

To: Housing and Homelessness Panel
Date: 05 December 2023
Report of: Head of Housing Services
Title of Report: Housing Complaint Handling Performance Q1 & Q2 2023-24

| Summary and recommendations | |
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| Purpose of report: | To inform Panel members on the Council's complaint handling performance in relation to the landlord function for Quarter 1 and Quarter 2, 2023-24. |
| Key decision: | No |
| Cabinet Member with responsibility: | Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing |
| Corporate Priority: | Support Thriving Communities |
| Policy Framework: | Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-2028 |
| Recommendation(s): That the Panel resolves to: | |
| 1. Note and comment on the report and agree any recommendations. | |

| Appendices | |
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| Appendix 1 | Complaint Handling Performance Tables |
| Appendix 2 | OCC Lessons Learned |
| Appendix 3 | ODS Lessons Learned |

Introduction and background

- At its meeting of 02 August 2023, the Housing and Homelessness Panel was provided with an update on complaint handling performance for the last two quarters of 2022-23. This report provides an update on performance for the first two quarters of 2023-24 (April to September 2023).

Summary

- Appendix 1 sets out the data on complaints for quarters one and two. Appendices 2 and 3 set out the lessons learned from OCC and ODS complaints respectively.

3. The total number of complaints received relating to the landlord function (OCC and ODS combined) was 109 in quarter one and 119 in quarter two.
4. Currently, we have three categories of decisions on complaints, “upheld”, “not upheld” and “partially upheld”. The partially upheld category will no longer be an option in the coming months following the Housing Ombudsman’s consultation on proposed changes to the Complaint Handling Code. Any “partially upheld” cases will be “upheld” going forward.
5. 60 out of 78 (77%) of OCC complaints were upheld or partially upheld and 111 out of 163 (68%) ODS complaints were upheld or partially upheld. 17 (10%) of complaints to ODS were reassigned to other service areas/functions, mainly OCC teams.
6. The main service areas complained about in OCC were Tenancy Management, Property Services and ASBIT. The main ODS complaints were relating to plumbers, carpenters, and planners, as well as joint complaints involving both ODS and Property Services. The key theme in OCC was the quality of service, while communication was the key theme in ODS. Both OCC and ODS have taken the learning and looked to improve areas of weakness.
7. OCC have been reviewing customer journeys with the tenants to better understand concerns and better manage expectations. Better record keeping, following up on communication and keeping in touch with tenants more regularly where there are complex issues have been key learning points improved upon. Tenancy Management have also been managing expectations of their availability through automated email responses and voicemail messages to explain that they are usually unable to take calls or respond to emails quickly because they are with other customers, directing callers to the Contact Centre. OCC are currently recruiting for a Customer Care and Complaint Manager to oversee all the landlord related complaints.
8. ODS have implemented Customer Service training and are providing better explanations to tenants where repairs have taken place. In person communications have been improved and Team Leaders are now required to take ownership of large works involving multiple trades or complex work. The Localz scheme is now providing real-time reminders and updates to tenants about appointments and operatives are now able to book follow-up appointments using their mobile devices (Versaa solution), as well as surveys and updating customer details on-site. ODS complaints regarding communication dropped to five in September, from an average of 12.6 in the preceding five months.

Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code Consultation

9. Throughout October and November, the Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman are each consulting on a single Complaint Handling Code for Local Authorities, very much aligned with the code that has been in place for the landlord function since April 2020. The proposed changes to the code relating to the handling of landlord function complaints are relatively minor clarifications in general, however compliance with the code is now a statutory requirement.

Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Failure Order

10. In July 2023, the Housing Ombudsman issued its first Complaint Handling Failure Order (CHFO) against Oxford City Council. The case in question was being handled by ODS however a request and then a reminder by the Ombudsman to send out a stage 2 complaint response was not followed and a CHFO was issued.
11. Analysis of the cause identified not just human error but single points of failure in the circulation of Ombudsman communications. Measures have now been put in place to auto-forward any communication from either Ombudsman service to several service managers and Heads of Service to increase awareness of a case if one does occur.
12. When the stage 2 response was sent out, the complaint itself was not upheld as the issue was with an electricity meter, which is the responsibility of the energy provider, not the Council. The CFHO has been published in the Housing Ombudsman's quarterly report on CFHOs.

Next Steps

13. With the Complaint Handling Code expected to be amended following the consultation, some minor changes will need to be implemented to our procedures, including ensuring that stage 1 complaints are responded to within 10 working days of receipt and removing the "partially upheld" option for complaint outcomes.
14. Complaints in ODS are managed through the Aareon QL system with appropriate workflow and PowerBi dashboards to ensure overall visibility of complaints, deadlines, and outcomes. OCC has decided that all complaints will now be managed through QL, and a corporate project is underway to implement the changes, extending the existing functionality to teams across the Council.
15. The new Customer Care and Complaints Manager, when appointed, will be tasked with ensuring that performance, case studies and lessons learned are constantly updated on the Council's website.
16. The quarter three and four performance report to this panel will include a comparison with the Q3 and Q4 reports from 2022-23.

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Background Papers: None

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