



HONEYCOMB GROUP

Annual Report on Complaints

Introduction

An annual report on complaints is a requirement of The Regulator's **Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard**. We are expected to have a complaints policy which provides a range of ways for tenants to express a complaint and sets out clear service standards for responding to complaints. We are also required for us to publish information about the number, nature, and outcome of complaints. We include this in the Annual Report to Tenants.

Housing Ombudsman: new complaint handling code

Honeycomb is a member of the Housing Ombudsman Service (the Ombudsman) which is the body which investigates social tenants' complaints when they are not resolved internally. The Housing Ombudsman published an updated complaint handling code in April 2022 which set out its expanded expectations of all landlords who are members of the Ombudsman's scheme.

This code was issued under the Ombudsman's new powers in the revised Housing Ombudsman Scheme. The code sets out required practice for the sector with the expectation that landlords respond to complaints effectively and fairly. One of the key expectations is that we demonstrate learning in our Annual Report.

National Housing Federation Together with Tenants Charter.

The Charter, which we have adopted in our own **Customer Voice** document, makes a series of commitments which aim to strengthen our relationship with customers.

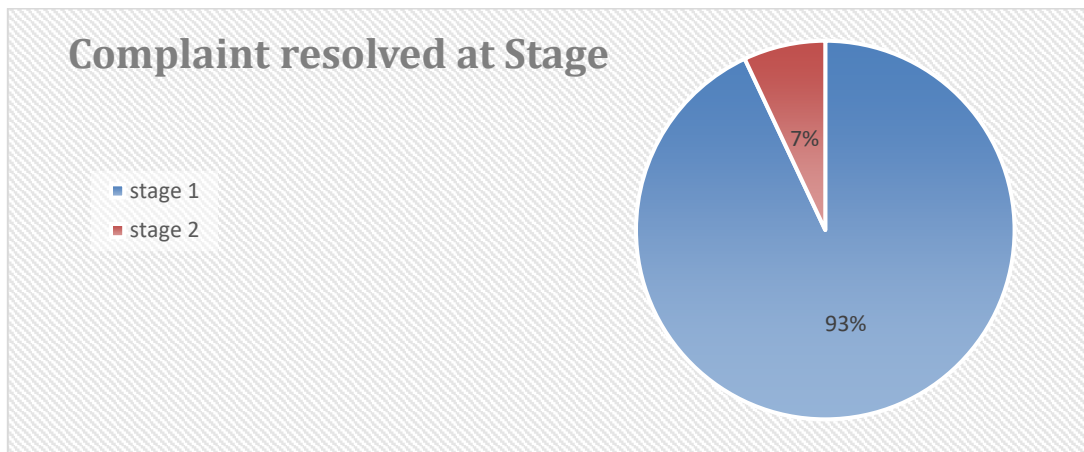
One of our commitments is:

Communication – Customers will receive clear, accessible, and timely information from Staffs Housing on the issues that matter to you, including important information about your home and the local community, how we are working to address problems, how we run the organisation and information about performance on key issues.

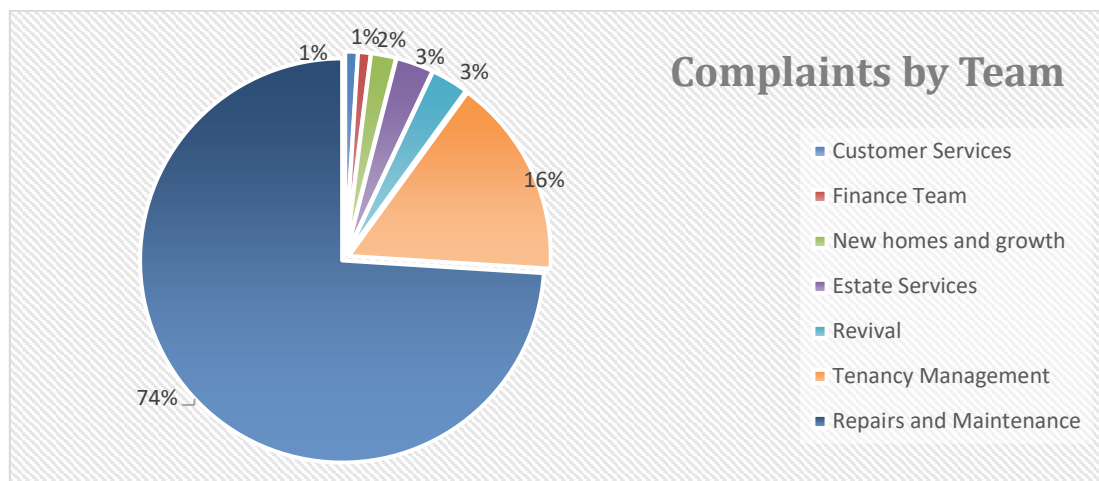
This report will look at our complaint's performance over the last 12 months, highlight key information and look at our aims for 2022 and beyond.

Performance Summary

The most serious complaints are managed through the formal complaints process. In 2021/22 we closed 100 formal complaints, 93 at Stage 1 and 7 at Stage 2. This compares to 37 in 2020/21. No complaints were reviewed externally by a designated person or the Housing Ombudsman.



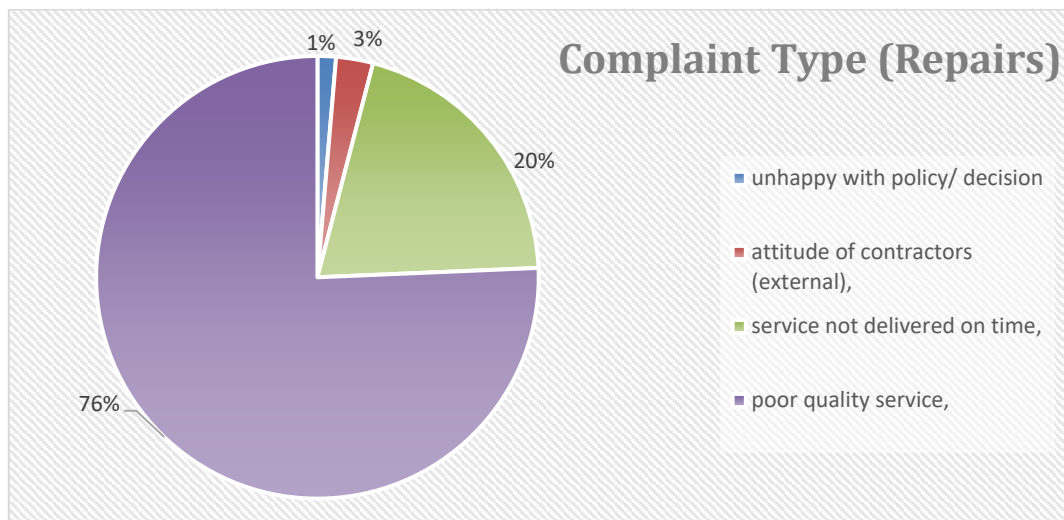
The highest proportion, 74% of complaints made, were about the repairs service. This was similar to 2019/20 (72%). However, this was a notable increase in the number of the complaints reported.



Of the 74 maintenance complaints, 73 were about responsive repairs. Most were resolved at the first stage and 3 went to Stage 2. There were several recurring themes which stood out and often formed part of the same complaint:

- Time taken to resolve some repairs, particularly issues with boilers/hot water supplies and shower faults
- Poor communication from the contractor about obtaining parts and, delayed or cancelled visits
- Poor quality of some repairs resulting in repeat calls from customers and return visits

One complaint was about planned maintenance, the complainant was objecting to decisions we had made in line with our service standards/planned maintenance programme. In this case we declined to carry out improvement work in the timeframe they had requested it and the complaint was not upheld.



In addition to the formal complaints, we also capture feedback and informal complaints made through the 'Make a Complaint' forms on the websites. Complaints made in this way are reviewed by the Complaints team, who decide how they are to be managed.

Some issues can be resolved with an immediate response back to the customer. Some are referred to other teams to be dealt with outside the complaints process, such as anti-social behaviour (ASB) complaints. In other cases, the team will confirm a formal complaint with the customer and record it in the complaints process.

There were 154 complaints made through the websites (compared to 67 in 2020/21). Of those, 86 related to dissatisfaction with the repairs service, 37 were referred onto the housing team as ASB cases. The remaining 28 website complaints were recorded, as agreed with customers, as formal complaints. The repairs issues raised through the 'Make a Complaint' process reflected similar issues of poor communication and poor quality of work. Most of these cases were resolved by direct contact and resolution with the customer without the need for the issue to be escalated to a formal complaint.

From a customer perspective, the advantage of this way of registering a complaint on the website is that it is available at any time. A third of the website contacts were made outside office hours.

In addition to these methods of capturing complaints, all staff are encouraged to use case notes on Journey CRM system to capture all contacts concerning complaints. During 2021/22, 238 contacts were recorded about complaints (compared to 158 in 2020/21), 49 related to formal complaints as recorded above. As we would expect, most customer contact on complaints is by phone and email.

Observations

Although the increase in complaints reflects weaker performance in some service areas there are some important positives to take from the complaints review:

- It is easy for customers to complain when they need to. We do not discourage complaints, and we may encourage them, as a way of capturing the issue to ensure we understand and correct the problem. The increase in complaints reported using the website indicates that we have made it easier to complain and that the process is used.
- Customers are making more complaints – although they may be dissatisfied at the point of recording the complaint, they also have an expectation that the organisation will respond and deal with these issues. This suggests that they are generally confident that problems will be addressed and sorted out.
- The Journey CRM system has enabled better recording and monitoring of informal complaints so that we are now able to provide reliable statistics on these as well as formal complaints.
- The proportion of complaints resolved at the first stage in the process improved to 93% (86% in 2020/21). Managers were able to resolve complaints early without appeals and further reviews being required.
- Customer Scrutiny of complaints was largely positive, recognising it is a system that works while also suggesting further improvements.
- Our Customer Voice commitment is:
We will give you advice and support when things go wrong and a simple route to raise an issue or to make a complaint. We will give you clear timescales setting out when you can expect a response. If you are not satisfied there is a simple appeal process and then an opportunity to appeal to the Housing Ombudsman if you are still unhappy.

We assess we have made good progress on meeting this commitment.

Lessons Learned/ Changes Made

Once we have captured and dealt with complaints, it is important that we review them to make sure we are learning from them and not repeating our mistakes. We also monitor to identify any trends. This applies whether we uphold the complaint or not.

Maintenance Complaints

In 2021-22, we upheld 82% of all complaints made including 97% of maintenance complaints and 38% of other complaints made. This compares with 2020/21 when there were fewer complaints and we upheld 54% of complaints.

This has been an exceptional year, the maintenance contract changed in August 2021. There was already higher dissatisfaction with the outgoing contractor (April – July 2021) and the new contractor faced unexpected challenges, especially around staffing shortages which resulted in issues with attendance at repairs and the quality of the service. This resulted in a much higher level of complaints about the service.

One of the main areas of complaint for the service has been poor information flows between the Ian Williams hub (control centre) and the Customer Services team leading to delays in providing up to date information to residents. This then resulted in more follow up calls, increasing call waiting times.

To tackle this, a facilitated problem-solving project group was set up with senior representatives from Ian Williams and Staffs Housing who have been meeting monthly to focus on critical issues affecting performance and customer satisfaction.

This has led to a number of interim actions to recover performance, including full recruitment to the responsive repairs team, agreed escalation process for customer service team leaders, changes to key staff to ensure better operational management of the contract, introducing a next-day-response for all urgent repairs, and transferring void property works to a different contractor. The benefits of this improvement plan will be seen during 2022/23 and there has been a reduction in informal complaints during quarter 1, 2022/23.

Other Complaints

The following table identifies some of the other lessons learnt and changes made from complaints in the last 12 months.

Lessons Learnt	Changes Made
It is important that we always check customer contact details and use the information provided.	Refresher training for staff on where to check key information and when to use it

Importance of ongoing communication with customers to ensure they are kept informed about the issue and progress and what will happen next.	Identify a key contact to ensure all customers involved in a complex issue are updated regularly and receive the same information at the same time
We need to have clear procedures for staff to follow covering all areas of housing services, such as shared owners in leasehold properties	Procedures for managing leasehold properties were reviewed and updated and legal refresher training was provided to housing team.

Other Actions in 2021/22

A Scrutiny Team review of the complaints process was completed in May 2022. Overall, the findings of the review were very positive and a number of recommendations for improvements were made which are currently in progress (includes the complaints team ensuring better communication with complainants when response dates are due, more face to face contact between the complaints lead and the customers at Stage 1 and amendments to the ‘make a complaint’ form). One key issue identified in the review was that there is no clear policy for how we identify and respond to complaints made through the various forms of social media used by our customers. This also features in the updated Housing Ombudsman’s complaints handling code and is in the action plan.

2022-23 – Next Steps

- We have produced a complaints action plan to implement best practice ideas we have identified from customers and the self-assessment (8.2b).
- Following the recommendation from the scrutiny review of the complaints process in 2021/22 we will review the way customers use social media and to put a new process in place to ensure we are responding consistently and in line with our policy to complaints received through this channel.
- We will be improving the information we provide about the complaints service, and about our performance in responding to complaints on the websites
- We have reviewed the complaints policy and updating it to reflect best practice identified by the Housing Ombudsman Service in the Complaints Handling Code ready for approval by Customer Services Committee.