

To: Housing & Homelessness Panel
Date: 7 November 2024
Report of: Head of Housing Services
Title of Report: Housing Complaint Handling Performance (Q1 & Q2 2024/25)

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To provide an update on complaint handling performance for the Council's landlord function.
Key decision:	No
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities
Corporate Priority:	Good, Affordable Home, Well-Run Council
Policy Framework:	Housing, Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-28

Recommendation(s): That the Panel resolves to:
1. Note and comment on the content of the report.

Appendices
None

Introduction

1. At its meeting in October 2024, the Housing and Homelessness Panel considered the Annual Complaint Performance & Service Improvement Report 2023/24, which also set out the background to the Housing Ombudsman and its Code of Complaint Handling.
2. This report provides information on the performance of the Council's complaint handling relating to the landlord function for the first two quarters of 2024/25, in terms of the volume, outcomes and timeliness of the responses.
3. A further update on complaint handling and performance improvement will next be provided in the formal 2024/25 annual report.

Context

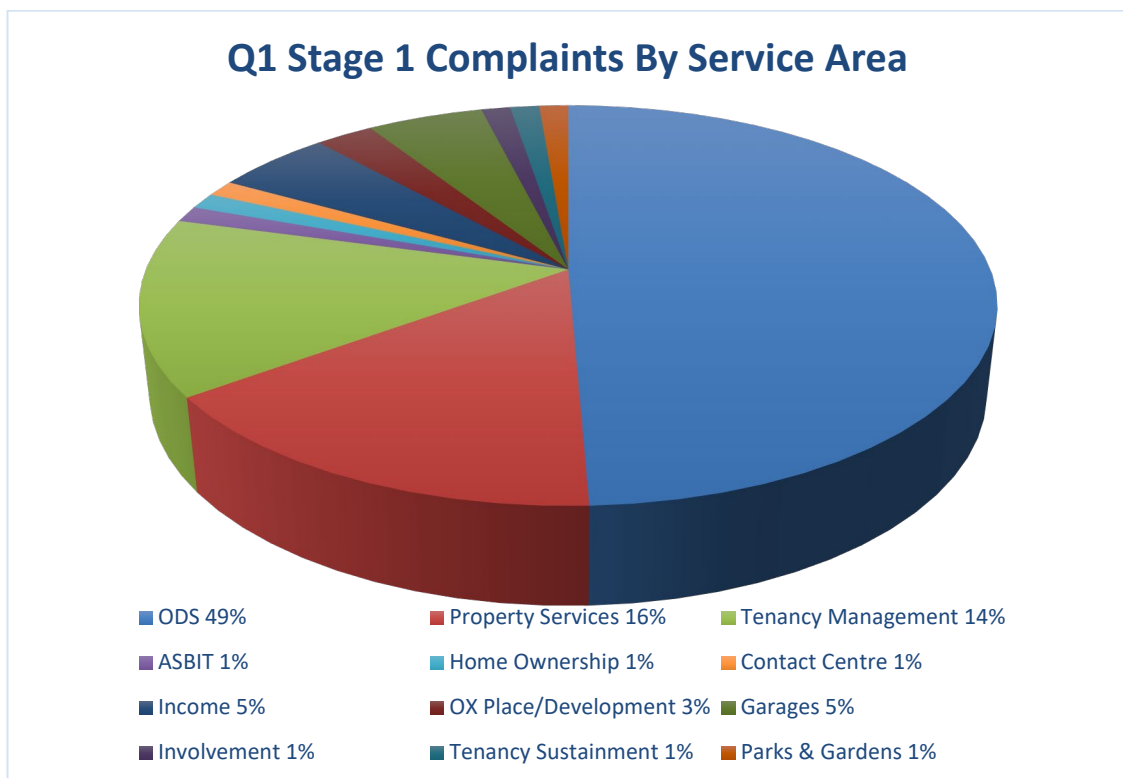
4. Both OCC and ODS handle a significant number of interactions with tenants and leaseholders over the course of a year, covering the Contact Centre, the Incomes team (rents), Tenancy Management, ASBIT, Sustainment, Estate Management, Planned Maintenance and day to day repairs.
5. Each year, ODS alone carry out over 34,000 repairs in tenants' homes and over 54,000 visits once compliance activities and planned maintenance works are included.
6. There have been changes within the Customer Care and Complaints team, with an officer leaving the organisation early in Q1 and their replacement starting in September. This temporary reduction in capacity has led to a backlog situation with stage 1 complaints which is being managed and reduced.

Stage 1 Complaints

Quarter 1 (1st April 2024 to 30th June 2024)

7. The table below sets out the number of complaints received and upheld by OCC and ODS respectively in Q1. Q1 2023/24 for OCC in brackets

Organisation	Received	Upheld
OCC	62 (29)	32
ODS	51	23
Total	120	55



8. Notes on Q1 data:

- Two of the 62 cases received by OCC were withdrawn.

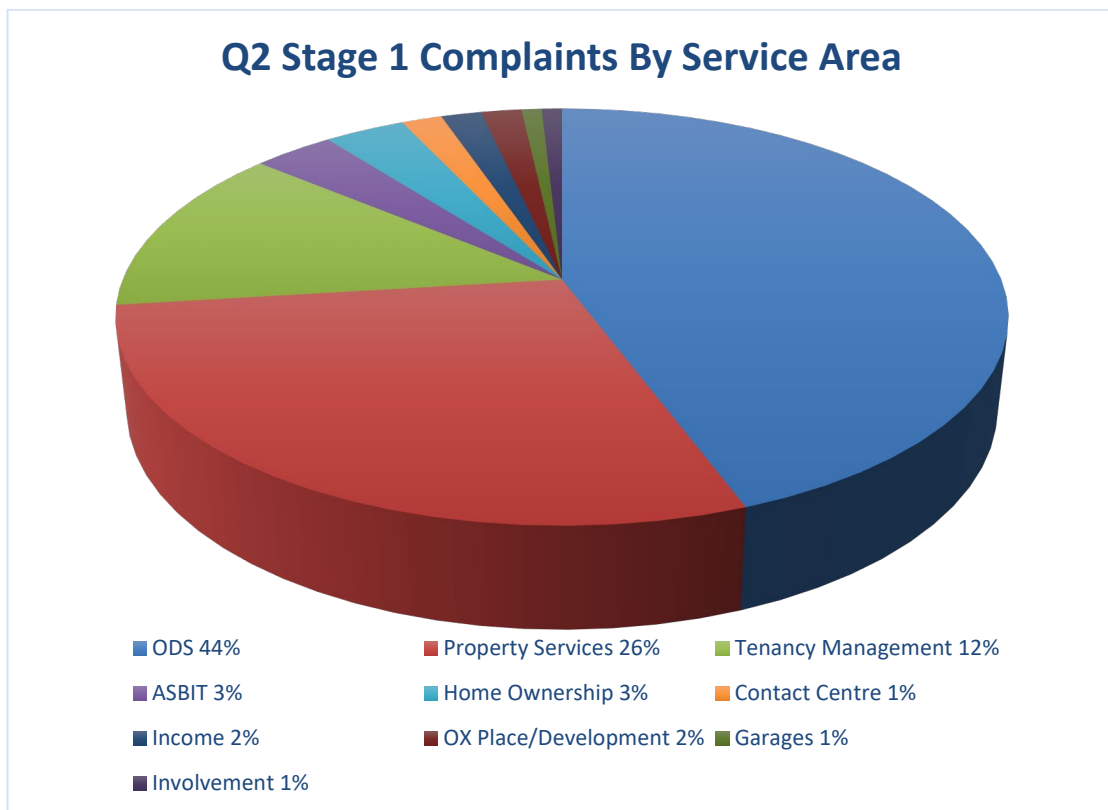
9. 48% of the cases handled by OCC were responded to within the prescribed timescale, as a result of the reduced capacity in the team.

- 79% of the cases handled by ODS were responded to within the prescribed timescale.
- Four cases received by ODS were subsequently referred to OCC.
- One ODS case was rejected as not meeting the criteria for a complaint.

Quarter 2 (1st July 2024 to 30th September 2024)

10. The table below sets out the number of complaints received and upheld by OCC and ODS respectively in Q2. Q2 2023/24 for OCC in brackets.

Organisation	Received	Upheld
OCC	31 (22)	6
ODS	37	27
Total	68	33



11. Notes on Q2 data:

- There are approximately 25 additional cases in the OCC backlog to be logged.
- Two cases were rejected as being service requests.
- One case was rejected because the issue occurred five years ago.
- One case was rejected as a duplicate.
- One case was rejected by ODS for not meeting the criteria of a complaint.

12. 16% of the cases handled by OCC were responded to within the prescribed timescale, again as a result of the reduced capacity in the team.

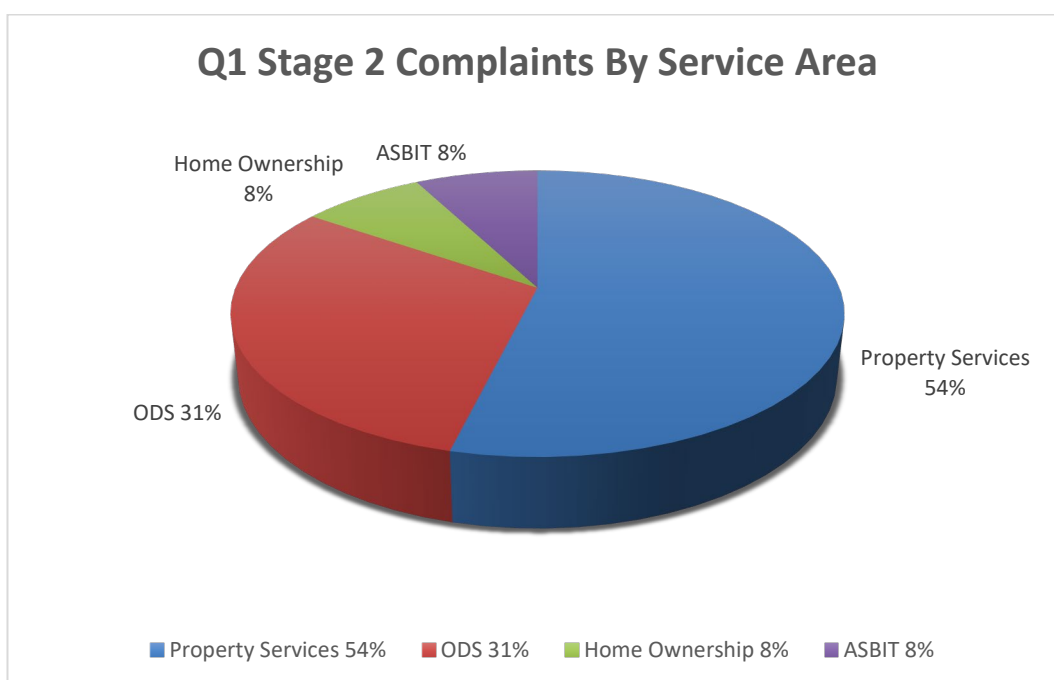
- 84% of the cases handled by ODS were responded to within the prescribed timescale.
- At the end of Q2, 22 OCC cases were still in progress.

Stage 2 Complaints

Quarter 1 (1st April 2024 to 30th June 2024)

13. The table below sets out the number of complaints received and upheld by OCC and ODS respectively in Q1. Q1 2023/24 for OCC in brackets

Organisation	Received	Upheld
OCC	9	4
ODS	4	1
Total	13	5



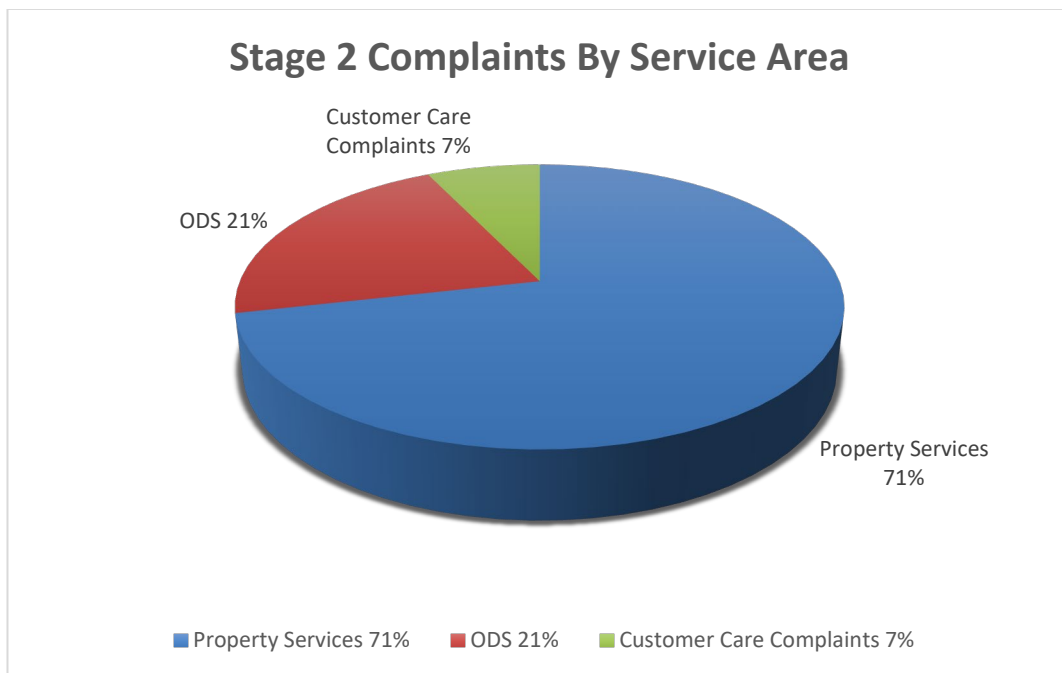
14. Notes on Q1 data:

- 89% of the cases handled by OCC were responded to within the prescribed timescale.
- 75% of the cases handled by ODS were responded to within the prescribed timescale.

Quarter 2 (1st July 2024 to 30th September 2024)

15. The table below sets out the number of complaints received and upheld by OCC and ODS respectively in Q2. Q2 2023/24 for OCC in brackets.

Organisation	Received	Upheld
OCC	10 (2)	7
ODS	2	0
Total	12	7



16. Notes on Q2 data:

- One of the 10 Stage 2 cases received by OCC was withdrawn.
- One ODS stage 2 case was referred to OCC.
- Two OCC cases were still in progress at the end of Q2.
- One ODS case was still in progress at the end of Q2.
- 86% of the cases handled by OCC were responded to within the prescribed timescale (including two extensions).

Housing Ombudsman

Quarter 1 (1st April 2024 to 30th June 2024)

17. The table below sets out Housing Ombudsman activity in Q1.

Decisions where a complaint is outside jurisdiction	2
Determinations received	2
Cases resolved with HOS intervention without investigation	1
Investigations started	1

18. Determination 1 found an instance of service failure in respect of our response to reports of loss of heating and hot water, and one of maladministration in respect of our complaint handling. We were ordered to provide a written apology, pay £300 in compensation, and review our complaint handling and provide a report on this to the Ombudsman. These orders were complied with, and we received praise from the Ombudsman for our report which they said would be shared internally as an example of good practice.
19. This case and the failures were referred to in the annual report where a Complaint Handling Failure Order was received in July 2023 in respect of the issues identified.
20. Determination 2 found there were service failures relating to our handling of the resident's reports of noise, our complaint handling, and our record keeping. We were ordered to pay £550 in compensation, arrange for an independent structural survey within eight weeks of the determination, produce an action plan detailing how we intended to address the issue, review our record keeping practices; provide a report to the Ombudsman, and review our handling of the complaint. We are still working through the action plan agreed and are providing fortnightly updates to the Ombudsman.
21. The case resolved with Ombudsman intervention was one where the resident wanted compensation. The Ombudsman suggested this might be suitable for mediation. Upon review of the case, ODS (who handled the complaint) confirmed the resident had not previously requested compensation and agreed to pay the £1000 the resident was asking for.

Quarter 2 (1st July 2024 to 30th September 2024)

22. The table below sets out Housing Ombudsman activity in Q2.

Decisions a complaint is outside jurisdiction	0
Determinations received	0
Cases resolved with HOS intervention without investigation	0
Investigations started	5

23. While there were no determinations in Q2, the number of investigations started by the Housing Ombudsman is notable.

Compensation

24. Compensation totalling £7,387.64 has been offered relating to cases received by OCC in Q1.

25. Compensation totalling £4,270.77 has been offered relating to cases received by OCC in Q2.

Trends

26. The number of complaints being received, and Housing Ombudsman activity have both increased significantly and these were expected following the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code (which came into effect on 1st April 2024) becoming law.

27. The Housing Ombudsman has also reported a significant increase in cases being referred to them (91% increase in the first 9 months of 2023/24) and their ongoing publicity campaign, highlighting poorly performing landlords and high compensation amounts awarded, has rightly contributed to an increase in tenant awareness and the importance of making complaints.

28. Within OCC and ODS, awareness of what is to be considered as a complaint has improved, and improved reporting across the Council has contributed to an increase in complaints being formally investigated.

29. Across the more commonly referenced service areas (ODS, Property Services, Tenancy Management), the overall percentage share of complaints relating to each service area remain stable compared to data reported in the Complaint Handling & Service Improvement Report 2023/24.

30. There has been a slight rise in complaints relating to garages and the Incomes Team, but these are only a small number of cases and do not indicate a wider concern. We will continue to monitor these areas.

31. Almost half (42%) of the 19 Stage 2 cases received by OCC in were at least in part related to damp and mould issues, compared to 20% of the 93 Stage 1 complaints received in the same period. This shows that damp and mould-related complaints are more likely to escalate as they are disproportionately represented at Stage 2.

32. Housing Ombudsman investigations are becoming more frequent and complex. The amount of evidence and background information requested as part of each investigation has increased. In addition, we have also seen an increase in ad

hoc enquiries from the Ombudsman, our reporting responsibilities, and requirements for overseeing and evidencing compliance with their determinations.

33. It should be noted that the Housing Ombudsman is itself operating in a backlog situation and many of the cases being investigated are from a year or more ago, before our improved complaint handling measures were in place. They have increased their staffing levels and as time moves on, they will be handling more recent cases.
34. A large part of the increase in cases going to the Housing Ombudsman is due to the residents' growing awareness of their right to access that service and we are obliged to promote it to complainants in all formal complaint correspondence) However, the determinations we receive are a very useful way of assessing how we are performing against the Ombudsman's Code and give us valuable guidance on how we can improve.

Progress against recommendations from annual report

35. The departure of the previous Customer Care & Complaints Officer has impacted on the capacity available to make progress against the future plans detailed in the Complaint Performance & Service Improvement Report 2023/24 or the improvements suggested by the Housing & Homelessness Panel and Cabinet following that report.
36. Improvements have begun in terms of capturing more information around compensation offered, as included with this report. Further information on the information captured around compensation payments will be provided in the next annual report.
37. Initial discussions have been held with ODS about how to better identify trends and themes including the use of robotic process automation (RPA). We are also looking to standardise our reporting so the information we provide is accurate and commensurate.

Conclusion

38. Complaints at all stages have increased compared to the same period in 2023/24.
39. The proportion of complaints being upheld remains similar to the previous period.
40. Housing Ombudsman investigations and activity generally has increased significantly.
41. Complaints received continue to provide excellent learning opportunities through all service areas.

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Background Papers: None
