

Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report 2023/24

Summary

Complaints occur when things go wrong, however an effective complaints process enables the Group to learn from issues that arise and then to improve its services as well as provide appropriate and effective redress. Complaint handling is an important strategic role for any organisation, providing vital information and insight into performance, culture and service improvements.

As part of its compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Code, the Group is required to publish annually its performance in respect of complaints as well as service improvements that have arisen from learning from complaints. The sections within the report cover the following areas:

- Our Stage One performance
- Our Stage Two performance
- Benchmarking and Compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code
- Details of any 'refused' complaints
- Customer Satisfaction
- Overall learning themes from our complaints and what we've done to enhance our services using the customer voice.

Themes arising from complaints

The Group acknowledges that its complaints performance has not been at a level that it would expect or want for its customers. High volumes of complaints over the financial year 2023/24 has meant that performance in complaint handling has also not been at a level that the Group would want and expect.

Challenges with the Group's repairs contractors has proven to be the largest source of complaints with over 75% of complaints either being in respect of a repair or repair related. This has also been compounded by the backlog of repairs which has increased complaints. Issues in respect of grounds maintenance and heating have also seen high levels of complaints.

The Group has worked hard and focussed upon improving its performance in these areas; more details are provided later in the report in respect of the learning and changes that have been made to services.

Complaints performance

Under the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Code, a complaint is defined as:

‘An expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the organisation, its own staff, or those acting on its behalf, affecting an individual resident or group of residents.’

Stage 1 complaints

As the table below highlights, we received 2,518 Stage 1 complaints in 2023/24, which is an increase of 279 complaints when compared to the previous year. The figure includes complaints carried over from the previous year.

COMPLAINTS	Year End 2022/2023	QTR 1	QTR 2	QTR 3	QTR 4	YTD 2023/2024
Formal Investigation/ Stage 1 complaints						
No. received in the period	2239	729	563	603	623	2518
No Resolved	1572	764	948	498	739	2949
Total no Resolved in agreed timescales (including extensions)	859	188	272	233	345	1038
Total % of complaints resolved within timescale (may include extension of time)	54.6%	24.6%	28.7%	46.8%	46.7%	35.2%
% upheld in the Period	84.7%	82.6%	82.7%	73.3%	81.3%	80.7%

We resolved 35.2% of the Stage 1 complaints within timescale against the service level agreement response time documented within the Complaint Handling Code, with the remaining complaints extended with our customers to give us additional time to address the issues raised in their complaint and to provide a resolution.

Of all Stage 1 complaints, we upheld 80.7% of these, demonstrating an acceptance of a service failure and a subsequent opportunity for us to learn and put things right to prevent reoccurring complaints.

Given the volume of complaints in the year, the Group automatically upheld complaints to Stage 2 given challenges with the timescales to resolve them. As levels are now at a more manageable level, the number of upheld complaints is expected to reduce. The Group is already seeing this in the year 2024/25.

Stage 2 complaints

As the table below highlights, we received 602 Stage 2 complaints in 2023/24, which is an increase of 295 complaints when compared to the previous year.

COMPLAINTS	Year End 2022/2023	QTR 1	QTR 2	QTR 3	QTR 4	YTD 2023/2024
Stage 2 complaints						
No. received in the period	307	101	130	192	179	602
No. Resolved	264	100	122	162	187	571
Total no Resolved in agreed timescales (including extensions)	103	39	49	69	73	230
Total % of complaints resolved within timescale (may include extension of time)	33.23%	39.0%	40.2%	42.6%	39.0%	40.3%
% of Complaints that are Stage 2	4.82%	5.5%	8.4%	11.1%	9.3%	8.6%
% upheld in the Period		67.0%	69.7%	81.5%	69.0%	72.3%

We resolved 40.3% of the Stage 2 complaints within timescale against the service level agreement response time documented within the Complaint Handling Code, with the remaining complaints extended with our customers to give us additional time to address the issues raised in their complaint and to provide a resolution.

Of all Stage 2 complaints, we upheld 72.3% of these, demonstrating an acceptance of a service failure and further opportunities following the Stage 1 complaint for us to learn and put things right.

Benchmarking and compliance

Findings of non-compliance with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code

The Housing Ombudsman has assessed 30 cases up to and including 31 March 2024 and has made 63 determinations against these cases. The Housing Ombudsman has made 9 determinations of non-compliance against the Code for the Group.

Tenant Satisfaction Measures

One of the areas in which the Group can benchmark itself is against other housing providers performance, by looking at the number of Stage 1 and Stage 2 formal complaints received during the month. This measure is part of the suite of Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs).

The Group's performance is detailed below:

Measure	Quartile 1	Median	Quartile 3	Longhurst (March 2024)
Formal Stage 1 & 2 complaints received (per 1,000 units)	2.44	4.13	6.70	10.98**
Percentage of Stage 1 & 2 complaints resolved within timescale (Housing Ombudsman)	100.0%	87.6%	66.7%	55.33%

*** full annualised figure for 23/24.*

As the table above highlights, Longhurst Group are receiving more complaints than the sector average benchmark in respect of complaints received per 1,000 properties. Although Longhurst Group are also underperforming in respect of the percentage of complaints closed within timescale, there has been a marked increase in comparison to the previous quarters. Quarter 3 saw 33% of complaints closed within timescale; quarter 4 saw an increase of 22% against that metric with 55.33% closed within timescale.

Refused complaints

The Group 'refused' 25 complaints in 2023/24, which is a very small percentage compared to all complaints received. It reflects that the Group ensures that customers are transitioned into the complaints procedure effectively. In all instances the reason why was clearly explained to the customer verbally and followed up by a letter confirming the refusal.

In the majority of cases, refused complaints were duplicated and had already been resolved. To improve understanding and transparency in this area, the Group will report upon the different categories of refused complaints going forward.

Customer satisfaction

The table below shows customer satisfaction with the Group's Complaints Service. This data is taken from customers who had made a complaint to the Group and were then contacted afterwards to rate their experience.

Satisfaction KPI's	2023-24 Q1	2023-24 Q2	2023-24 Q3	2023-24 Q4	Target
Complaint Handling	68%	65%	66%	66%	70%
Complaint Outcome	71%	66%	74%	53%	65%

Throughout the year, Longhurst Group have been slightly below the target of 70% of customers satisfied with the handling of their complaint, with an average percentage score of **66.25%** across the year.

For satisfaction in respect of the outcome of the complaint, an average of **66%** of customers stated that they were satisfied with the resolution provided, 1% above the target metric for the year.

Learning from complaints

The Group knows that learning from complaints and using the customer voice to improve our services when we have got things wrong is key to stopping complaints from re-occurring but also demonstrates to our customers that we listen and act on their feedback. Complaints are a vital piece of insight from our customers. As well as our own customers, we have responded to the recommendations with the Ombudsman's Spotlight reports such as the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) and Knowledge and Information reports.

As a result, we have made some significant changes to how we respond to and handle complaints, including significant investment in our systems. Learning and listening to customer feedback, we have:

Improved our complaints handling

- Upskilled our Customer Services Team to be able to resolve customer enquiries where there has been a service failure at first point of contact wherever possible.
- Enhanced our systems through significant investment so we can track the progress of the complaint from the moment it is logged to when it is fully resolved and who is responsible for keeping the customer informed. This enhances the single line of accountability.
- Reviewed and improved the relationship between the Complaints and Repairs Teams to reiterate ownership and empathy for all complaints, again improving accountability.
- Made material changes to the structure within the Complaints Team to meet the needs and demands of our customers, ensuring ownership and responsibility to resolve the complaint and keep the customer updated.

- Reengineered our policy, procedure and processes, where we have engaged and involved customers in mapping the 'customer journey'.
- Amended our complaints handling process so that our customers will deal with the same Complaints Resolution Officer for the duration of their Stage 1 complaint until it is resolved. Should the complaint be escalated to Stage 2, the customer will deal with the same Complaints Resolution Officer at that stage until their complaint is fully resolved. This will give a greater level of consistency and continuity for our customers who will know who is dealing with their complaint from start to finish.
- Updated the process for extending complaints, where by agreement needs to be given by the Operational Lead and the Team Leader before extension is approved.
- Amended the process for managing commitments so that the complaint handler and the operational lead have joint ownership of managing the action through to completion, ensuring ownership and excellent customer services.
- Developed an 'alert' on our housing management computer systems that lets our colleagues know when a customer has a live complaint. This means that our colleagues, such as our Housing Officers, are aware of any issues and are able to offer support when speaking to customers.

Following the publication of the Knowledge and Information report from the Ombudsman, we identified the following areas that we have strengthened to improve our approach:

- Tailored training sessions for colleagues in the use of our Housing System (Dynamics) and ensured learning was embedded across the Group.
- Specific communication on the importance of capturing key customer profile data and refreshing it, using an 'every contact counts' methodology.
- Launched a project to close any customer profile data gaps identified by proactively contacting customers to update their profile information.

Following the publication of the Housing Ombudsman's Spotlight Report on Noise – 'Time to be Heard', we have:

- Developed a new Anti-Social Behaviour and Neighbourhood Management Policy that specifically strengthens our approach to the management of noise as part of any ASB complaints. This policy was written in collaboration with customers and was informed by recommendations from the Ombudsman's report.
- Invested in greater functionality within the 'Noise App', a tool that our customers can download for free online and capture any instances of noise nuisance. This can then be sent directly to the Housing Team as evidence for ongoing noise nuisance cases.
- Updated our dedicated website page to make it clear how we manage instances of noise nuisance.
- Updated our Lettings Policy to ensure our position is clearer in terms of rehousing children in flats above a ground floor.

Below are examples of where we have listened to the customer voice, learned from our service failures and implemented service improvements to reduce the risk of repeat complaints.

We have:

Re-engineered our policies and processes

- Updated our policies, clearly outlining customer and Longhurst Group responsibilities in respect of trees.

- Overhauled our tenancy management processes to provide clearer explanations to our customers about any legal actions taken, time frames, etc. This will help manage our customer expectations and provide greater transparency.
- Invested in a utility broker service that will ensure that any meter debts are identified and cleared down when our homes become empty. This means that when our homes become ready to let again, they are not being delayed whilst meter issues are resolved. Importantly, it means that customers that have been allocated the home are not experiencing unnecessary delays.
- Reviewed and overhauled our stock condition survey forms to document non-standard structures and other additions to the property so we have a full 360-degree profile of our customer's home.

Improved the customer journey

- Introduced an emergency repairs reporting line through our Customer Access Centre main telephony number.
- Introduced an anti-social behaviour reporting line through our Customer Access Centre main telephony number.
- Updated and strengthened our procedures to ensure that no legal possession related documentation will be sent to customers ahead of any planned office closures.
- Agreed that all of our letters to customers have the name and job title of the person sending it and are signed, so if customers need to contact us, they know who they need to speak to. This will also strengthen accountability within teams.

Strengthened our people approach

- Introduced weekly 'Toolbox Talks' repairs and maintenance training for our frontline Customer Services Teams to support them in diagnosing repairs accurately when our customers report an issue.
- Developed a programme of mandatory customer care training for all of our colleagues.
- Reviewed the structures of our Property Services and Customer Services Teams to ensure we have the right people in the right roles in the business to deliver excellent services to our customers.

Strengthened our approach on damp and mould issues

As part of our ongoing learning actions in respect of damp and mould, we have also:

- In April 2023, launched the 'Staying Well in your Home' campaign where we surveyed customers to find out the extent of the problem. We received 1,180 responses in total, providing us with some great insight. As part of this awareness campaign 741 customers requested and were sent a humidity meter. We contacted all customers by telephone who had been identified as having damp and mould issues to discuss this and to book an assessment to carry out any subsequent works identified.
- Introduced a recorded message on our telephone lines between October to May encouraging customers to report any damp and mould issues.
- Reviewed our damp and mould leaflet with customers and considered how to make this accessible to those who can't access it online.
- Introduced mandatory training for all colleagues for damp and mould detection and diagnosis.
- Developed a clear damp and mould process in respect of response times for investigation alongside a housing management system process where all cases are

captured, recorded and monitored through to works being completed and closed to the customer's satisfaction.

- Establishing a comprehensive Group policy for Damp and Mould.

Current Performance as of 01 June 2024

The Group is committed to improving its performance in respect of complaints ensuring that customers not only receive an excellent experience when dealing with the Group but also that redress is made when things are not right. The Group has made significant improvements in complaint handling during the early part of 2024 and improvements are continuing through the year. At the end of March 2024, there were 429 open complaints and as of 1st June 2024, we had 279 open complaints; a significant reduction of 150.

The Group is committed to ensuring that its customers receive the highest levels of service and as such is working with independent organisations to test and review its complaints performance for the remainder of 2024/25.