot draw reliable conclusions about whether the initial outcome was fair, the overturn rate suggests that the initial response either missed an opportunity to identify service failures, or, the outcome was fair at the time of the response, but service failures happened after this resulting in the complaint being upheld.

4.27 When looking at the main reasons for escalation, these are attributed to:

- Delays or failures in tracking and completing commitments and actions communicated at stage 1 and a lack of communication about these service failures
- Requests for a review of compensation awarded
- Residents disagreeing with the decision or proposed next steps
- A failure to address all the issues raised and impact on residents

4.28 It is important that we reach fair and balanced conclusions at stage 1, and that responses are clear, impartial and compassionate in explaining the reasons for the decision. It is even more important that any pending actions are followed through to completion to provide residents with reassurance that the matter has been taken seriously.

Resident Satisfaction with complaint handling

4.29 The consumer regulation requires all landlords to understand tenant satisfaction in relation to various services across Housing, these are all set out as tenant satisfaction measures¹. This is so residents and landlords can see how well they are performing. One of the areas that feedback is sought is around satisfaction with complaint handling.

4.30 Tenants are contacted at random by an independent organisation and asked a series of standardised questions.

4.31 In 23-24, 26.7% of tenants were satisfied with our approach to complaint handling. Whilst this percentage is on average low across the sector, based on a recent report published by Housemark who have collected performance from 221 Landlords, our satisfaction is just above the median mark for London Boroughs and Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs).

4.32 In addition to this, Housing Services conduct transactional satisfaction surveys to understand how residents including landlords experience the complaints service. In 23/24, the percentage of residents satisfied with complaint handling was 31%. At the end of Q1, this has increased to 39%.

4.33 We recognise that satisfaction in relation to complaint handling can be more challenging if the resident's desired outcomes cannot be met, however, more detailed analysis of the experience of residents who complained has shown that satisfaction improves when:

- We engage well with residents throughout the complaint journey to demonstrate that we have listened to them and understood the problem.
- We respond quickly to the complaint, carrying out the necessary actions within the timeframes we set.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-the-introduction-of-tenant-satisfaction-measures/outcome/tenant-satisfaction-measures-summary-of-rsh-requirements-accessible>



- Responses are clear, fair and thorough, and the explanation helps the resident make sense of what has happened.
 - The issue is resolved through the complaints process, which had not happened before they complained.
- 4.34 It is important that future improvements in the delivery of the complaints process centre on the above feedback. This will ensure that even if a resident has cause to complaint, when they engage in the complaints process, they have a positive experience irrespective of whether the Service has delivered their desired outcomes.

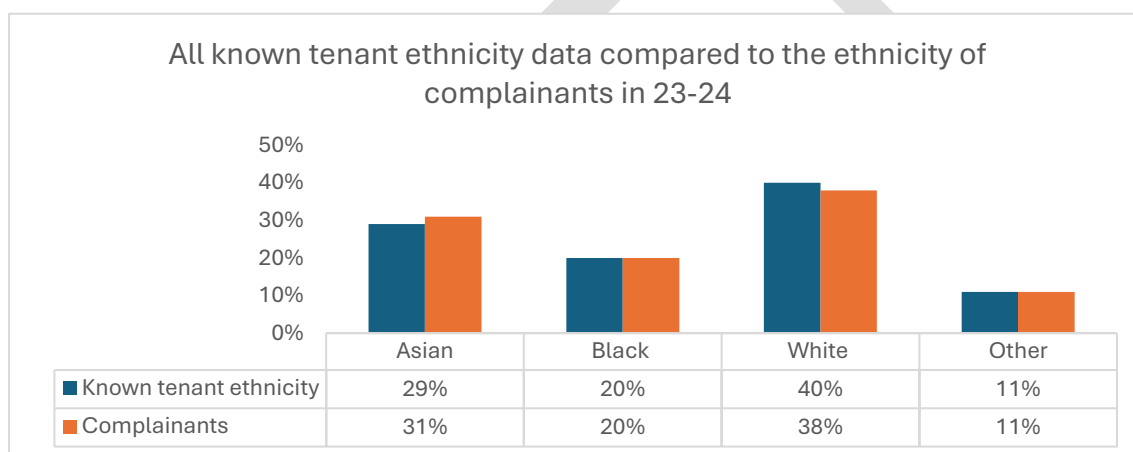
Compliments

- 4.35 We've received 65 compliments from residents who have contacted the Council to recognise positive experiences. Compliments are equally important pieces of feedback that provide Officers and Teams information about what residents appreciate during interactions with Housing services.
- 4.36 Some examples of the compliments received are reflected below and the themes indicate that residents are grateful when Officers are polite, patient, take the time to understand issues and take ownership of the query.
- ❖ *I called this afternoon and spoke to very nice young lady ..., she was polite, patient and most importantly took the time to listen to my concerns without interrupting. She is a credit to the customer service team, what Breath of fresh air she was. Tell her to keep up the good work.*
 - ❖ *Every time I go around to Lupus street or use the phone service... I'm met by friendly, helpful, efficient people. It's lovely to have both efficiency and warm, friendliness at the same time. And i've noticed [sic], while waiting at lupus street, for example, that everyone who attends, whatever their age, ethnicity, physical or mental health challenge, is met with politeness, warmth and efficiency. I appreciate the phone service you offer with some brilliant personnel.*
 - ❖ *This is the third time in a couple of weeks that I have requested information and each time I get a well written email and the info I need. I have total confidence in the quality and prompt reply and that my requests are important and will not be put into a black hole and not addressed. I have been a leaseholder for 23 years and I feel that the service is personal and that I am not dealing with a big organisation but a office with only a few staff.*
 - ❖ *I wanted to write to you as I have noticed now on a few occasions how GOOD a customer service I receive from Westminster City Council. I have called/emailed a few occasions over the past year or two and each time I deal with positive, attentive, proactive staff. A great example is speaking to [name] who whilst couldn't deal with my enquiry, at least picked the phone up after waiting for a few minutes, explained there was a backlog. She also took my details and advised someone will call back later in the day...I have to commend your management and team – they are always excellent.*

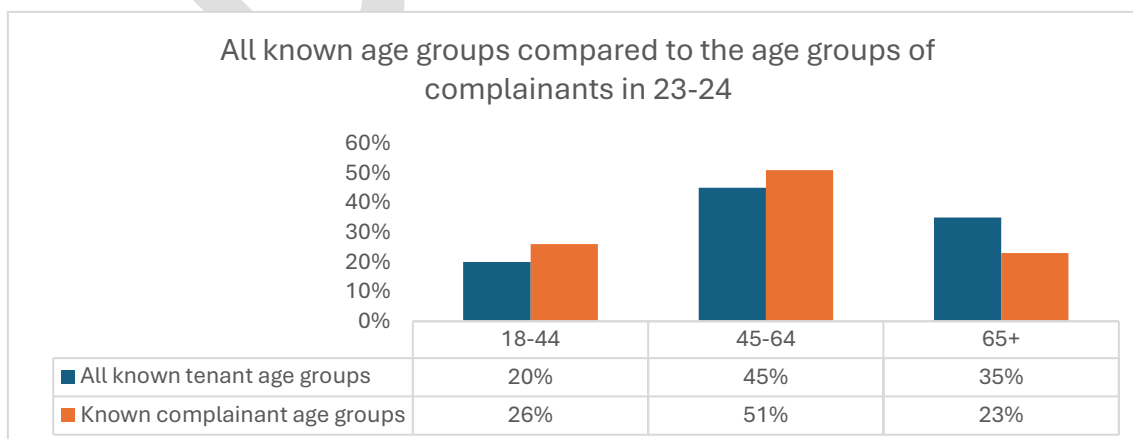


4. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 4.1 We are committed to ensuring that the complaints process is accessible to all our communities and that the complaints we receive proportionately reflect the lived experiences of the residents who live in the borough or who access our services.
- 4.2 During 23-24, complaints about Housing services were raised through the Council’s online complaints form and this did not offer complainants an opportunity to provide equalities data.
- 4.3 However, based on information that has been collected and where the age, gender and ethnicity of residents is known, which is usually captured during tenancy sign up, the charts below show the representation of our complainants by the same categories.
- 4.4 The chart below indicates that there is a relatively similar percentage of complainants with the same ethnicity as the known ethnicity of our tenants.

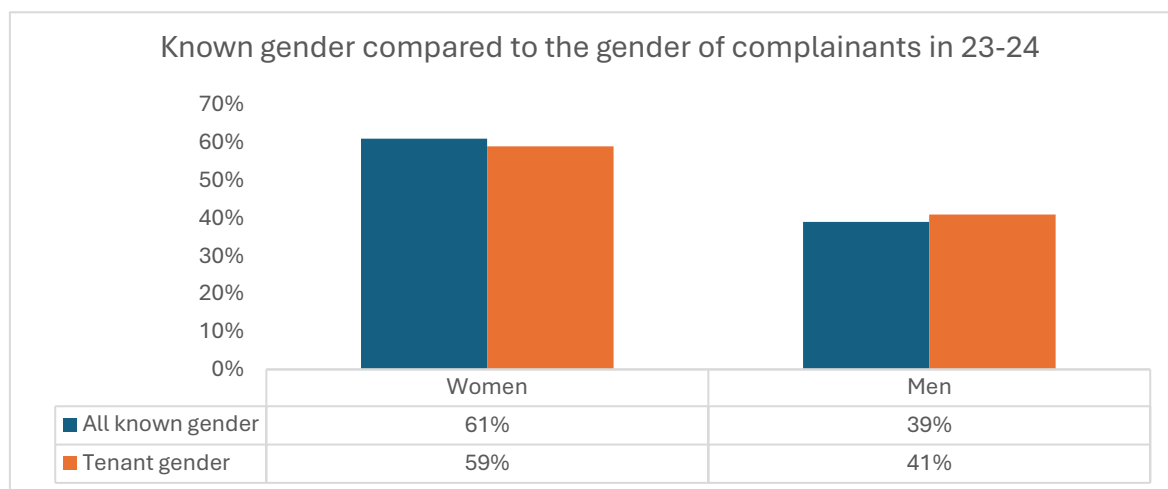


- 4.5 The chart below shows that there are some differences in the percentage of complaints from different age groups, compared to the percentage of residents where their age group is known. As there are high numbers of residents where information is not known, we cannot make reliable conclusions, but we will need to continue to monitor the variations to ensure the complaints process is accessible to all residents particularly those who are 65+.





4.6 The information in the chart below shows that based on the sample size, the percentage of male and female complainants is similar to the proportion of residents where their gender is known. This is positive to see but should be kept under review throughout 24/25.



5. Housing Ombudsman Service casework

- 5.1 This section provides a summary of the volume of complaints determined by the Housing Ombudsman Service for 22/23 compared to the Housing Ombudsman Service’s draft annual performance report for 23/24.
- 5.2 The Housing Ombudsman have three stages of their approach; triage, information request stage and determined cases.
- 5.3 They provide determinations on a case, but within this, reach an individual finding in relation to each complaint issue investigated. Any finding of severe maladministration, maladministration or service failure contributes to the overall maladministration rate. The full list of possible findings are set out below.

- Severe maladministration
- Maladministration
- Service failure
- Reasonable redress
- No maladministration
- Out of jurisdiction

Performance overview

- 5.4 In 23/24, the Ombudsman investigated made a determination on 51 complaints and made 116 individual findings. This has resulted in an overall maladministration rate of 79%.
- 5.5 The table provides the headline summary figures from 2022/23 and the 2023/24 position as set out in the draft Landlord Performance Report 23-24.



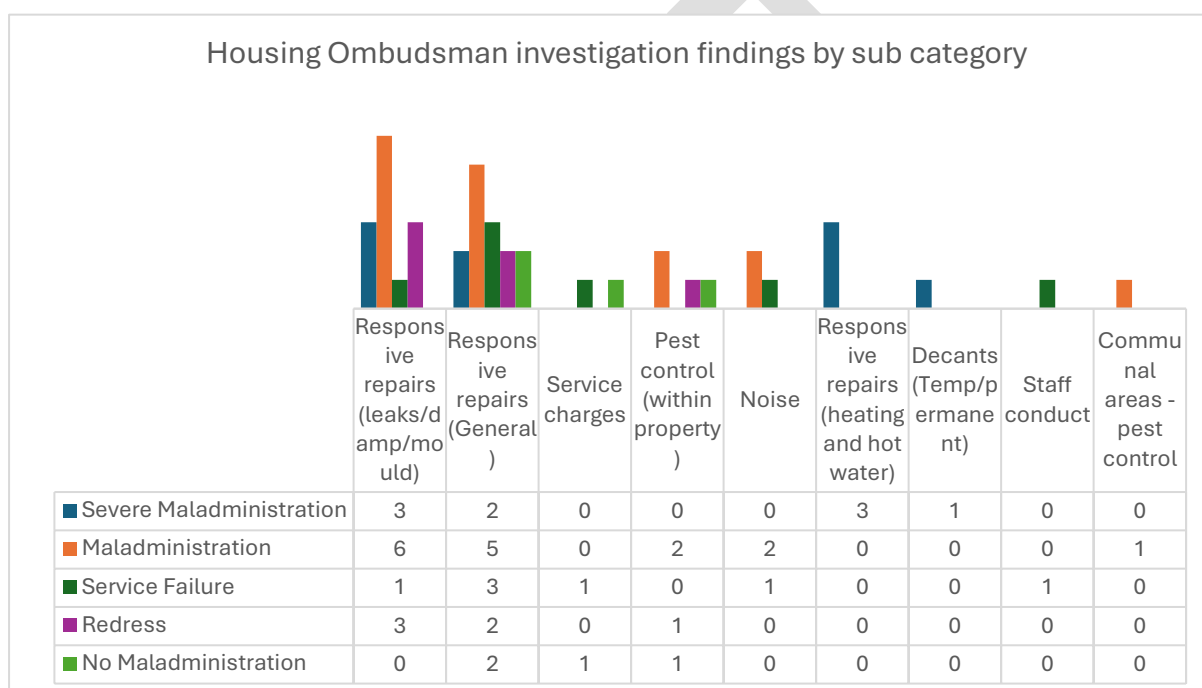
Outcome	2022/23	2023/24
Determinations	39	51
Findings	64	116
Maladministration Findings (including Service Failures)	36	77
Maladministration Rate (including Service Failures)	61%	79%
CHFOs	0	1
Orders made	49	171
Recommendations	44	37
Compensation	15,495	£40,525

- 5.6 When compared to Landlords of a similar size or type, the Council is reported to have performed similarly to others, although it should be noted that the national rate of maladministration is 73% and this is the same for landlords of a similar size (between 10,000 and 50,000 units). Other Local Authorities, ALMOs and TMOs had a maladministration of 78%.
- 5.7 Given this, Housing Services take the position that performance in respect of Housing Ombudsman Casework is an area of concern and there must be a concerted effort to resolve complaints quickly and properly within the complaints process.
- 5.8 It is acknowledged that the Housing Ombudsman Service has received and determined a higher volume of complaints, and this is a position which is replicated across the sector.
- 5.9 It should also be noted that determinations largely relate to cases or complaints investigated by the Council in 21/22.
- 5.10 Given that the Council has seen a decline in performance across each type of Ombudsman finding, the table below shows the breakdown of findings for Westminster City Council, compared with Landlords of a similar size and type.

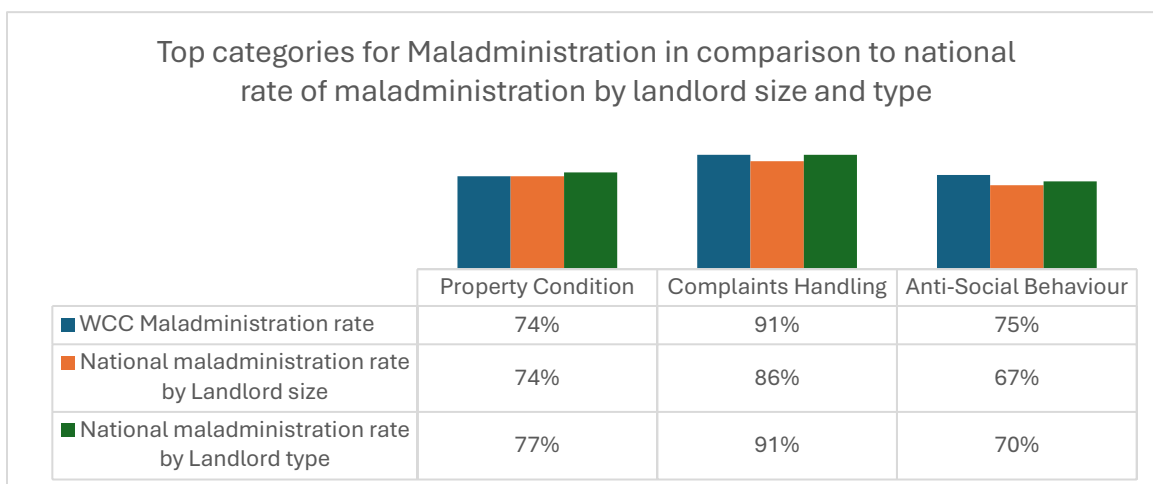
Findings	Westminster City Council 23/24	Landlords of a similar size (10,000 – 50,000 units)	Landlords of a similar type (Local Authority / ALMO / TMO)
Severe Maladministration	9%	8%	9%
Maladministration	38%	42%	45%
Service Failure	19%	18%	18%
Mediation	0%	1%	1%
Redress	9%	8%	4%
No Maladministration	8%	16%	15%
Out of Jurisdiction	16%	7%	9%
Withdrawn	0%	0%	0%



- 5.11 In summary, the Council compares similarly in respect of findings of severe maladministration, service failures and cases where it has made offers of reasonable redress. It has a lower overall percentage of maladministration compared to others.
- 5.12 Contrastingly, landlords of a similar size and type have had more findings of no maladministration. Although we cannot conclusively say that residents do not pursue complaints that have not been upheld, it does confirm that in all cases escalated to the Ombudsman, there was at least one finding falling within the category of maladministration.
- 5.13 The chart below shows the breakdown of individual findings (excluding those that were out of jurisdiction or withdrawn) by sub-category, as reported by the Ombudsman. It shows that most of the determinations related to responsive repair issues, particularly around leaks, damp and mould. This is also where the majority of severe maladministration findings were made.



- 5.14 As referenced in 6.9, most of the complaints determined in 23/24 related to complaint issues that were reported in 21/22 or between 22 and early in 2023.
- 5.15 When reflecting on the top three categories where maladministration findings are high and, in some cases higher than other landlords of a similar size and/or type, the chart below shows how our performance compares.



5.16 We know that case handling in relation to repair issues was not as robust as it needed to be, and that the impact of this was more significant for our most vulnerable residents. These service failures were further compounded by poor complaint handling and poor record keeping practices which affected the service’s ability to track and monitor remedial works.

5.17 It is also acknowledged that in relation to the management of noise or anti-social behaviour cases, our rate of maladministration is also above the national maladministration rate when compared to landlords of a similar size and type. The Service has reviewed case handling practice in response to each case and made several improvements to demonstrate learning from both the determinations and the Ombudsman’s spotlight report on noise.

5.18 During 23/24, and to comply with orders and recommendations made by the Housing Ombudsman Service, the total amount of compensation paid was £40,525 which includes compensation awards offered within the internal complaints process.

Complaint Handling Failure Order

5.19 The Council also received one complaint handling failure order (CHFO) because it failed to issue a stage 1 complaint response in relation to a resident’s concerns about asbestos. Although the Council did investigate and respond to other complaint issues under three different stage 1 responses, it overlooked the fact that none of these addressed the residents’ concerns about asbestos.

5.20 The Housing Complaints Service has reviewed its procedures, tracking of new Ombudsman cases and has introduced weekly oversight meetings to ensure all casework is captured and followed through. This is chaired by a Service Manager and Head of Service and high-risk cases are escalated to Senior Leaders to avoid non-compliance.

6. Learning and service improvement

6.1 Housing Services have a clear commitment to learn from complaints and resident feedback. We know that in past years, our approach to learning has not been as robust or as consistent as it needed to be.



- 6.2 During 23/24, we have been focused on embedding a culture of learning across the entire service, sharing more insight from complaints and engaging with staff across different Teams to reflect and learn from repeat themes within complaints to facilitate improvement.
- 6.3 We have also introduced case reviews which are often triggered by service failures identified within complaint investigations, complex cases or as ordered or recommended by the Housing Ombudsman. We have developed a corresponding learning framework to ensure that themes are captured and formalised into action plan.
- 6.4 A significant part of our learning and improvement journey has been informed by a finding of severe maladministration in November 2022 relating to case dating back to 2021. This triggered various improvement activity, and thereafter, between May and September 2023, we received five more determinations in relation to historic cases, all of which had at least one finding of severe maladministration.
- 6.5 These further highlighted the need to improve:
- How we identify, record and respond to the needs of vulnerable people and specifically recognising how they or their family may be impacted by the issues they are reporting.
 - The handling of repairs; ensuring we meet our service level agreements in relation to completing repairs, but specifically how we record repairs and improve communication about outstanding work.
 - Complaint handling practice to ensure that responses were timely, accurate and addressed the complaint issues thoroughly.
- 6.6 Improvement in these areas has been underpinned by significant investment and focus on developing our systems to improve record keeping practices which has enabled us to deliver some key changes as set out below:

Supporting vulnerable residents:

- Rolled out mandatory safeguarding and vulnerability training to our staff and contractors to ensure we have a consistent approach to supporting residents with health and support needs.
- At our contact centre, we have strengthened identification of vulnerable people or those who require adjustments so that we can better respond to their needs and adjust our services accordingly. This includes sharing information about the required adjustments with our contractors so that they can work flexibly to support our communities.
- In March 2024, the Service launched the Customer Advocacy Team. This is a multi-disciplinary team based in the Contact Centre which includes a dedicated Housing Officer and Social Worker. The team provide advice and proactively manage cases which involve vulnerable individuals. Satisfaction with the service is measured via post call surveys at the point of closing a case, to date Satisfaction is 96%.
- In parallel, the Service's Care and Support Team (CAST) which launched in March, has implemented the 'Getting to Know You' project. This initiative has involved a census that has been sent to residents alongside a proactive outbound calling campaign to complete Household Support Reviews. Over 2,200 Household Support Reviews have been



completed providing the Housing Service with an updated understanding of resident and household support needs.

- The Housing Service's work to recognise, record and respond to vulnerable people has been commended by the Housing Ombudsman Service which we are very proud of.

Repairs:

- We have met with all repairs contractors to talk through performance and agreed priority areas for improvement. We developed a Repairs Improvement Programme which is focused on delivering a high quality, consistent and reliable repairs services meeting the needs of tenants and leaseholders.
- We have strengthened our approach to damp and mould through implementing quicker response times for both surveying properties and reducing the risk to tenants. We have also implemented a 12-week monitoring period for all damp and mould cases which is overseen by our dedicated damp and mould team who utilise dedicated contractor staff for all damp and mould issues. We also launched a consultation on our damp and mould policy.
- Increased the number of repairs staff to focus on complex leaks, increased the number of contractors as well as the number of appointments that can be booked by our contact centre and launched video calls to improve repair diagnostics.
- We have improved our systems to ensure that repair jobs can be raised and tracked more easily and introduced text message updates to confirm repairs appointments and to track the progress of repairs.
- We have developed new policies covering damp and mould, windows restrictors and an overarching new repairs policy accompanied by a tenants' repairs charter. These reflect best practice and learning from other landlords, the ombudsman and the regulator.

Complaint handling:

- We have reviewed our approach to complaint handling and changed our operating model to ensure Services are accountable for investigation and response to stage 1 complaints and that stage 2 complaints are investigated impartially by Senior Officers.
- Brought in additional resource to address a general increase in complaint volumes, escalation to stage 2 and Housing Ombudsman casework.
- We have developed and delivered complaint handling training to all staff involved in the complaints procedure to raise awareness, knowledge and skill in resolving complaints and informing them of the proposed Statutory Complaint Handling Code.
- Piloted a dedicated Repairs Complaints Team to work in partnership with surveyors and contractors to address complaints, but more importantly to support the resolution of repair issues by getting to the heart of the problem and engaging with residents throughout the complaints process.
- Introduced a quality assurance and lessons learnt framework as well as carrying out more case reviews. We have taken a multi-disciplinary approach to reflect on casework practice which has supported the identification of further opportunities to strengthen and resolve resident concerns.



Record keeping

- The CRM system launched for the repairs service to improve visibility of customer contact across different Teams.
- System development for the management and response to damp and mould cases, including sharing assessment reports, actions and updating the resident.
- CRM was developed and launched for complaints to improve visibility of resident concerns and to improve access to complaints information.
- System training on CRM is carried out for new starters and existing users weekly. This is supplemented by weekly bitesize training sessions and training material e.g., documents and videos that are accessible at any time for users.
- Housing have established a training and quality assurance team within the digital programme, and Officers will carry out training needs analysis with users, review the quality of work and the use of systems by housing staff, curating feedback for specific teams and individuals, and carry out training online and in person to ensure that they are addressing user needs.

Noise and Anti-social behaviour

- Ensured staff are equipped with other tools to investigate noise, this includes the noise app to support residents in sending us secure short recordings of noise so that we can determine if it is a noise nuisance or not.
- We have built closer relationships with the environmental health team to ensure there is a joint approach on noise cases involving both teams ensuring that we use our joint tools effectively.
- We have reviewed all noise categories – to reflect what noise should and should not be treated as ASB or whether it's a lower-level housing matter. We have created an easy-to-read fact sheet on noise reports specifically, which has been reviewed and consulted on with residents who provided feedback about the service.
- We regularly review risk assessments in relation to anti-social behaviour cases and have also updated our procedure to ensure that every case is reviewed at 30 days and 60 days of being open. Following an ombudsman determination, on every case where there is no contact gained must have a visit before it is closed- unless there is good reason not to visit (which must be documented on the case around decision making).
- We have reviewed how we respond to hate crime and hate related incidents and have produced guidance on this to our team and contact centre staff ensuring that these are treated as high risk and vulnerability is considered in every case.
- We have ensured that residents know what an ASB case review is and that they know where to find it, including releasing newsletter articles, amending our web pages and creating an ASB factsheet.



Pest control

- We are currently moving the raising of proofing jobs away from the commercial performance team, and to the contact centre. This should help residents obtain more information about any proofing jobs that have been raised and those works being carried out.
- The baiting programme for rats has increased thereby ensuring residents across our larger estates are receiving a more proactive response to minimising the impact associated with rats. This is also the case with an increased sewer baiting and rat boxes with similar anticipated results.
- Every estate has a new active programme of monitoring for rats. This is to facilitate any reports from residents or operatives to ensure a custom plan can be made to address any issues that arise.
- Pest control team are attending councillor surgeries to provide support and education to residents.
- Pest control officers are now assigned zones/areas within the borough to familiarise and tackle issues, thereby ensuring they are aware of local and specific issues on those patches.
- Rat boxes have been placed around new food waste bins to help prevent any new issues as part of a new food waste campaign that was rolled out.
- Pest control officers attend resident meetings where this has been pre-arranged to help discuss matters on their estates/homes as well as attending our Resident Association forum and Leasehold conference.
- Created a new factsheet published to provide information to residents on pharaoh ants and bed bugs and we have trialled a new squirrel trap on an estate to address issues associated with squirrels.

7. Priorities for 24/25

7.1 In direct response to learning from complaints, resident feedback and maladministration findings made by the Housing Ombudsman Service, we need to ensure that there is a programme of work to make improvements. This programme will include:

- Improving reporting and analysis of complaints, particularly for our vulnerable people, with appropriate oversight from the Director's Leadership Team.
- Addressing the root cause of complaints by embedding learning to improve resident experience and satisfaction.
- Developing a programme of training to support staff to carry out robust investigations, communicate decisions and proportionately resolve and remedy complaints.
- Hold a task and finish group on complaints so that further improvements are driven by resident engagement.
- Rollout the Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) to improve complaint handling practices and ensure compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint handling code.



- Accelerate our approach to management and resolution of repair issues as set out in the repairs improvement plan.
- Develop an aftercare approach which is centred on maintaining engagement and communication with residents on outstanding actions to improve resident satisfaction and ensure matters are resolved without the resident having to pursue the matter.

8. Financial Implications

- 8.1 Compensation awarded within the internal complaints procedure and awards as ordered or recommended by the Housing Ombudsman Service are paid from the Housing Revenue Account established for such purposes.
- 8.2 Sufficient budget provision has been built into the HRA business plan which was agreed at full council in March 2024. This budget will be viewed as part of the yearly refresh of the HRA business plan.'

9. Legal Implications

- 9.1 From 1 April 2024, the Housing Ombudsman's complaint handling code is a statutory requirement for social landlords. The code introduces timescales for acknowledging and dealing with complaints, as well as a requirement for a 2-stage complaints process.
- 9.2 The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 requires the Housing Ombudsman to monitor social landlords' compliance with the code.