

Lancaster City Council | Council Housing

Annual Complaints Performance and
Service Improvement Report

2023-2024

Introduction

At Lancaster City Council, we value feedback from our residents as it helps us identify areas where our services or properties can be improved. Regardless of the complexity of the cases, residents can expect the Housing Team to address their concerns promptly.

While we strive to resolve issues on the spot, there are instances where further investigation is necessary. In such cases, the complaint will be handled according to Stage 1 of our Complaints Policy, ensuring transparency and accountability in our processes. Our Complaints Policy is readily available to view online, outlining what they can expect when they make a complaint to their landlord.

Annually, we conduct a self-assessment of our complaints handling against the Housing Ombudsman Complaint code to ensure compliance, and to drive continuous improvement. To make a complaint or share concerns, residents can reach us via email, phone, in person, or even through our social media channels, although complainants should note that social media inquiries may not be monitored daily.

Annual Self-Assessment

We have conducted an annual self-assessment (May 2024) against the Code of Practice for Complaint Handling, as outlined by the Housing Ombudsman.

This assessment ensures that our complaint handling policy and process remains fully aligned with the provisions set forth by the Code. Through this process, we have reaffirmed our commitment to maintaining high standards of transparency, fairness, and efficiency in addressing complaints from our stakeholders.

Our full self-assessment can be found online at: [Customer care- Lancaster City Council](#).

Performance

Overall:

Council Housing (Including Repairs and Maintenance Service) received 66 complaints during the 2023/24 financial year. This represents a 37.5% increase against the previous year (48). 57 complaints were raised at Stage 1, with 9 of these being escalated to Stage 2 following continued dissatisfaction being expressed (See Fig. 1).

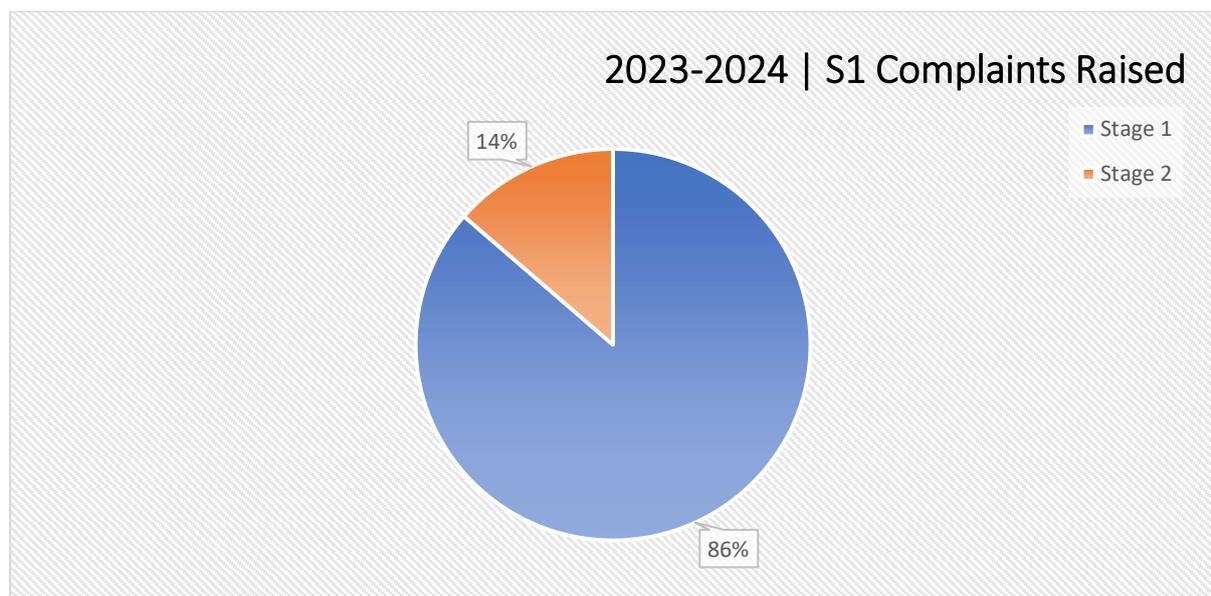


Figure 1. 2023-2024 Complaints Received

The increase in complaints seen year on year can be explained by:

- The increased importance placed on effective complaint handling and the 'tenant voice' being heard and acted on by landlords by both the Housing Ombudsman and the Regulator of Social Housing.
- High profile media coverage of landlord failings within the sector and encouragement (including by the government) that tenants should access landlord complaint processes where appropriate.
- Increased communication by the Housing Service via multiple channels to ensure the complaints process is more widely known and understood.
- Effective and accessible methods for reporting housing complaints.

- Increased staff knowledge through training, ensuring complaints are heard and escalated through the formal process where appropriate.

The Council Housing Service is committed to a positive complaints culture where complaints are welcomed and treated as valuable sources of data and feedback to aid service improvement.

The consistent numbers of complaints being received by the service as shown below provide reassurance of a visible, accessible service being provided:

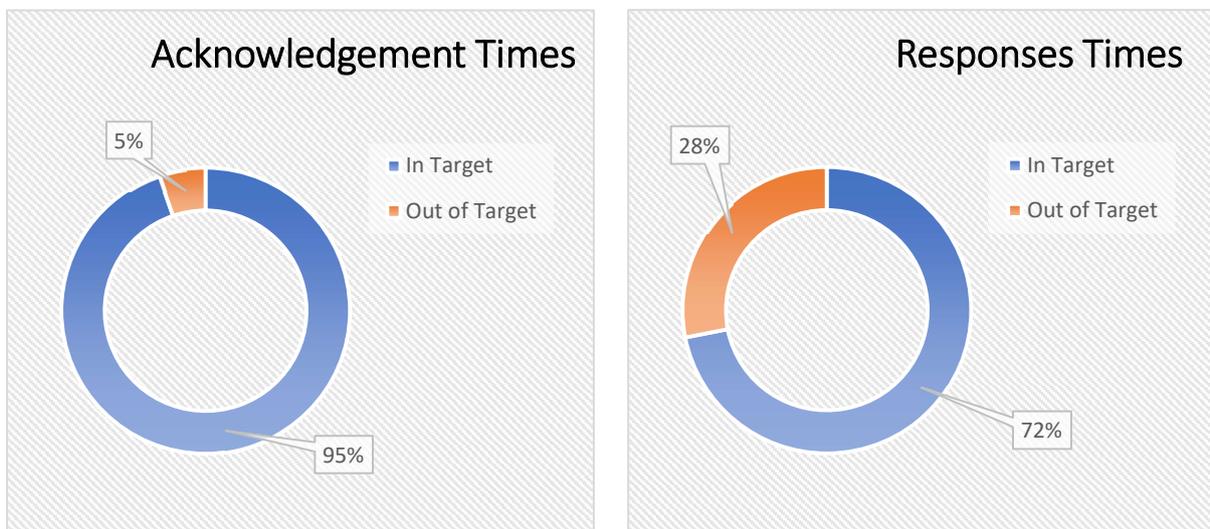
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
COMPLAINTS RECEIVED	14	13	11	27

It is possible that the increase of complaints received in Q4 follows a series of communications sent by the council regarding our complaints process as noted above.

Stage 1:

Of the 57 Stage 1 complaints raised in 2023-24:

- 54 (94.7%) complaints were acknowledged within the timescale of 5 calendar days set out by the Housing Ombudsman.
- 41 (71.9%) Stage 1 complaints were responded to within the Ombudsman timescale of 10 working days.



(Fig 2. A visualisation of Stage 1 acknowledgments and responses provided within the target timescale)

Housing and Estate Management related issues represented the largest proportion of Stage 1 complaints with 52.6% of all incoming complaints (30 complaint cases). Repairs related complaints made up 43.9% (25 complaint cases) with Compliance related complaints making up the remaining 3.5% (2 complaint cases) (See Fig. 3).

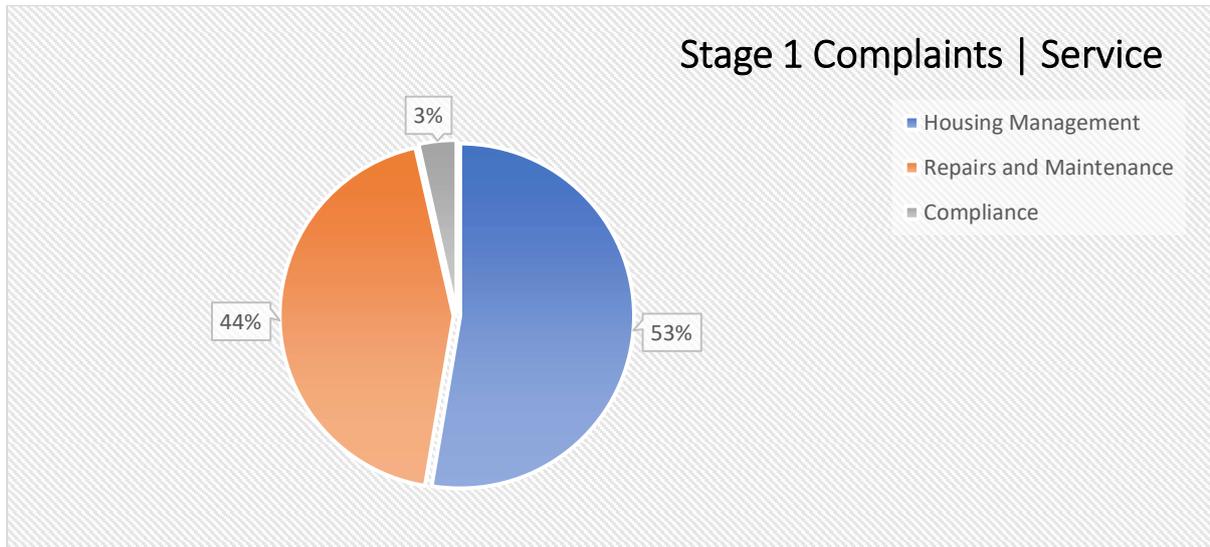
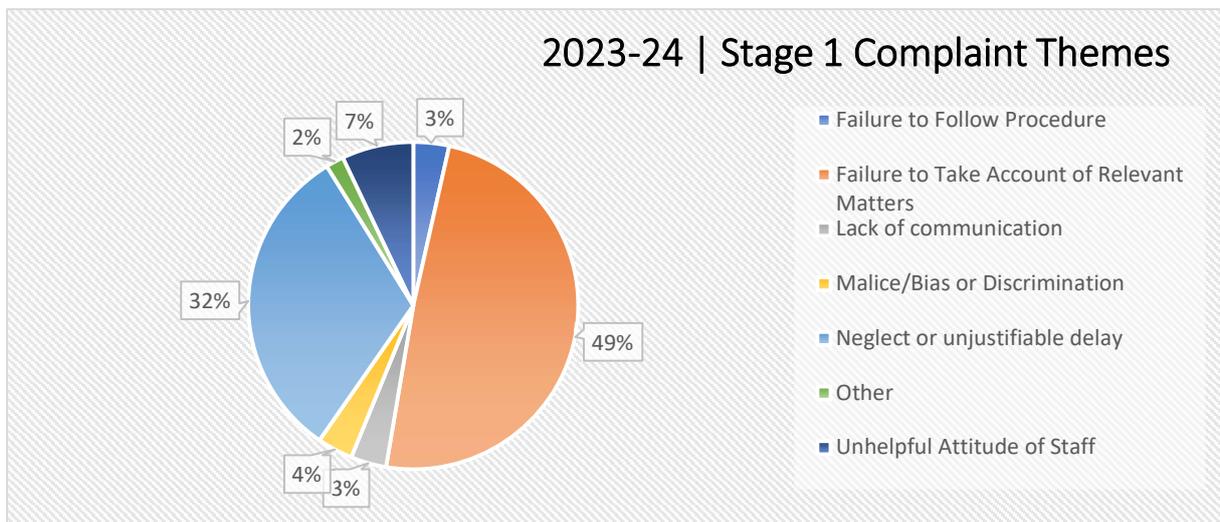


Figure 3. 2023-24 Stage 1 Complaints by Service Area

The most common theme for Stage 1 complaints was ‘Failure to Take Account of Relevant Matters’ with 28 of the 57 stage 1 complaints (49%). A full break down can be seen in the table and chart below (Fig. 4).



Complaint Theme	Number of Cases	% of Cases
Failure to Follow Procedure	2	3.5
Failure to Take Account of Relevant Matters	28	49.1
Lack of communication	2	3.5
Malice/Bias or Discrimination	2	3.5
Neglect or unjustifiable delay	18	31.6
Other	1	1.8
Unhelpful Attitude of Staff	4	7.0

(Fig 4. Stage 1 Complaint Themes)

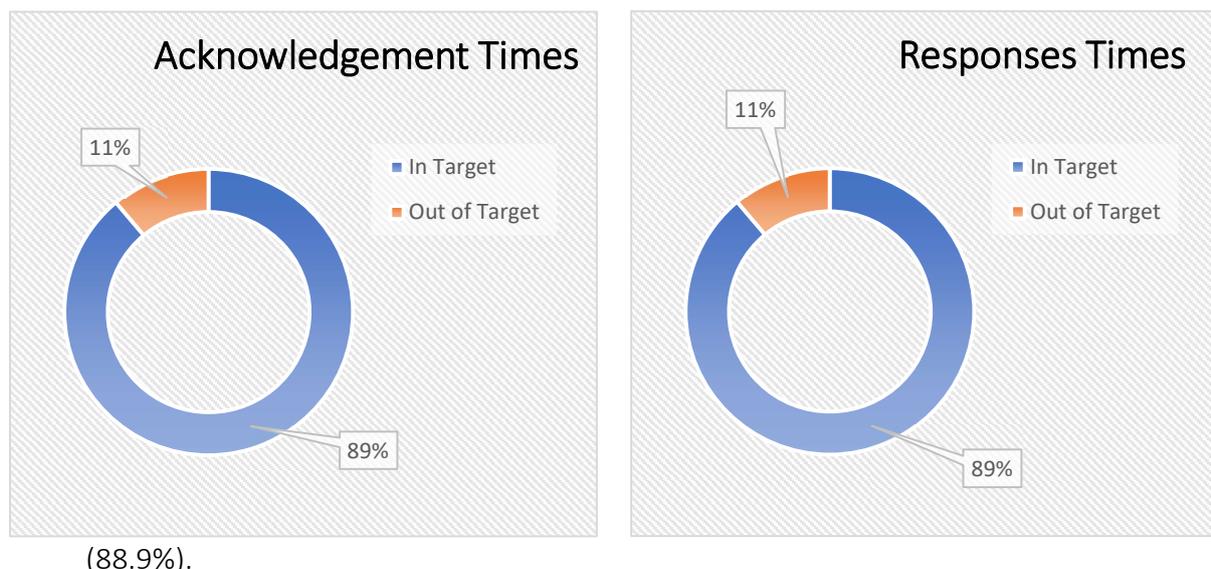
The average response time for a Stage 1 complaint during 2023/24 11.9 working days. Although many cases were responded to within the target time this does not meet the requirements set out by the Housing Ombudsman of 10 working days. In response to performance monitoring in year, processes were tightened up during quarter 3 which saw a significantly improved performance during quarter 4 where average response time was 6.5 working days, with over 90% of stage 1 complaints receiving a response within the 10 day target time.

Finally, 52.6% of Stage 1 complaints were upheld, 31.6% were not upheld and 15.8% were partially upheld. From April 2024, in line with the Complaints Code complaints will no longer be classified as partially upheld but will be either upheld or not upheld.

Stage 2:

Of the 9 Stage 2 complaints raised in the 2023-24 financial year:

- 8 complaints were acknowledged within the timescale of 5 calendar days set out by the Housing Ombudsman (88.9%).
- 8 complaints were responded to within the Ombudsman timescale of 20 working days



(88.9%).

(Fig 5. A visualisation of Stage 2 acknowledgments and responses provided within the target timescale)

Housing and Estate Management related issues represented the largest proportion of Stage 2 complaints with 88.9% of all incoming complaints (8 complaint cases). Repairs related complaints made up 11.1% (1 complaint cases), (See Fig. 6).

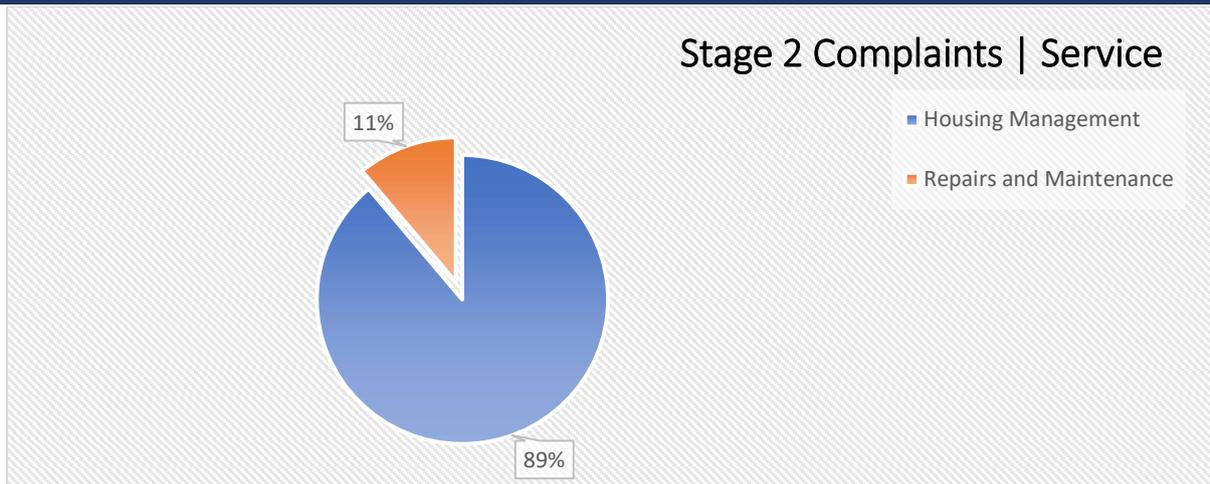
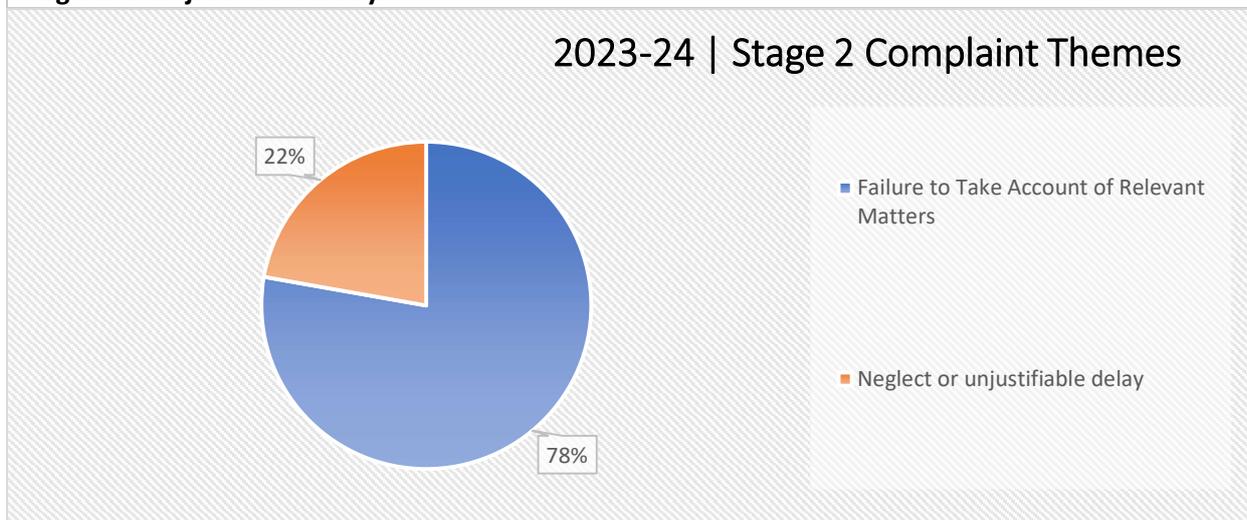


Figure 6. 2023-24 Stage 1 Complaints by Service Area

The most common theme for Stage 2 complaints was ‘Failure to Take Account of Relevant Matters’ with 7 of the 9 Stage 2 complaints (77.7%). A full break down can be seen in the table and chart below (Fig. 7).

Complaint Theme	Number of Cases	% of Cases
Failure to Take Account of Relevant Matters	7	77.7%
Neglect or unjustifiable delay	2	22.3%



(Fig 7. Stage 2 Complaint Themes)

The average response time for a Stage 2 complaint is 20.2 working days, this does not meet the requirements set out by the housing Ombudsman of 20 working days. And although most cases were responded to within the target time. A minority outlier has impacted on the average result in this area.

Finally, 33.3% of Stage 1 complaints were upheld, 44.4% were not upheld and 22.2% were partially upheld. From April 2024, complaints will no longer be classified as partially upheld in keeping with the code set by the Housing Ombudsman.

Complaint Handling Quality

In addition to complaint handling statistics the service introduced quality review during 2023/24 to provide assurance that individual complaint cases are being managed consistently and in line with complaint code requirements.

During quarter 4 weekly complaint review meetings involving all complaint handling officers were implemented, to ensure not only that timely responses are being provided to live cases, but that shared learning and agreed approaches are being considered to what are sometimes complex cases.

In addition, complaint reviews were introduced during quarter 4 for sampling and review of recently archived cases for quality control. These reviews are carried out by senior managers within the service to ensure high level oversight and accountability.

For 2024/25 both weekly reviews and quality sampling will become further embedded, along with a monthly complaint learning panel for all team managers to ensure actionable insights are captured from as many complaints as possible, and progress in response to these actions is reviewed and delivered.

Learning and Service Improvements

As noted above, improving the learning and actionable insights gained from complaints is a priority for 2024/25. These actions will be monitored for delivery and published widely to promote greater transparency and offer further evidence and reassurance to tenants and residents that their 'voice' is being heard in housing service delivery.

The table below details three significant pieces of learning captured during 2023/24, with the actions in progress at time of writing.

Complaint	What we learnt	What we did in response	Year end 2023/24 update
Complaint from leaseholder about repair work outstanding and information provided	Communication was not effective	New leaseholder handbook developed – including single point of contact. In house training provided to staff responsible for leasehold management	Leaseholder handbook awaiting final sign off from residents. Leaseholder forum coming soon

Complaint about rehousing waiting times	Although pressures exist within the local housing market which are not easily resolved, the Council has a greater role to play in providing good quality information	Developed standard information on expected waiting times, numbers on the housing waiting list, and alternative housing options. Published this as infographic	Updated council housing web pages due to go live early May 2024 – this will include full FAQ's on housing waiting list and waiting time information, and infographic information for greater transparency
Multiple repairs complaints in which the complainant was seeking compensation	In line with Housing Ombudsman expectations the Council needs to consider how best to use financial compensation in response to tenant dissatisfaction	Complaints considered case by case with compensation offered where significant disruption, inconvenience or financial loss was incurred by the complainant	Compensation policy in development for launch in May/June 2024 – to set clear expectations and policy framework for compensation decisions

Tenant Satisfaction

In 2023 the Housing Service carried out the first set of annual Tenant Satisfaction Measures. These include satisfaction questions and performance data across the whole housing service, which are standardised across the whole social housing sector, and will be reported in to the Regulator of Social Housing to form part of annual data submissions.

In answer to the question “how satisfied are you with Lancaster City Council’s Housing Service’s complaints handling?” satisfaction came in at 36%. This is below current aspirations for satisfaction in this area and is evidence that the service is not currently meeting the needs of residents.

For context, early indications are that this figure is low across the housing sector and Lancaster are within the reported range of satisfaction, though below where we need to be.

In addition, it is recognised across the housing sector that for Local Authorities (rather than other Registered Providers of Social Housing without the wider the Council remit) this satisfaction figure is to some extent a commentary on the Council as a whole, and not just the housing service.

During 2023/24, in addition to complaints 31 compliments were logged relating to housing management, repairs and maintenance, and lettings.

Exclusions

In the 2023-24 financial year we have not kept an active record of cases that the council has refused to investigate due to it falling under one of the exclusion provisions listed within the council’s Complaints Policy.

From April 2024, in line with the Ombudsman’s revised Complaints Handling Code, Council Housing will be keeping a record of incoming feedback and expressions of dissatisfaction, that do not meet the criteria to be investigated as part of the Complaints process.

We can however provide a summary of Service Requests that were received in this timescale. Some expressions of dissatisfaction will have been excluded from the complaints process in favour of being treated as a service request. Service Requests are expressions of dissatisfaction received where the point of contact is the first time a resident has reported an issue or fault to Council Housing (i.e. a repair).

In the 2023-24 financial year, Council Housing received 57 service requests, all of which were surrounding repair requests a breakdown of which can be found below:

Section	Number of Cases
Adaptations	1
Electrical	1
Ex Contractor	7
General Trades	19
Inspection	27
Unclassified	2

Ombudsman Findings of Non-Compliance

In recent years the Housing Ombudsman Service has developed an increasingly proactive role in monitoring and intervening in housing service delivery through receipt of individual complaint cases and analysis of emerging themes and trends. Their 'spotlight' reports, for example, offer guidance and recommendations for effective service delivery in a range of areas and the Housing Service uses these to inform ongoing service review.

With regard to specific cases, Lancaster City Council was subject to two determinations during 2023/24.

Case 1

For the council's handling of a persistent anti-social behaviour (ASB) case a finding of 'maladministration' was found. Their finding related specifically to the way that the Housing Service had managed the ASB case, including insufficient risk assessments being carried out, a lack of understanding of the impact of the ASB on the victims, and poor communication during the case.

The experience of both the complainant and the housing team of this case was one of the drivers behind creating the new housing specific Community Safety Team and updated policy framework which launched in 2023, the principles of which include improvements in the areas highlighted by the Ombudsman.

The ASB case resolved to the complainant's satisfaction in 2022.

Case 2

For the council's handling of a noise nuisance case in 2022 it was found that the focus on 'enforcement' failed to consider the impact on the complainant, and in particular his specific vulnerabilities and support needs. A finding of 'maladministration' was issued for complaint handling and 'severe maladministration' in relation to the handling of the complainant's vulnerabilities and needs.

Again, as above, the development of the Community Safety team addresses some of the issues raised in this determination. In addition, it has promoted a review of how the service considered vulnerability within service delivery, and a new vulnerability policy is in development at time of writing to establish the principles and activity across the service in this area.

In addition, a review of Knowledge and Information Management practices is underway to provide assurance around case management and use of appropriate information in such cases.

The complainant in this case has since had the situation resolved to his satisfaction.

2024/25 Action Plan

In order to address the key areas where complaint handling required improvement the following action plan has been produced. This plan will be monitored by senior managers within the service to ensure delivery of agreed actions and mid-year update presented to the Council Housing Advisory Group (on which both the Lead Member for Complaints and the Lead Member for Housing and Homelessness sits).

Area for improvement	Action(s)	Lead Officer(s)	Target for completion
Learning from complaints	<p>Monthly complaint learning meetings including all complaint handling officers in the service will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify insights and learning from complaints received in the month Identify learning and insights coming from transactional satisfaction surveys Develop clear actions with timescales Monitor delivery of actions Publish learning and actions carried out 	Neighbourhood and Support Services Manager, Policy and Performance Officer, Complaint learning group.	Monthly, from May 2024
Monitoring of exclusions	<p>The tracking of complaints will be developed to include effective tracking of expressions of dissatisfaction which have been excluded from the complaints process as per the Council's Complaints Policy, including exclusion reason.</p> <p>Refresh of staff training in this area</p>	Policy and Performance Officer	By end of June 2024
Complaint Handling Satisfaction	<p>Create transactional satisfaction survey and agreed process for surveying all complainants. Feed this information into monthly learning.</p>	Policy and Performance Officer, Customer Services Manager	By end of June 2024

Service requests	Improve recording, reporting and monitoring of service requests - expressions of dissatisfaction which do not meet the threshold of a formal complaint	Policy and Performance Officer, Service Managers	By the end of July 2024
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