



# Annual Complaints Report 2023-2024

## Details

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Audience	Housing SLT
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Appendices	1 – views from various Heads of Service (below main report)

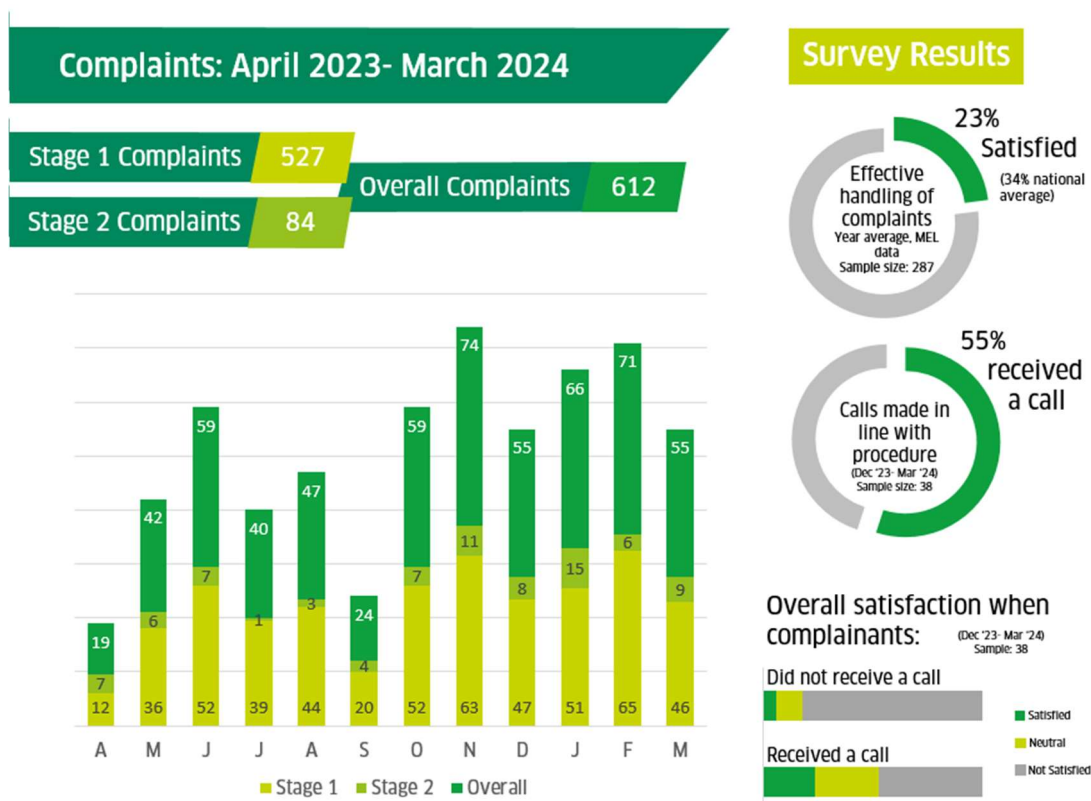
## Purpose

This report will explore the Housing & Property Service's complaints handling performance from **1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024** and the associated residents' satisfaction.

We have reviewed complaints handling within the department and compared this to the previous year. This has allowed us to identify lessons learnt and the improvements which have been implemented, as well as informing plans for further improvement in the coming year.

A summary of this report will be made available for residents via the Tenants & Leaseholders Annual Report.

## Annual Overview



## Changes in the sector and our approach

The Complaint Handling Code became statutory on 1 April 2024, meaning that **landlords are obliged by law to follow its requirements**. The aims are to ensure that the complaints handling process is consistent, accessible and allows for efficient and timely investigation and response to complaints.

Over the last year we have been preparing for the new code. To do so, we have assessed our previous approach to complaint handling and completed a new complaints self-assessment to focus our efforts to ensure compliance. This led to the Complaints Team developing an update to our policy, which is currently in the approvals process and is expected to be in force at the end of June 2024.

Teams within the department have reviewed the complaints they have received and have recorded lessons learned and associated service improvements. This has led to updated policies, training delivered, and procedures updated. We have also asked residents what they think of our complaints process and have used this to help inform service improvements. A Complaints Bootcamp (focus group) has been planned for May 2024 to allow us to review this year's performance and deep dive into our processes to prioritise what is important to service users.

## Lessons learned from the sector

It is also important to learn from the mistakes of others, and there is a wealth of material provided by the Ombudsman, other social landlords and sector bodies. Several highlights are recorded below:

### **Complaint response times**

A quarterly report by the Housing Ombudsman in June 2023 found that “where landlords did have a good reason for extending the time it needs to file a response, this was often not being communicated clearly or consistently. Often, the landlord said it was extending but not informing the resident as to why and doing so at the last minute, eroding trust with the resident.”

We reminded internal teams of the importance of continued open communication with complainants and the central complaints team offer a second layer of assurance. We rarely want to extend a deadline, but when it is necessary to properly respond and address all concerns, we will speak to the tenant, explain our position, and request a jointly agreed extension and new response date. During 2023 we produced a template for this to help ensure our approach is consistent. In addition, bespoke online complaints handling training is being developed internally to ensure that all staff know what is expected to effectively handle complaints.

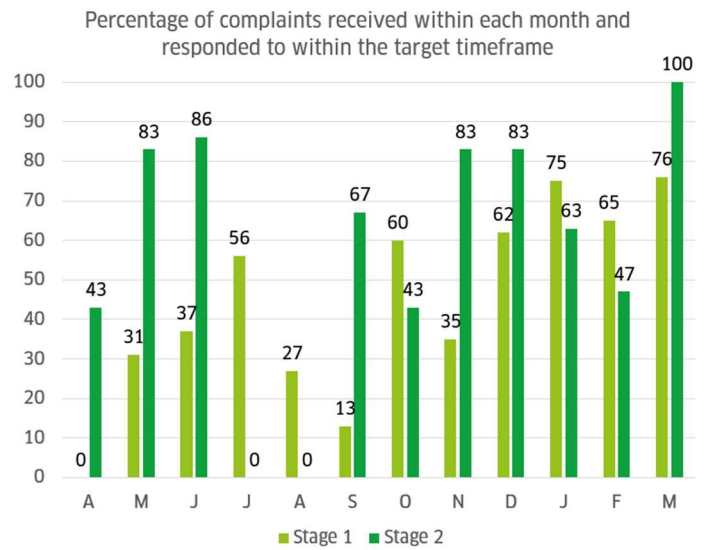
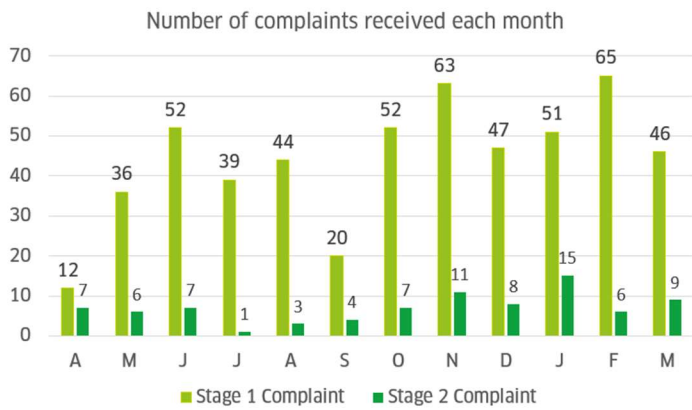
### **Poor communication and ongoing repair issues**

The Housing Ombudsman published a report in February 2023 highlighting the repairs service and complaint handling failures of Southwark Council (towards the end of 2022 and into early 2023). A tenant had repeatedly complained about issues with her heating, which was affecting her daughter’s medical condition. The council did not properly fix the issue even though several visits took place. They also missed an appointment. The council did not keep the complainant updated and did not properly fix the issues even though a complaint was raised, and the tenant requested for it to be escalated to the next stage of the complaints process.

The excellent delivery of repairs is a sector wide issue. We have worked hard with our repair’s contractor over this period and co-created a service improvement plan. The focus is to ensure a robust systemic response to ensure all repairs are managed and monitored appropriately. In addition, during Q4 a new customer engagement platform CX-Feedback was purchased and allows for automated transactional surveys for all completed repairs.

# Complaints data

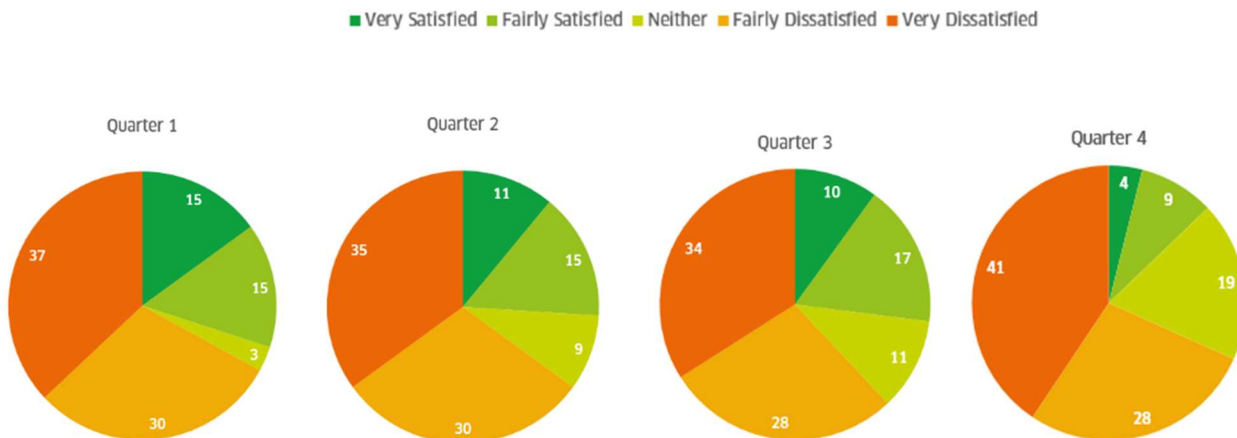
1 April 2023- 31 March 2024



## Our Tenant Satisfaction Measures on Complaint handling - Perception Data

How satisfied are residents with DBCs approach to complaints handling?

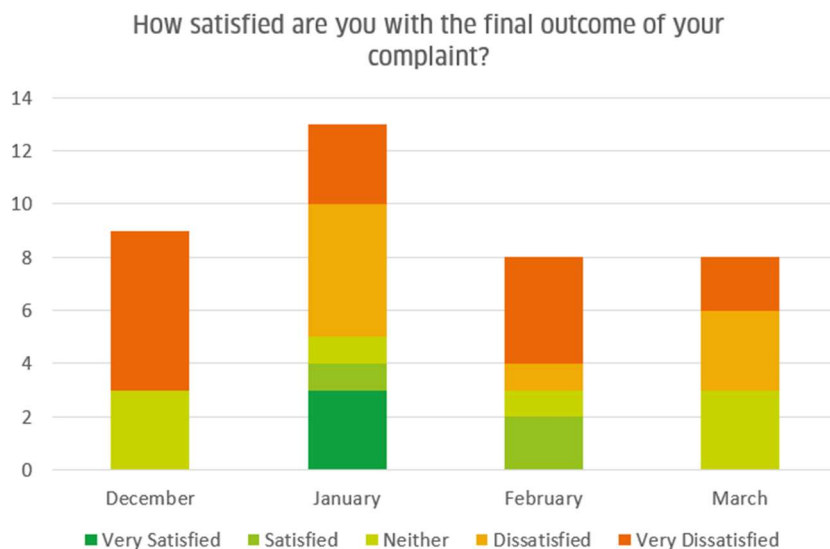
Total sample size: 406



Annual Average

## Survey data

December 2023- March 2024



Overall satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint

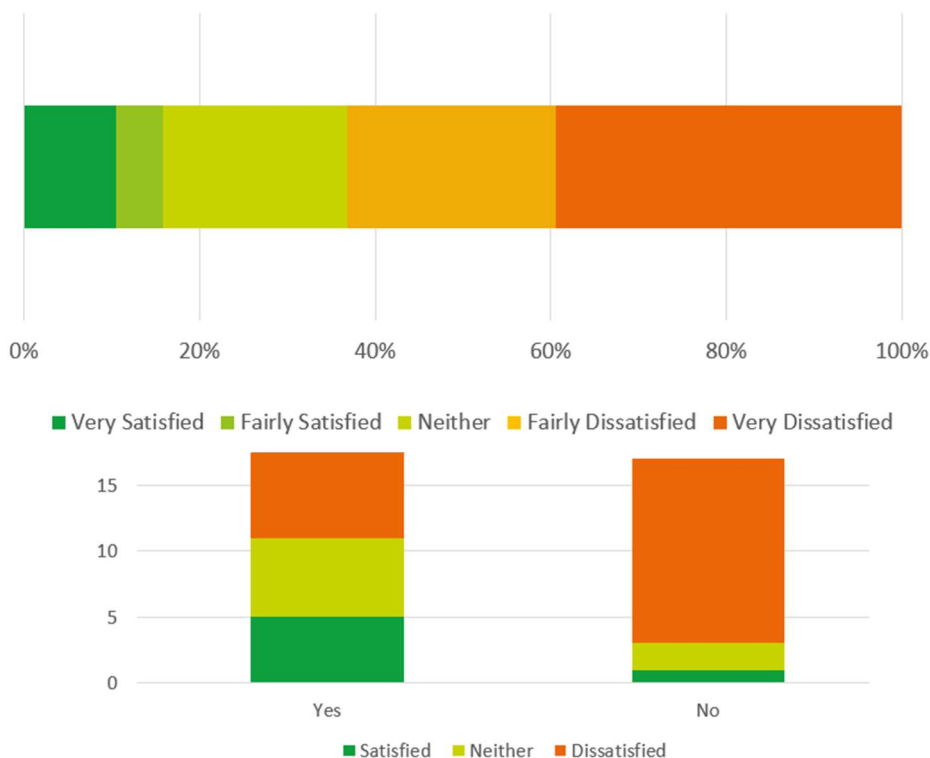
Call-backs in line with policy and associated levels of satisfaction

Customer satisfaction that “staff do what they say they will”

Sample size: 38

How satisfied are you that staff do what they say they will?

Most survey respondents were more satisfied with the outcome of their complaint when they have received a call back. This is likely because the responding officer is more aware of exactly what the issues are, and the complainant feels listened to.



Sample size: 38

This data tells us that we need to be clearer in how we communicate next steps and promises to our residents. It is important to ensure a consistent approach so that residents' expectations are met, and the service is equitable. This is even more important for serious complaints, such as those relating to compliance issues.

We need to ensure that next steps are recorded, tracked, and followed through to prevent further escalation of the complaint. This workflow is being built into the new complaints module of the digital platform going live in the summer 24.

Qualitative feedback

Positive -

"An officer rang me (she is a credit to her parents) she was kind - her listening skills were exemplary- she kept to her word and after 12 days of not being able to use my kitchen sink or washing machine, she had Osborne here pronto (and Scott from Osborne should be cloned! Polite, professional, and problem sorted excellently)"

- Compliment from a complainant.

During the complaints review we have looked at the quality of responses sent out from Heads of Service and managers. Special mention must be given to both Kevin Clinton and Steven Cooper for the quality of letters sent out from their service area. In most of their cases, all issues raised by the complainant are addressed and the responses are written to a high standard, using clear and concise language, within the allocated timescales.

"Personally, I was pleased in all areas listed above, but I would suggest a speedier outcome to any findings either positive or negative"

- Feedback from a complainant

"I wrote twice and neither replies answer my question. If it had **been answered properly** the first time, then I would not be required to write a 2nd time and I would have had an answer."

- Feedback from a complainant

"Your process is a joke! Ticking boxes is all that matters, and the public's opinion is clearly not valued or respected. Asking retrospectively what could be done better should not take precedence over dealing with complaints in real-time and actually resolving complaints".

- Feedback from a complainant

## Key take-aways

- Residents want to receive a call about their complaint. Those who do, tend to be happier with the outcome.
- Residents are often told about “next steps” in their complaint response. These were not always followed through which understandably leads to a negative overall perception of the complaints process and escalation.
- Most residents are not satisfied with the overall outcome of their complaint. Calling complainants and following through on actions promised within the response will significantly improve overall satisfaction, as will delivering exactly what we said.

## Escalations to Stage 2

### **Why are complaints escalated to Stage 2?**

Typically, people escalate their complaint if they are not happy with the overall outcome, though there are other reasons. We have seen complaints escalated when actions promised at Stage 1 have not been followed through, but also when a complaint has been misinterpreted - this is why it is so important to call complainants so that any issues can be clarified prior to an investigation and response being issued.

## Ombudsman

We have received three Ombudsman determinations in the last year - all three findings were against DBC (in the previous financial year we received four determinations, two for and two against).

The determinations against DBC in 23/24 across the three cases were classified as maladministration regarding:

- Recording keeping
- Complaint handling
- Handling reports of repairs
- Handling repairs
- Renewal works

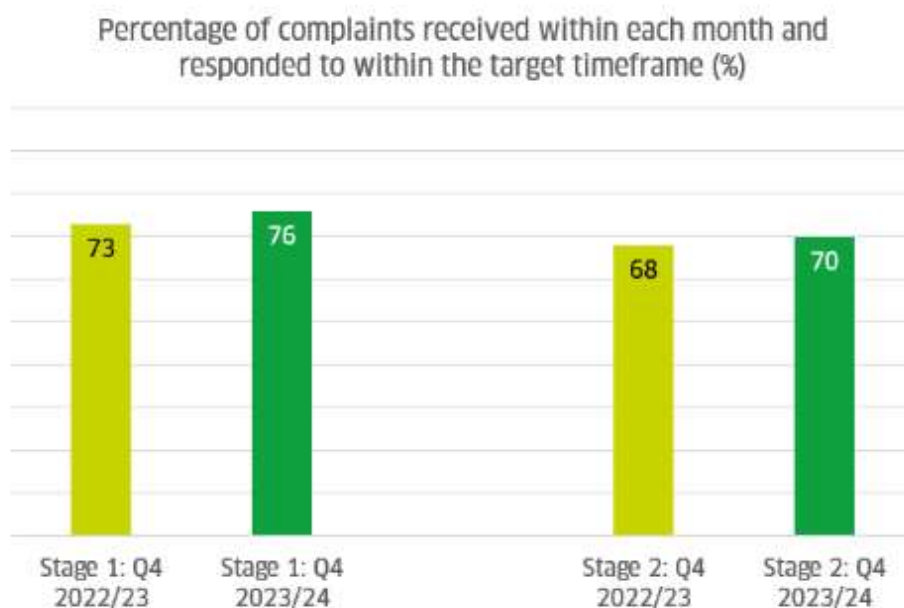
The determinations include a variety of “Orders” and “Recommendations”. The complaints team leads on the coordination of the delivery of these and can provide further information if required.

To improve the overall management of Ombudsman cases, a summary of any ongoing cases will be provided in the quarterly Performance & Tenants’ Voice report (which has an

approval process ending at Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee). In addition, they will be tracked operationally at HSLT every month with the regular complaints report.

## Comparison: Complaint response rates 2022/23 compared to 2023/24

There is improvement in the handling of complaints. At Quarter 4 (2022/23), the percentage for Stage 1 complaints responded to on time was **73%** and for Stage 2 complaints **68%**. The current levels at Quarter 4 (2023/24) are **76%** and **70%** respectively. This is a fair improvement on last year, but clearly more work to do.



## Lessons Learnt

### **[Interim] Head of Strategy, Quality and Assurance Head of Service**

This stage 2 complaint related to a 5kWh air-source heat pump which had been installed at a 3-bedroom property. The tenant reported the heat pump was undersized and therefore not keeping the house warm. Following the investigation, it was discovered that the tenant had switched it off because he felt the heat pump was not adequate. The installer had provided 3<sup>rd</sup> party assurance that the pump would be sufficient for the property but felt the problem was the tenant not always keeping it on, as recommended. As a result of this complaint, our new heating contactors are instructed to review the insulation and report back. Their findings will help shape our approach going forwards with any future installations or replacements of such units. In the meantime, the tenant was given compensation to cover their electric costs while the system is left on 24/7 while this review takes place. If it proves to be an under-sized heat pump, this one will be replaced, and all future installs / replacements will be upgraded accordingly.



### **Private Sector Housing Manager**

The Private Sector Housing team have not received any formal complaints this year, but they have received service requests. The team will be looking to better promote their services and online reporting systems so that residents can raise queries more efficiently than making a service request via the complaints system. This will also save Officer time when reclassifying the complaint as a service request on our complaints system.

### **Temporary Accommodation Manager**

Temporary Accommodation have received several complaints this year, from which lessons have been learned. An example of this is when someone complained that they hadn't heard back from their Homeless Prevention Officer. Looking into this case, the team learned that processes aren't always well explained, which can lead to feelings of uncertainty and distress from those using our services. As a result of this case, the team have looked at how Officers have been communicating with service users and reinforced this in 121s. In addition, teams have been reminded about the importance of keeping in contact with tenants and providing regular updates. This has been further reinforced via a review of ways of working in the team and reprofiling of some roles.

Another example is when a tenant felt bullied by a neighbour and the Council. The team manager looked at how the actions of Temporary Accommodation Officers might have caused the tenant to feel this way. They also contacted the person who was complained about, giving them the chance to explain the situation from their perspective. Because of this complaint we have carried out additional team training and open discussions to help improve how we investigate reports of ASB and noise complaints.

### **Head of Safe Homes**

The Safe Homes Team receive a variety of complaints each year. A common issue raised is concerns around the level of communication received from operatives. The team have investigated and raised this with the contractor and have requested that they inform tenants as soon as possible if an appointment needs to be delayed or rescheduled. This will be more closely monitored in the future.

Some complaints have been raised about a lack of out-of-hours attendance. The reason for a non-attendance can be because of what has been reported not being classed as an out of hours response and would be attended the next working day. However, in some cases this may also be because of the contractors' call centre incorrectly escalating calls. The Safe Homes team have raised this directly with the contractor who will closely monitor this issue going forward.

### **Head of Asset Management**

This team are responsible for repairs and planned works, and due to the nature of their role this part of the service receives the most complaints. Earlier in the year it was identified that not all issues raised in complaints were being responded to as part of the complaint response. To resolve this, the team now bullet point each issue individually and respond to each specific point within the overall complaint response.

Residents have complained about agreed works not being completed. The team are looking into ways to improve the delivery of follow-on actions and are currently exploring software options to help achieve this goal. To help improve efficiency, a review is underway focused on the capacity of our surveyors and how they can utilise technology to improve efficiency and reduce human errors.

The Planned Works team have received complaints about a lack of communication surrounding kitchen and bathroom refits. Cardo, our contractor, have been asked to send residents daily updates while works are carried out at their homes. Similarly, tenants have reported that they don't have enough information about what works like these will entail before they start. To provide more information, Cardo have been asked to develop a handout with photos of different stages of the works, providing a guide for residents as to what they can expect from the process. There will also be an increased presence of the resident liaison team whilst works are ongoing.

### **Cleaning Services Manager**

The Cleaning Service have implemented lessons learned over the last year and have seen a positive impact on the number of complaints they now receive.

Some of the things the team have done to investigate and learn from their complaints include:

1. For 90% of all complaints, the tenants were visited - this gave tenants further opportunity to discuss their concerns and seek reassurance. The officer in attendance was able to check the actual concern but also deal with any other issues which may arise during the visit (sometimes these were not connected to the actual complaint). Tenants felt listened to and reassured that we were taking the complaint seriously. Whilst visiting every complainant may not always be possible, this approach continues to provide us with invaluable insight for areas where we need to improve or maintain.
2. The team have created and implemented ad hoc and regular spot checks and inspections.
3. Where tenants didn't like the smell of certain cleaning products, or the results were not what we expected, the team have changed the cleaning chemicals used.
4. Extra training for staff.

5. Where we had genuine concern or complaints, these were addressed specifically with the members of staff carrying out the duties and post checks were carried out to ensure that the expected standards were maintained.
6. A time and motion analysis was carried out to understand workload and staffing. This has resulted in an increase in staffing, change in rota/schedule and identified further work to be undertaken, e.g. an options appraisal about the future of the service.
7. The Cleaning team have also developed closer and coordinated working with other internal teams. For example, persistent areas of fly tipping were included on regular estate inspection visits by the Tenancy Management team, and they continue to work with the Property team, to vary schedules around planned and scheduled work which could impact on the expected standard of cleaning. This is further supported by a fly-tipping pilot, which will inform the future delivery of this activity with the aim of improving efficiency and outcomes for residents.
8. The team is also reviewing the cleaning specifications as a result and will engage with our tenants and leaseholders to develop the specification.

## Petitions

Two formal petitions have been received during the 2023/24 period. These are recorded alongside complaints as they demonstrate clear dissatisfaction with services provided. The two related to a new-build development and homelessness.

### St Margarets Way

This related to disruption caused by the operational management of a development site. The Council facilitated mediation between the petitioners and contractor to find many practical solutions to the issues raised:

- Additional signage installed to prevent vehicles going wrong way
- More due diligence on lorries undertaken to avoid the school drop off and pick up times 8-9am and 3:15 – 4:15pm
- Monthly drop-in meetings agreed for neighbours and regular newsletters
- Site gates changed to only open from 7:30am

The learning will be taken into future developments undertaken by the Council.

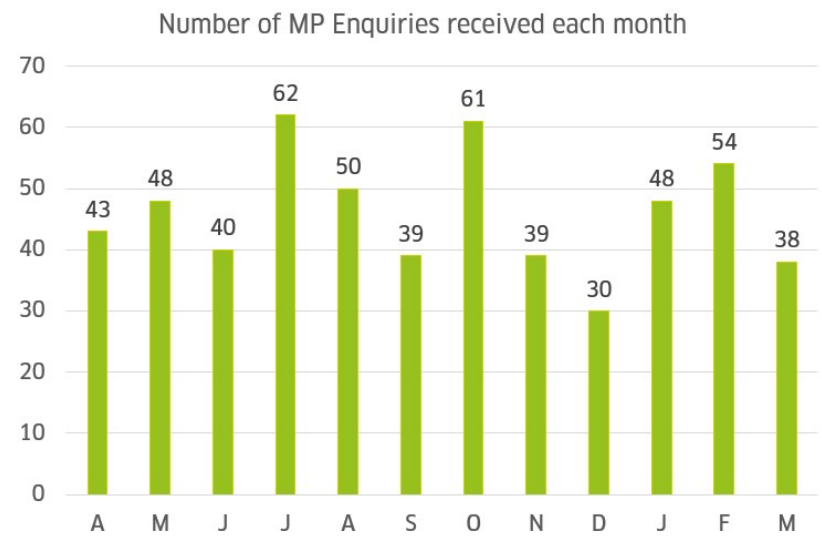
### Homelessness

This related to rough sleepers in a local neighbourhood causing perceived anti-social behaviour to other residents. We deployed an outreach team to engage with the rough sleepers and provided a combination of both support and enforcement action to alleviate the issues. The support related to help with accommodation and substance misuse.

This reinforced the benefit of our strategic partnership with the charity 'Decorum Emergency Night Shelter' who have a specialist team that really added value dealing with this matter.

## MP Enquiries

The Housing service has received 552 MP Enquiries in 2023/24. The highest number of enquiries were received in July, closely followed by October. December received the lowest number of enquiries.



We will begin recording “lessons learned” for MP Enquiries during the current financial year and will include data for MP Enquiries in our quarterly tenants’ voice reports. Going forwards, we will look at MP Enquires in more detail to determine how many are complaints compared to more general enquires or service requests.

## Disrepair

Disrepair is clearly a serious form of dissatisfaction. In the financial year 2023/24 we have had 36 new disrepair cases, and 39 carried over from the previous year. 11 cases have been closed and there are 64 cases currently open.

We have recently employed an internal solicitor to focus on improving processes relating to dis-repair case to embed learning and improve process.

## Improvements Undertaken

### Transactional surveys

We have rolled out monthly transactional satisfaction surveys for tenants who have made complaints about the service. This gives each complainant a chance to tell us about their experience. The survey gathers data relating to overall satisfaction as well as checking if procedure has been followed- for example has each complainant received a call as part of their complaint investigation.

We have recently purchased a new system, CX Feedback, and going forward this will house and run the transactional surveys allowing for real time data collection/analysis and saving Officer time and an improved user experience. In addition, many of the key surveys will be automated.

### **Quality audit on complaint responses**

We have implemented quality audits on complaint responses from the teams. Each month we review several complaint responses to monitor the quality and identify any areas of concerns or trends. We have found that most complaint responses are well written being easy to understand, address all areas of concern, and clarify next steps. Our view of the quality is scheduled to be tested with residents in Q1 (24/25).

We will continue to spot check responses and will raise any concerns identified in our monthly complaints report.

### **Improved monthly reporting to HSLT**

A monthly complaints report is reported to HSLT. Since starting this in in December, we have made several amendments to the report to make it more comprehensive and insightful. These reports highlight important feedback from complainants, including levels of satisfaction, whether “staff do what they say they will”, as well as including an open comments section. Lessons learned are included at the end of these reports.

The data from the SQA team is included alongside a corporate complaints report.

### **Complaints Co-ordinator**

To help improve complaint handling and responses, a Disrepair and Complaints Co-ordinator has been hired within the property repairs team. This team member has had a positive impact on complaint responses.

### **Bespoke complaints training for Housing**

A new course is being finalised and will launch shortly on DORIS (DBC’s online training platform for staff). This course will be made mandatory for all staff in Housing so that everyone knows how to handle complaints and why they are so important. The course will

explain why each case must be treated seriously, following our procedure and the requirements set out in the Complaint Handling Code.

This course has been jointly developed by the Complaints and the SQA Teams.

### **Compensation policy has been approved - more consistent approach**

A new compensation policy has been approved. This will help us to achieve a more consistent approach when considering compensation for complaints where something has gone seriously wrong, and a financial contribution is needed to help put things right.

In the year 2023/24, we paid out £44,287.68 in compensation for a total of 36 cases. This averages to £1,230.21 per person. However, some were statutory payments.

- One payment of £6,005.89 was made to someone as a home loss payment (a statutory payment to compensate people for the distress and inconvenience of having to move home permanently).
- A total of £33,376.05 was split across 27 payments as compensation for damaged furniture and / or disrepair.
- A further £4,905.74 was split between payments to 8 residents for compensation linked to repairs.

### **Updated complaints self-assessment**

We have updated our complaints self-assessment following the new Ombudsman complaints handling code. In doing so, we have identified some areas for improvement. These updates are now on our [corporate website](#).

### **Stage 2 Complaints are kept in Housing & Property Services Dept**

Historically, all stage 2 complaints were assigned to a service area outside of the one responsible for the stage 1 complaint. The aim of this was to ensure that the complainant received an independent review of the initial complaint. Having listened to teams, we have found that this resulted in stage 2 complaints taking longer to resolve as the person investigating at stage 2 did not usually have enough technical knowledge of the issue to investigate and respond independently. As a result, we now keep all stage 2 complaints about Housing and Property Services, within that department. This means that the people handling the case can provide a more specialised response in a quicker time frame.

Looking at response times in quarter four for 2022/23 and 2023/24, we can see that they have improved by 2%. This is not huge; however the response times have improved significantly during the year up to Q4 (63% in January, 47% in February, and 100% responded to on time in March).

## **Feedback on keeping stage 2 Housing complaints within Housing, from non- Housing Heads of Service:**

We now keep all Housing Stage 2 complaints within the directorate. We have asked Heads of Service for some feedback about how they think this is working which can be seen in Appendix 1. In summary:

- Workload has shifted from the corporate heads of service to those in Housing and Property Services. This is in direct correlation with where complaints originate from.
- Performance has showed moderate improvements over the period.
- Non-housing managers feel the benefit of not needing to learn the technical aspects of the housing teams.
- and felt this made better use of their time and the time of the relevant Head of Service from Housing & Property Services, who had to be consulted with to fully understand the issues.
- Resource appears to be an issue in certain areas of Housing & Property Services.

There is still the opportunity for Stage 2 complaints to stay within the actual team where the Stage 1 originated as this could help make teams more accountable for performance and incentivised to find lasting solutions. This aspect will be discussed at HSLT during Q1 24/25 and be part of the HTIP Target Operating Model review.

## **Working with tenants to improve our services: Highlights -**

- We carried our engagement events at high-rise blocks to help raise awareness of the Building Safety Act and its real-life implications. These led to bespoke action plans for the buildings.
- 30 Residents at Grovehill have directly influenced the creation of an estate improvement plan and this is being developed into a template to help improve engagement on other estates.
- The Tenant and Leaseholder committee (TLC) has helped with the approach to implement CX-Feedback. They requested more transactional data and challenged the approach of only surveying at the end of a process and not during.
- The Tenants Improvement Grant (TIG) is prioritised by residents and funded a community garden project at the Planets. They also agreed to re-brand as 'Tenant Improvement Group' – still TIG.
- TPAS are helping re-engineer resident engagement at the Council. Residents are at the heart of the approach.

## Next Steps

### **New Complaints System**

A digital platform has been purchased and will be launching this year, with Complaints embedded in to phase 1. The system will help to record data more accurately as information won't need to be recorded in multiple locations (such as on the current complaints system and various spreadsheets) and will ensure that officer time is saved as some admin work will be eliminated from the current complaints handling process.

Another benefit of this new system will be improved data visibility. At the moment, we are not able to easily filter complaints by the subcategories of complaints made by tenants or those made by leaseholders. The new system will enable us to do this, allowing for more specific data to be drawn out very quickly.

### **Complaints Bootcamp**

A complaints bootcamp is being arranged and will take place in May 2024. This will involve residents coming into the Forum and spending some time working with the SQA team to tell us what they think about complaints.

We will add and findings from this session to an action plan, helping us to continue to move complaints improvement works forward.

A similar bootcamp was run by the SQA team at the end of 2021, with a focus on our repair's contractor. A key issue that was identified was poor communication surrounding cancelled appointments. This information was fed into an improvement plan and resulted in a significant decrease in complaints about this issue, we hope that the upcoming Complaints Bootcamp will result in similar success.

### **Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI)**

Work is underway using CX-Feedback to improve our base EDI information held on tenants and leaseholders. Given it links directly to our housing management system, it has provided clarity around what information is and isn't held.

This will lead to greater insight into the satisfaction levels of various cohorts of our customer base during 24/25.

## Conclusion

We have learned a huge amount from complaints during this period. Service improvements have been made, and further actions are planned.

Resident satisfaction is linked to service and performance improvements, and this absolutely remains a key area of focus.



We are working towards being in a better position in relation to the management of complaints and will work closely with residents to help facilitate this (as detailed within this report).

## Appendix 1

Feedback received from Heads of Service involved with Stage 2 complaints:

### **Head of Property Services**

“It feels like there is an increasing amount of Stage 2 complaints and customers have the opportunity to request a stage 2 review whether that is appropriate or not which has a negative impact on the resource of those Heads of Services who are allocated to deal with Stage 2 reviews of other service area’s stage 1 complaints.”

### **Head of Commercial Housing Contracts**

“My team don’t interact directly with the public so don’t receive any stage 1 complaints but do receive stage 2s. On more than one occasion, I have dealt with customers who suffer from mental health issues. I have found it difficult to support these tenants from a mental health perspective and at times, there needs to be better signposting/support for Heads of Service to direct tenants should they need more support than merely dealing with the complaint.

In the case of 2 complaints, I have had to remain involved once the complaint has been dealt with, which takes up a considerable amount of time. I think there should be a tracker when this happens as it has at times meant I was dealing with 4 complaints, and I am sure I am not the only one in this position.”

### **Head of Digital**

“I have found the numbers of complaints allocated to me since this decision has reduced significantly. Therefore, it has had a significant positive impact on my workload.”

### **Head of Financial Services**

“I was happy to deal with Stage 2 housing complaints and can see how having a non–housing person lead on these introduced some objectivity into a stage 2. However, housing colleagues did have to spend a fair bit of time bringing me up to speed on technical/policy matters which did i) make me feel like their time could be better spent on something else and ii) make me wonder if I was the best person to advocate for the person making the complaint- would someone with more service knowledge be better able to challenge decisions?”

Overall, I think the process as it stands now gives a better outcome for the customer and makes best use of officer time.”

### **Head of Development Management**

“I dealt with four Housing Stage 2 complaints between March and October 2023. These were difficult for me because I did not know the area, how the teams within Housing were structured, or

their responsibilities. I am sure that it took me longer than a senior Officer in Housing to complete the Stage 2 responses for this reason.

On the other hand I also felt that because I was coming at the subject matter completely cold I did not have any preconceptions of the correct way of doing things, and I felt that not knowing the subject area meant that I had to drill deeper into the complaint and for one of them actually reached a resolution that Housing were not originally prepared to accept (looking at a shower fault). As such I can see both pros and cons of the new approach.

As Housing have a proportionally large number of complaints, not picking up Housing Stage 2s has certainly made my overall workload easier.”

### **Head of Environmental and Community Protection**

“I think specific knowledge applies to all technical areas of the council, so some of the Heads of Service (HOS) are not equipped to respond and end up almost entirely relying on Team Management or Relevant HOS for a response, others put their own spin on it and interpret specialisms incorrectly.

I personally think it would be better if Assistant Directors (AD's) or HOS from individual areas did their own complaints. This workload could then be counteracted by the back office HOS/ADs doing the HR investigations.”