

Annual Complaint Performance & Service Improvement Report 2024/25

(Landlord Services)

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Introduction

This is our second annual Complaint Performance & Service Improvement report, following the introduction of the Housing Ombudsman's new Complaints Handling Code which came into force on 1st April 2024.

The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 also granted new statutory powers to and placed statutory duties on the Housing Ombudsman, so it is more important than ever that we ensure we are compliant with the Code and strive to be transparent and accountable.

We also adhere to the Regulator of Social Housing's Consumer Standards, and our complaints handling is specifically guided by the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard. We are required to demonstrate that we have a robust approach to handling complaints, a culture of learning from them, that we implement improvements, and that we publish the data around this.

As required by the Housing Ombudsman, we produce this annual report to share our findings, successes, and lessons learned with the Ombudsman, the Council Members, and most importantly, our residents. We are also publishing our Complaints Handling Code Self-Assessment, which we are obliged to complete at least annually. The most recent self-assessment was reviewed by the Housing & Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on 6th March 2025.

This report covers the period from 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025, and encompasses all complaints relating to the services Oxford City Council (or those acting on our behalf) provide as a landlord. This does not include complaints regarding homelessness, housing benefit, or any other Local Authority functions that would come under the remit of the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman.

These complaints may have come from tenants, shared owners, leaseholders, private residents, or third parties acting on behalf of any of those. The complaints were handled by either the Customer Care & Complaints team within Landlord Services or, where appropriate, by our contractor, ODS, on our behalf.

Further information on complaints

Our annual self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code and other Ombudsman-required publications can be found here:

<https://www.oxford.gov.uk/complaints-council-housing>

Further information on our complaints procedure and how to make a complaint can be found here: <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/comments-compliments-complaints>

Information and support regarding complaints can be found on the Housing Ombudsman's website: <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/>

Definition of a complaint

Based on the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman's Code, Oxford City Council defines a complaint as:

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the Council, its staff, or those acting on behalf of the Council, affecting an individual citizen or group of citizens.

Service requests made for the first time and reports of anti-social/nuisance behaviour are not considered to be complaints for the purpose of our procedure. Complaints about Councillors, or about Freedom of Information and Subject Access Requests are subject to their own separate procedures and are also not included. We may also not consider complaints where the issue has already been addressed in a previous complaint, or regarding incidents that occurred more than 12 months ago. More information on what is and is not a complaint can be found on our website.

The complaints process

A resident or their representative can make a complaint by telephone, by email, via our website, by post, or by speaking to their Tenancy Management Officer or other member of staff. It is not necessary to use the word 'complaint', as it is our duty to recognise an expression of dissatisfaction that meets the criteria and offer to record it as such.

We have a two-stage process, as set out in the Housing Ombudsman's Code.

Stage 1

At Stage 1, the Code instructs us to acknowledge the complaint within 5 working days. This acknowledgement will set out our understanding of the complaint, what the complainant is looking for as a resolution, provide the date by which they can expect a response, and provide the contact details of the Housing Ombudsman.

The Code says we are to respond within 10 working days, and in this response we explain how we have investigated the complaint, set out our findings, confirm any action taken, state whether it has been upheld or not, offer compensation where appropriate, and detail what any next steps are, including how they can escalate to Stage 2. We also include the details of the Housing Ombudsman again.

We are permitted to use extensions when necessary, but this must be no more than 10 working days without good reason. Extensions may be required if it is a particularly complex case, if visits need to be arranged, if we need input from someone on annual leave, or if we are awaiting further information or evidence from the complainant. We will always explain why an extension is required.

Stage 2

If someone is unhappy with the response they received at Stage 1, or if we fail to do what we agreed to do as part of the resolution offered, they can ask for their complaint to be considered at Stage 2 where it will be reviewed by someone more senior.

At Stage 2, the Code says we are to acknowledge the complaint within 5 working days. This acknowledgement will follow the same format as the one at Stage 1, as well as including confirmation as to why the complainant has escalated the complaint to Stage 2 (if known), and it will state if there are any issues from Stage 1 that have been resolved and don't require further investigation.

The Code allows us 20 working days to respond at Stage 2. In this response we will explain the outcome of our review and any additional investigation, as well as including any changes to the outcome and proposed resolution. Again, the details of the Housing Ombudsman are provided along with confirmation that they have completed the final stage of our internal process and can approach the Housing Ombudsman should they remain dissatisfied.

We are permitted to use extensions when necessary, but this must be no more than 20 working days without good reason. Extensions may be required for the same reasons given above. Again, we will always explain why an extension is required.

Housing Ombudsman

We are required by law to be part of the Housing Ombudsman scheme and comply with their Code. As part of this, we have to publish an annual self-assessment of our compliance with the Code, as well as this report. Annual reports need to include details of all our determinations and orders made by the Housing Ombudsman against the Council in the year.

If we fail to meet our membership conditions, including following the Code, they can: issue a Complaint Handling Failure Order; report us to the appropriate regulator (this would be the Regulator of Social Housing for most complaint issues); and they can publish the details of the failure on their website and publicly via press releases.

The Housing Ombudsman require that a complaint has completed our internal process or has been declined for investigation by us before they will take the case. They may contact us to confirm that a complaint has been through Stage 2, or ask us to escalate it if it hasn't. They can also give us a deadline to provide a final response.

During their investigation, the Ombudsman will request evidence from us which we are obliged to provide. They may decide that the complaint sits outside of their jurisdiction and/or refer a case to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman. If they have identified a solution that could quickly resolve the issue, they can propose this, or they may suggest mediation.

Following an investigation, the Housing Ombudsman will issue a determination. They will decide if there has been a service failure, maladministration, or severe maladministration, or if they are satisfied with the actions we have taken. They can issue various orders, including instructing us to:

- Apologise to the complainant
- Pay compensation to the complainant
- Takes action to put things right
- Stop doing something they think we should not do
- Review our policies and practice.

We have to provide evidence to the Ombudsman that we have complied with their orders. If we fail to do as they ask, they can refer us to the relevant regulator, publish the details of our failure to comply, issue a Complaint Handling Failure Order, and/or apply to the Secretary of State to have their order enforced as if it were a court order.

Performance

The following sections detail our complaints performance in 2024/25.

Stage 1

From 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025, we handled the following number of complaints at Stage 1:

	2023/24	2024/25
Stage 1 Complaints Handled by the Council	134	226
Stage 1 Complaints Handled by ODS	431	188
Stage 1 Complaints Total	565	414

Whilst complaints handled by the Council have risen by 68.7%, the overall number of complaints is lower than last year due to the considerable drop in complaints handled by ODS. This reduction in complaints for ODS has been attributed to the roll-out of systems enabling them to address customer feedback more promptly, identifying that some types of complaint are related to policies and actions within the Council rather than ODS and should be handled by the Council, and a better understanding of what is a complaint and what is a service request made for the first time.

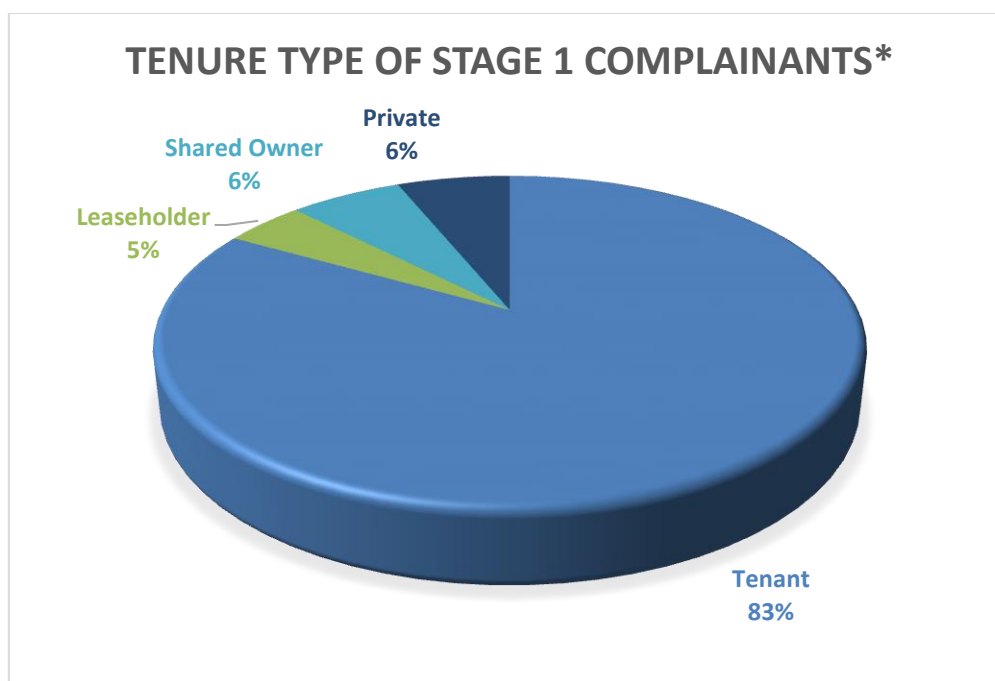
In addition to the Stage 1 complaints handled by the Council, we declined to accept and investigate 7 complaints for the following reasons:

- 2 were complaints the resident had already made previously
- 2 were service requests being made for the first time
- 1 was regarding an issue that happened more than 12 months ago
- 2 were not regarding services provided by the Council.

When complaints are rejected, the resident is provided with the reasons for this, directed to the appropriate channel/organisation for their issue (where applicable), and provided with the contact details of the Housing Ombudsman.

ODS had 11 Stage 1 complaints that were either withdrawn, rejected, or were referred to the Council.

The chart below shows that 83% of the complaints handled within the Council came from tenants (or those acting on their behalf), compared to 86% last year. Leaseholders made up 5% of the complainants (7% last year), with shared owners at 6% (same as last year), and private owners having increased to 6% from 1% last year.



* This is taken from complaints handled by the Council. ODS do not have records of the tenure type of the person making the complaint.

Stage 1 complaints by service area

Of the Stage 1 complaints investigated by the Council, 4 were withdrawn. 38 are still in progress (see the 'Trends and challenges' section below). ODS still have 17 of their complaints ongoing. These are not included in the figures for upheld/not upheld.

Overall, of the complaints received during the relevant period that have been resolved, 66% of Stage 1 complaints were upheld (this was 59% in 2023/24). Of these, 69% of those handled by the Council were upheld (61% last year), and 57% of those handled by ODS (58% for 2023/24).

It should be noted that some complaints may have covered more than one service area so the total number shown below will be higher than the number of complaints received.

A complaint being upheld does not mean that all of the points raised were upheld, therefore it may show as 'upheld' against a service area that was involved, but we did not find any service failures in their part of the complaint.

	Total	Number Upheld
ODS	171	98
Property Services – Repairs & Maintenance	112	67
Tenancy Management	83	44
Garages	5	0
Anti-Social Behaviour	13	3

Home Ownership	9	5
Property Services – Other	22	14
Legal Services	3	2
Development/OX Place	12	8
Contact Centre	9	7
Involvement	3	0
Tenancy Sustainment	2	1
Income	16	6
Customer Care & Complaints	2	2
Business Improvement	1	0

Stage 1 timescales

Of the Stage 1 cases handled by the Council, 95 were responded to using an extension to the target date. Reasons for this include delays in getting a response from the relevant department, awaiting reports from external contractors, staff leave/sickness absence, staff shortages, and awaiting further information from the complainant. For cases handled by ODS, 52 complaints had their target date extended.

48.6% of Stage 1 complaints handled by the Council and 100% of Stage 1 complaints handled by ODS were responded to within the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code timescales. Please see the 'Trends and challenges' section below for more insight into this.

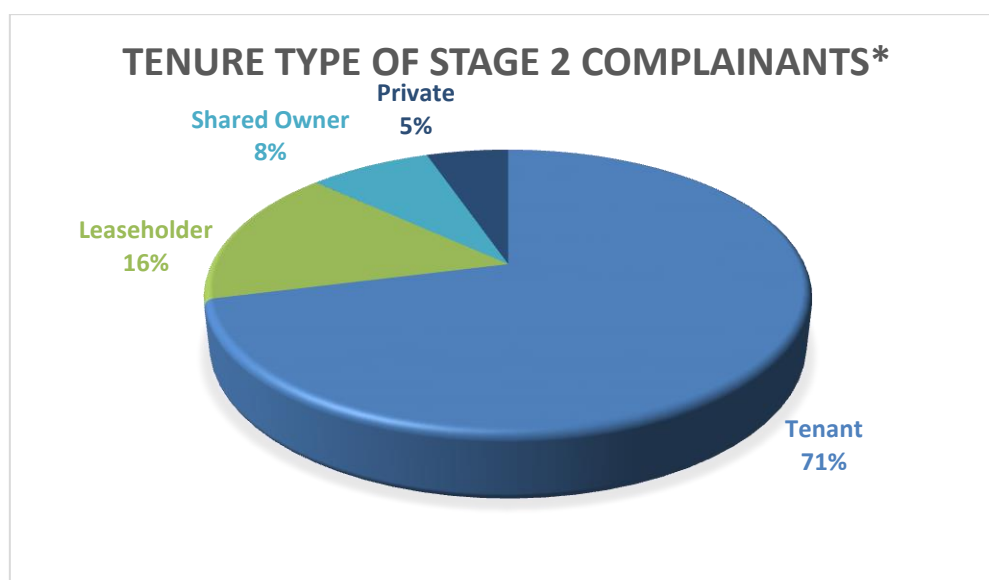
Stage 2

From 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025, we handled the following number of complaints at Stage 2:

	2023/24	2024/25
Stage 2 Complaints Handled by the Council	19	38
Stage 2 Complaints Handled by ODS	11	13
Stage 2 Complaints Total	30	51

The Council did not reject any complaints at Stage 2. ODS had one Stage 2 complaint that was referred to the Council.

The chart below shows that 71% of the complaints handled at Stage 2 within the Council came from tenants (compared to 84% last year), with a small increase in Stage 2 complaints from shared owners (up to 8% from 5% in 2023/24), and a larger increase from leaseholders (16% this year from 6% in 2023/24).



* This is taken from complaints handled by the Council. ODS do not have records of the tenure type of the person making the complaint.

Stage 2 complaints by service area

Of the Stage 2 complaints investigated by the Council, 1 was withdrawn. 3 are still in progress (see the 'Trends and challenges' section below), and 6 that ODS are investigating are still ongoing. These are not included in the figures for upheld/not upheld.

Overall, 57% of Stage 2 complaints were upheld, which is a decrease from 83% in 2023/24. Of these, within ODS 33% were upheld, and within the Council 62% were upheld (down from 82% and 83% respectively in 2023/24).

Many of these will have already been upheld at Stage 1 but were escalated to Stage 2 for reasons such as seeking further compensation or repairs agreed not having been completed. It does not necessarily indicate that the Stage 2 conclusion disagreed with the Stage 1 decision.

It should be noted that some complaints may have covered more than one service area so the total number shown below will be higher than the number of complaints received.

A complaint being upheld does not mean that all of the points raised were upheld, therefore it may show against a service area that was involved as upheld, but we did not find any service failures in their part of the complaint.

	Total	Number Upheld
ODS	6	2
Property Services – Repairs & Maintenance	30	18
Tenancy Management	8	6
Home Ownership	4	0
ASB	2	1
Involvement	1	0
Development/OX Place	2	1
Customer Care & Complaints Team	5	4

Stage 2 timescales

Of the Stage 2 cases handled by the Council, 10 were responded to using an extension to the target date. The reasons for this included staff absence, awaiting responses from other departments, and waiting for reports from external contractors. Of the Stage 2 cases handled by ODS, 1 was responded to using an extension.

83.8% of Stage 2 complaints handled by the Council and 100% of Stage 2 cases handled by ODS were responded to within the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code timescales. Please see the 'Trends and challenges' section later in the report for more information on this.

Compensation

Across Stage 1 and 2, the Council offered a total of £36,005.50 in compensation in 2024/25, excluding additional amounts ordered by the Housing Ombudsman. Housing Ombudsman orders to pay compensation are inclusive of any amount already offered or paid.

Housing Ombudsman Outcomes

In 2024/25, we received 7 decisions from the Housing Ombudsman, made up of 5 determinations, 1 finding that it was outside of jurisdiction, and 1 case resolved with Ombudsman intervention prior to investigation.

Overall, on the points investigated within the determinations they found:

- 6 instances of service failure
- 3 instances of maladministration
- 1 instance of no maladministration
- 2 instances of reasonable redress

As of 31st March 2025, we had 8 cases outstanding with the Ombudsman for investigation.

You can search decisions published by the Housing Ombudsman on their website:
<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/decisions/>

The Ombudsman publish their decisions 3 months after the final decision date, omitting the names of the resident(s). They may decide not to publish a decision 'if it is not in the resident's or landlord's interest or the resident's anonymity may be compromised'.

The Housing Ombudsman cases that had an outcome in 2024/25 are detailed below:

Case 202220478 – Decision of 24th April 2024

This complaint was investigated by ODS on our behalf and completed Stage 2 of our procedure in August 2023. The complaint to the Ombudsman was about our response to the resident's reports of damp and mould, our response to reports about a loss of heating and hot water, and our complaint handling.

The Ombudsman decided they could not investigate the damp and mould complaint as it had not been included in the original complaint and was therefore outside of their jurisdiction. They found there had been a service failure regarding our response to the loss of heating and hot water, and that there was maladministration in respect of our complaint handling.

The Housing Ombudsman issued the following orders:

- *The landlord must do the following within the next four weeks:*
 - a. *Provide a written apology for the failures identified in this report.*
 - b. *Pay the resident compensation of £300 comprised of:*
 - i. *£100 for the distress and frustration caused by its response to reports about a loss of heating and hot water.*
 - ii. *£200 for the distress and inconvenience caused by its complaint handling.*

- c. Review the complaint handling in this case, with reference to the failings identified in this report, to determine what actions have been/will be taken to prevent a recurrence of these. The landlord should write to the Ombudsman with the outcome of this review.*
- *The landlord should provide this Service with evidence of compliance with these orders within the timescale set out above.*

Following their determination, an apology was sent to the resident, and the compensation ordered was paid. We carried out a review of the failings identified and provided the Ombudsman with our report, detailing the steps we have taken to prevent similar issues in future (see also the 'Learning and service development' section below). We received praise from the Ombudsman's Investigator for our response, which was described as 'an example of good practice'.

The full report can be found here:

<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/decisions/oxford-city-council-202220478/>

Case 202321079 – Decision of 15th May 2024

The Housing Ombudsman determined that this complaint regarding a health and housing assessment was outside of their jurisdiction. The resident was referred to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman.

Case 202327898 – Decision of 29th May 2024

This complaint was investigated by ODS on our behalf and completed Stage 2 of our procedure in September 2023. The complaint to the Ombudsman was about compensation following concerns about a subcontractor's failure to take appropriate precautions regarding asbestos.

Prior to investigating and as ODS had already upheld the complaint, the Housing Ombudsman contacted us to see if we would consider offering the £1000 requested by the complainant, or if we would accept mediation. ODS advised that the resident had not requested this as part of the complaint, but they felt it was an appropriate remedy and agreed to the payment. The Ombudsman was satisfied that following their intervention, the matter had been resolved.

Case 202300539 – Decision of 26th June 2024

This complaint completed Stage 2 of our procedure in July 2023. The complaint to the Ombudsman was about our response to the resident's reports noise, and they also looked into our complaint handling and record keeping.

The Ombudsman found that there were service failures in our handling of the resident's reports of noise, our complaint handling, and regarding our record keeping.

The Housing Ombudsman issued the following orders:

- *Within 4 weeks, the landlord must pay the resident a total of £550 compensation, made up as follows:*
 - a. *£400 for its handling of noise reports.*
 - b. *£150 for complaint handling.*
- *Within 8 weeks, the landlord must arrange for an independent structural survey to be carried out in the resident's property. If no structural issues are identified, the landlord should produce an action plan with timescales setting out the exploratory steps it will take to try to identify the cause of the noise, and what alternative options for resolution (for example, a move to a suitable property) may be available if the noise issue cannot be resolved. The landlord should then adhere to the timescales. The action plan should be shared with both the resident and the Ombudsman.*
- *Within 4 weeks, the landlord is ordered to review its current record keeping practices against this Service's spotlight report on knowledge and information, which sets out the benefits of good record keeping and provides recommendations for landlords. It should write to this Service with the outcome of the review, and details of any actions that it has/will take in relation to its record keeping practices.*
- *Within 4 weeks, the landlord should review its handling of the resident's complaint and establish whether any learning can be implemented to prevent the identified failing from occurring again.*
- *The landlord should provide evidence to the Ombudsman that it has complied with the above orders within the timeframes specified.*

Following the determination, we arranged the payment of the compensation, arranged for a structural survey as well as other visits to try to identify the source of the noise, arranged remedial work, and provided reports to the Ombudsman reviewing our practices against their Spotlight report on knowledge and information and reviewing our handling of the case. We had already made the improvements identified by this.

Case 202320570 – Decision of 28th October 2024

This complaint completed Stage 2 of our procedure in January 2024. The complaint to the Ombudsman was about our response to the resident's reports of a leak from the property above, our handling of their reports of damp and mould, and the resident's claim for compensation.

The Ombudsman found that there was maladministration in our handling of the resident's reports of a leak from the above property and with our handling of the resident's reports of damp and mould. They also found a service failure with the handling of the claim for compensation.

The Housing Ombudsman issued the following orders:

- *Within 4 weeks of this report the landlord must:*
 - a. *Provide the resident with an apology around the failings identified within this report.*
 - b. *Pay the resident compensation of £4,662.83. This is inclusive of any previous compensation it has paid. The landlord must provide evidence of compliance in the form of an invoice or system screenshot showing it has paid the compensation to the resident.*
 - c. *Speak with the resident and identify if he wishes to make a claim for the damage to his belongings. If so, it must provide the resident with advice on making a claim to its insurer. Should the resident wish to make a claim, it must provide him with support to do so. It should show to the Ombudsman that it has provided both the advice and support in writing.*
 - d. *Speak to the resident to identify if he has any further concerns in relation to the property. It must also complete an inspection of the entire property and:*
 - i. *Provide the resident with a specific point of contact who he is able to liaise with about any ongoing concerns around damp and mould in the property.*
 - ii. *Take necessary damp and moisture readings. It must confirm its findings to the resident and Ombudsman and if it needs to take any action.*
 - iii. *Take necessary damp and moisture readings. It must confirm its findings to the resident and Ombudsman and if it needs to take any action.*
 - iv. *If it identified that there are ongoing issues, it must provide the resident with an action plan and timeframe in which it aims to complete the works.*
 - v. *The landlord must provide the Ombudsman with evidence of the post inspection findings, any action plan, its communication of the plan to the resident and provision of the specific point of contact.*
 - vi. *If it identifies that there are ongoing issues which it must rectify, consider whether additional compensation is required to address any distress and inconvenience faced by the resident.*
 - e. *Provide proof of compliance with these orders.*

Following the determination, we provided the resident with an apology, paid the additional compensation awarded, supported them with an insurance claim for damaged items, and carried out further investigations at the property. It was determined that as major work was required, it would be most appropriate to permanently move the resident.

The full report can be found here: <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/decisions/oxford-city-council-202320570/>

Case 202346472 – Decision of 31st October 2024

This complaint completed Stage 2 of our procedure in April 2024. The complaint to the Ombudsman was about our response to the resident's reports of repairs during the defect period, including a leak which caused damp and mould, and the resident's request for larger radiators in the property.

The Ombudsman found that there was a service failure in relation to our handling of the resident's repairs reported during the defect period, but that there had been reasonable redress with our handling of the resident's request for larger radiators.

The Housing Ombudsman issued the following orders:

- *Within 4 weeks of the date of this report, the landlord should:*
 - a. *Write a letter of apology to the resident.*
 - b. *Pay the resident £450 which is made up of the following:*
 - i. *£350 offered in the final complaint response for the delays in repairs and communication issues (to be deducted if it has already paid).*
 - ii. *An additional £100 for the failures identified with the response to the window reports.*
 - iii. *The additional compensation should be paid directly to the resident and not offset against any debt that may be owed.*
- *Within 4 weeks of the date of this report, the landlord should:*
 - a. *Contact the resident to confirm if all repairs raised in this case have been completed.*
 - b. *Agree with the resident how it will resolve any outstanding repairs and provide a schedule of work.*
 - c. *Confirm arrangements to post inspect any work completed to obtain final sign off.*
- *The landlord should provide this Service with evidence to confirm it has complied with the orders above within the timescale given.*

Following the determination, an apology was sent to the resident, the compensation was offered but rejected, further property inspections were carried out, and the work relating to the damp and mould was completed.

The full report can be found here: <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/decisions/oxford-city-council-202346472/>

Case 202345407 – Decision of 10th January 2025

This complaint completed Stage 2 of our procedure in March 2024. The complaint to the Ombudsman was about our handling of the resident's reports of leaks within the property and damp and mould.

The Ombudsman found that we had offered reasonable redress which resolved the complaint about our handling of the reports of leaks, and that there was no maladministration in our handling of the reports of damp and mould.

Trends and challenges

National trends

Across the Housing sector, there has been an increase in complaints received over the last few years, with the Housing Ombudsman reporting accepting more than double the number of cases for investigation in 2023/24 than they did in 2021/22.

Traditionally within housing providers, most complaints have been regarding repairs and maintenance, and that has continued to be the case as it is the most common type of interaction that residents have with us as a landlord. This is true for the Council, but we have also seen an increase in the percentage of complaints about other service areas, whilst ODS have seen a large decrease in their complaints numbers.

Complaints about damp and mould have continued to increase throughout the sector, as residents are increasingly aware of the risks following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak and the subsequent scrutiny of how landlords should respond to reports of damp and mould. We would expect this to continue, especially when what is known as 'Awaab's Law' comes into effect. Whilst plans are being put in place to comply with these new requirements, the sector expects the volume of complaints about damp and mould to continue to increase due to greater awareness of the issue amongst residents and raised expectations on how it will be handled.

Our key themes

We have observed the following trends and challenges regarding the complaints received in 2024/25:

- **Damp & Mould**

Complaints about the handling of damp and mould reports have increased again slightly, with 49 of the 226 Stage 1 complaints handled by the Council including damp and mould as a main issue. This equates to 21.7%, compared to 19.4% in 2023/24. At Stage 2, 13 of the 38 cases included damp and mould as a main issue, which is 34.2% of all Stage 2 cases handled by the Council, up from 26.3% last year.

Over 33% of complaints handled by ODS where a trade was specified were regarding the plumbing and plastering categories of work, and these are the trades most involved in damp and mould cases, which is likely to have been a factor in some of those complaints.

- **Communication**

The majority of complaints received by ODS and the Council have been regarding levels of service and communication.

Communication was a factor in 120 of the 226 Stage 1 complaints handled by the Council, and in 38 of the cases handled by ODS. Meanwhile, service was identified as a main factor in 185 of the Council's cases, and in 12 of those handled by ODS.

ODS have continued to make use of their system to obtain feedback from residents immediately after a repair, and this is credited with being a large part of why their complaint levels have dropped. This improved communication means it is easier for customers to let them know about any issues promptly, before something becomes a formal complaint.

Communication was frequently one of the factors in complaints involving the Tenancy Management team, being mentioned in 49 complaints they were involved with. This is thought to be largely due to staffing issues, with some areas without a permanent Tenancy Management Officer for periods of time due to staff absence and difficulties in recruiting. The structure of Landlord Services is being reviewed, including the Tenancy Management team, and it is hoped this will lead to improved service and more consistency in staffing.

- **Repair Delays**

A significant number of complaints for ODS and Property Services included concerns about the time taken to complete repairs. Reasons for this included needing to order materials, the procurement of specialist contractors/subcontractors, waiting for a surveyor visit, or delays in getting approvals for work to proceed.

ODS have observed that the requirement for asbestos surveys can also be a factor in complaints regarding delays to repairs being carried out. There were also delays with the supply of replacement windows and doors. ODS have taken steps to address the contract management of these services.

In 2024/25 there were occasions where extreme weather conditions, including storms and high winds, impacted the Oxford area. This resulted in an increased demand for repairs. These included flooding, water ingress, and issues with drainage systems, as well as roofing and fence repairs. This sometimes resulted in residents having to wait as emergency work was prioritised.

ODS also observed that there were cases where jobs were closed down incorrectly and/or follow-on work wasn't arranged. When this occurred, it was raised with those responsible as well as management to draw attention to the impact on residents and ensure processes are followed.

There were also a number of cases where the delays were caused by the resident disputing the work planned, difficulties with gaining access to the property, or because we were unable to contact the resident.

- **New Build Properties**

We noticed an increase in complaints involving new build properties, including complaints around the reporting and repair of defects, quality of work, the end of defect period and transition from that, and communication. These complaints came from a mix of tenures (7 from tenants, 5 from shared owners, at Stage 1).

We have been working closely with OX Place to investigate these cases, advise them on our requirements in regards to complaints, and make improvements.

- **Complaint Handling**

The introduction of recording and responding to complaints using our CRM system has provided great benefits, and we are continuing to make modifications to our systems and processes to gain better insight into the types of complaints we receive and the residents we serve, as well as monitoring learning and outcomes. This should enable us to provide greater insight in annual reports moving forward, and we already have much more data available to us than we have previously.

Both ODS and the Council have had incidents during 2024/25 where complaints had been logged incorrectly so were not picked up immediately. We have worked extensively with the Contact Centre to ensure cases are logged correctly, and are satisfied this has only impacted a handful of cases.

The biggest change this year has been the considerable drop in the number of Stage 1 cases handled by the Council being responded to within the agreed timeframe. This has been due to a number of factors:

- Staffing levels unable to maintain the service during periods of staff illness and annual leave
- Periods where posts within the Customer Care & Complaints team were vacant
- Cases having been originally logged incorrectly
- The volume of complaints received, and associated enquiries (Housing Ombudsman investigations and information requests, Subject Access Requests, Freedom of Information requests, etc.)
- Staffing issues within other teams (such as Tenancy Management and Property Services) impacting our ability to respond to a complaint as we were waiting for information/action
- Occasional IT issues preventing us from accessing cases and issuing responses.

Please see the 'Learning & service development' section for steps we've taken to address these issues.

Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs)

Our 2024 Tenant Satisfaction Survey (which can be found here <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/file/3668/tenant-satisfaction-survey-results-report-2024>) showed that of those who said they'd made a complaint, only 31% were satisfied with the handling of it. This was a small decrease from the score of 33% in the 2023, and still quite a way down on the 66% who were satisfied in the 2022 survey. It is naturally not the result that we want.

At the time of writing, we do not have Housemark's benchmarked results for Local Authorities, however last year the top quartile result was only 35%, which shows that similar organisations have been experiencing comparable levels of dissatisfaction.

Whilst we cannot always offer the outcome a complainant is looking for, we would always want them to feel that their complaint had been taken seriously, that they had been treated with empathy, and that they received a clear, thorough and timely response.

It may be that in these cases where there was dissatisfaction, they didn't feel they got the level of service they should expect or were dissatisfied with the outcome. We plan on implementing measures to ensure we get feedback from residents following a complaint so we can understand why people are dissatisfied.

The delays with our complaints handling in 2024/25 may well have contributed to some of this dissatisfaction. We have already implemented more rigorous procedures and increased staff numbers to prevent this happening again, and we have plans to work more closely with residents to understand what they are looking for from our service and their expectations.

There may also be other reasons for the low level of satisfaction with complaint handling shown in the survey. We need to ensure we are recognising complaints and logging them as such, to avoid situations where a resident may think they have made a complaint, but we don't have a record of it, as may have happened in some of these cases.

It may also be that there is often confusion around what is and isn't a complaint, so a respondent may actually have been unhappy following a report of anti-social behaviour, for example. They might term this as a complaint, but it wouldn't meet our criteria to be handled within our complaints process. Regardless, we are making improvements to try to ensure a better service is provided moving forward.

Learning & service development – what we've done in 2024/25

Whilst responding to the issues raised in a complaint is important, ensuring we learn from them is also a priority. Many people who contact us with a complaint ask for assurances that we will make improvements so something positive can come out of their experience. Learning from complaints is not just our statutory duty, it is a commitment we make to citizens that they will be heard, and their views will help shape our services.

Some of the measures below were implemented as a direct result of a complaint, others were already being considered but formed part of the assurances we have been able to provide to complainants at the point of resolution.

Landlord Services Customer Care & Complaints Team

Following the changes in Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code that came into effect on 1st April 2024, in 2024/25 we continued to make changes in how we handle complaints about our landlord function. We worked on these changes with colleagues who handle complaints within ODS and those within the Council who handle non-landlord function related complaints to ensure a consistent approach.

- We have continued to work on our letters, to ensure they are free from jargon, that the tone is professional but accessible, and that all the required information is included.
- In collaboration with the Ombudsman Link Officer, we have made improvements to how we submit evidence to the Ombudsman to ensure our submissions are thorough and timely.
- An additional Customer Care & Complaints Officer post was created so that we can meet demand for our services. These interviews took place within 2024/25, with the Officer commencing their new role in April 2025. The Tenant Ambassadors provided feedback on the candidates which was taken into account when assessing who should be offered the role.
- We have worked with the Contact Centre to provide better insight and understanding into where complaints should be directed, how to recognise and log them, the information required, and steps they can take prior to the complaint being received by the relevant complaints 'hub'.
- We were part of a project to design and implement Robotic Process Automation (RPA) for complaints forms submitted via our website. This means that following an initial review, these can be entered onto our system automatically.
- A centralised Sharepoint has been created for storing evidence related to complaints, reducing the risk of losing information should a staff member leave or be off work. These files can only be accessed by those with a

responsibility for handling or overseeing complaints, and the information will only be retained in accordance with our Data Retention Schedule.

- We have continued to adapt how we record data on our system and our reporting functionality, and this is an ongoing project. We have already made improvements that have enabled us to provide more detailed insight in this report this year.
- We have continued to work closely with ODS, feeding back on outcomes from investigations and identifying areas for improvement. We frequently collaborate on complaints, and we have established greater clarity on what is best handled by ODS on our behalf, and what should be investigated by the Council directly.
- We have attended training on supporting residents and staff with compassion fatigue, appropriate compensation and remedies, as well as Housing Ombudsman webinars. We have continued to complete Housing Ombudsman e-learning courses to ensure we are following best practice. The Customer Care & Complaints Manager has also attended the quarterly meetings of a group made up complaints managers from various Local Authorities and Housing Associations where we discuss challenges and best practice.
- The Customer Care & Complaints team have continued to work closely with colleagues in other teams, providing support, advice, and education around the complaints process. We have also worked more closely with OX Place than we have in previous years.
- We have worked with colleagues handling insurance claims to better understand how we can work together and have supported residents in making a claim, when necessary.
- We have continued to report to the Housing & Homelessness Panel on our progress.

Property Services

- Area Property Officers have been introduced. Each Officer is dedicated to an area within Oxford and are the first point of contact for the investigation of Stage 1 complaints relating to Property Services.
- The number of specialist Damp & Mould Surveyors has been increased to ensure that they can address more severe cases quickly.
- Templates for reports on damp and mould have been designed and are used by our Surveyors to ensure that the relevant information is recorded.
- Improved tracking of damp and mould cases, using both our CRM system and spreadsheets.

ODS

- ODS have been working closely with their Planners and the Contact Centre to improve communication with residents and internally. This included encouraging the Contact Centre to speak to them directly when necessary and making use of Teams to send urgent messages.
- ODS have expanded the use of their messaging system for appointments. As well as getting a text (or automated message on a landline) when the appointment is booked, a reminder is sent on the day of the appointment, and a further message when the operative is on their way. The resident can also contact the operative directly and provide feedback once the work is done. Use of this system began prior to April 2024, but its use has since been extended across their responsive repairs team, resulting in fewer complaints and reducing appointments with no access by more than 20%.
- Those handling complaints within ODS have also been working with their colleagues to embed a positive complaint handling culture and a greater understanding of the Ombudsman's requirements. This has resulted in quicker response times for the cases they investigate.
- There is now improved cooperation and communication regarding complaints between ODS and various departments within the Council, notably Property Services and Tenancy Management.
- The complaints 'hub' within Landlord Services and the 'hub' within ODS have worked together to better identify what complaints belong with ODS and which would be better handled by the Council. ODS also feel they now have greater clarity on what is a complaint and what is a service request, which enables them to handle them appropriately, which has contributed to their reduced complaint numbers.
- Issues with accessing a property, especially in regards to damp and mould or where there is a health and safety concern, are flagged up to Property Services and Tenancy Management.

OX Place

- For consistency and improved communication, it was agreed that residents in new build properties would have a single point of contact within the Council (the New Homes Officer), who would then liaise with OX Place as necessary.
- Amendments have been identified for future versions of the Home User Guide, especially around timescales for repairs following the defect period.

Home Ownership

- Our website has been updated to ensure we are providing clear and accurate information.

- With the assistance of the Tenant Ambassadors, the letters sent out to shared owners regarding service charge estimates and actuals have been amended to provide clearer information. This was done on a trial bases with the actuals and extended to all shared owners when the estimates were sent out in February.

Tenancy Management

- Arrangements have been for the Customer Care & Complaints team to share any vulnerabilities or disabilities disclosed by tenants with the Tenancy Management team so these can be recorded on our system, ensuring our records are up-to-date and we can tailor our services accordingly.
- There is increased collaboration between Tenancy Management Officers, Area Property Officers and ODS, especially in situations where we are struggling to access a property to carry out work.

Contact Centre

- Further work has been done with the Contact Centre on recognising complaints, establishing where they should be directed, and logging them correctly.
- Staff within the Contact Centre are now empowered to take steps to address issues at the first point of contact when a resident is making a complaint by telephone. This may include ordering a repair, making an appointment or asking for a Damp & Mould Surveyor to visit.

Plans for 2025/26 and beyond

As of 1st April 2024, the new version of the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code came into effect, alongside new statutory powers for the Ombudsman. In conjunction with new regulatory standards, the focus is on ensuring complaints are handled appropriately and that the customer's voice is heard and is stronger than ever. The expectations for us as a landlord are high, and we will do everything we can to meet those, not just in terms of our handling of complaints but how this results in improvements to our services.

The volume of complaints has increased as residents become increasingly aware of their rights, and as we continue to create an environment where complaints are recognised, recorded and welcomed as an opportunity to put things right.

Many organisations find that as confidence in their ability to competently handle complaints increases, so does the volume they receive, without there having been any change in the level of service. Therefore, we don't see this increase as a negative thing, but an opportunity to better understand the expectations of our residents and as evidence we are facilitating that communication.

We don't want to see anyone dissatisfied with our services, but we appreciate it when residents get in touch and give us the chance to put things right or explain why we are unable to offer what they are looking for.

The increase in complaints numbers, more stringent regulation, and strict timescales does present challenges we will need to face. We will need to make sure we are well-resourced, both in terms of staff and systems, to meet these challenges.

Many of the plans we set out last year for 2024/25 have had to be postponed as we handled the challenges of an increased volume of complaints and low staff numbers. With an increased capacity within the Customer Care & Complaints team, we hope to make further progress on these this year.

Our plans for 2025/26:

- Our wider review of our Tenant Involvement Strategy will include looking at ways of involving residents more in our complaints process so that we are providing a service that meets not just the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman, but of the people it is intended to help. We are also looking to include our involved residents in identifying trends and learning from complaints and monitoring our progress on this. This will provide additional insight and increase our accountability. The intention is for a panel of residents to be formed and meet quarterly to review complaints data.
- We will further develop how we use our IT systems to monitor complaints, the outcomes, and report on complaints. This includes ensuring senior management have visibility of the data so they can identify areas of focus for improvement. It will also ensure greater accountability.

- We are looking at what measures we can implement to gain better insight into the themes of complaints so we can identify trends and emerging issues more quickly and efficiently and ensure the complaints data is used and reflected in strategic work e.g. our Asset Management Strategy.
- We have plans for developing a compensation policy/procedure for complaints, in conjunction with our residents.
- We are exploring how we can best seek feedback from residents following their complaint so we can measure their satisfaction with both the process and the outcome and use their comments to make improvements.

Closing remarks from the Customer Care & Complaints Manager

This has clearly been a year of challenges regarding complaints. I would like to begin by apologising to residents for the delays they may have experienced. This is not the level of service you should be able to expect or that we want to provide, and it does not reflect our commitment to providing an efficient, empathetic service that adheres to the Housing Ombudsman's requirements. We have recruited additional staff in both the Customer Care & Complaints team and other teams we work with, and we have amended our processes to try to ensure we provide you with a better service in future. Many of our complainants have been very understanding and gracious during this time, despite sometimes facing difficult situations themselves, and as well as my apologies I would like to offer my thanks for this.

We have had to continue to adapt to accommodate the increased numbers of complaints, and we will continue to do so. Whilst I am never happy that any resident has cause to complain, I am pleased that we are capturing these expressions of dissatisfaction more accurately than ever and recognising them as complaints. I am grateful for all of those who have taken the time to share their experiences and thoughts with us and have given us the opportunity to put things right. We can't always offer the outcome a resident is looking for, but we can ensure that their opinion is heard and valued, give it full consideration, and explain our decisions. Whilst too many complaints have been responded to out of target, I sincerely hope we were able to offer a fair resolution in the end.

More positively, ODS' expanded use of technology to improve communication and seek timely customer feedback has seen a reduction in complaints about their work. We have also continued to work more closely together to provide a consistent, compliant approach to complaints handling.

Lucy McCormack, Complaints & Quality Assurance Manager at ODS, has said:

"ODS Building Services has seen a reduction in complaints in the 2024/2025 year, however, the key themes around service in general is something we continue to address. We are using technology more than ever before to improve communications & retrieve customer feedback in real-time, and continue to include our Operational staff in improvements in this area."

We've also seen an increase in Housing Ombudsman investigations into complaints that residents have escalated to them. Residents are increasingly aware of their right to complain and to have our response reviewed by the Ombudsman if they remain dissatisfied once the complaint has completed our internal process. We welcome the Ombudsman's thoughts on these cases, as it helps inform future decisions and ensure we align our service with their expectations. In many of the cases from 2024/25, we had already identified failings and service improvements prior to the Ombudsman's determination and made the necessary changes to how we work. Ensuring we learn from complaints is one of the most important objectives of the Customer Care & Complaints team.

My goals for this year are focused on increasing satisfaction with our service, through:

- Ensuring we respond to complaints promptly, providing fair and thorough responses
- Engaging with residents about their experiences throughout the complaints process, as well as collaborating with colleagues in Tenant Involvement to work with residents to drive service improvement
- Reviewing and modifying our processes to ensure we have robust practices to ensure service continuity when challenging circumstances arise.

I am hoping that in next year's report we will be able to demonstrate our progress on these plans, as well as improved response times. I would like to thank our residents and colleagues for their patience and support during a challenging year, and give my assurances that we will always strive to do better.

Kat Mayes

Customer Care & Complaints Manager (Landlord Services)