



# HONEYCOMB GROUP

## Annual Report on Complaints 2023-24

Foreword: Honeycomb group has a group wide policy for complaints handling. This report covers complaints data for Staffs Housing, the housing service within the Group. Complaints within honeycomb charitable services areas are currently reported separately.

Please note future reporting will include and overview of all services within the group, within the report.

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# Complaints at Honeycomb:

## Scope of Report:

This report covers complaints between 2023-24. Complaints come to us through a variety of channels including face to face interactions, social media and via forms on our website. From a customer perspective, the advantage of logging a complaint online is that social media and our website are available at any time.


## Complaints vs Service Request:

Honeycomb Group recognises the difference between complaints and services complaints, further detail can be found below:

1. **Service Requests** (referred to as 'informal complaints' in our 2023-24 Complaints Policy): When a complaint is received, we attempt to fix the issue quickly and where this is possible the complaints will be logged as a service request/informal complaint.
2. **Stage 1:** If the customer is unhappy with the outcome of a service request or has made it clear they wish to raise a formal complaint, the case will be treated as a stage 1 complaint and will be investigated by someone working at Manager/Head of Service level.
3. **Stage 2:** If the customer is unhappy with the outcome of their stage 1 investigation, they can escalate their complaint and ask for it to be reviewed. In this case it will be treated as a stage 2 complaint and investigated by someone working at Director level.
4. **External Review:** If the customer is unhappy with the outcome of their stage 2 investigation, they can refer their complaint and ask for it to be reviewed by the relevant external body:
  - Staffs Housing – The Housing Ombudsman ([www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk](http://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk)).
  - Revival / Glow / Concrete – The Fundraising Regulator ([www.fundraisingregulator.org.uk](http://www.fundraisingregulator.org.uk))

Full details of the complaint handling process can be found in our 2023-24 Complaints Policy: <https://www.honeycombgroup.org.uk/media/3707/complaints-policy.pdf>

## Staffs Housing Overview:

Number of Complaints Received Across the Group 2023-24						
Service Area	Refused	Service Requests	Formal TOTAL	Stage 1	Stage 2	External Review
	0	129	151	127	20	0

### Background to Complaints in the social housing sector:

Complaints received for Staffs Housing are subject to our internal Complaints Policy and the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.

The Housing Ombudsman is an independent body that oversees the complaint handling of social landlords. The Housing Ombudsman oversees the Complaint Handling Code which before April 2024 was guidance, from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 the code was made statutory. As part of this code Honeycomb are required to submit an annual self-assessment, of our complaint handling procedures and performance, as part of this submission we need to share this document. On occasions the Housing Ombudsman may also investigate cases referred to them by our customers, when they have been through our full formal complaint process and are not happy with the final outcome.

The Regulator of Social Housing also plays a role in monitoring complaints for Honeycomb. In April 2024 they launched the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard, this new standard empathises the need to give our customers a clear and accessible complaints procedure to ensure their voices are heard. The Tenant Satisfaction Measures (CH01 and CH02) also monitor complaints performance indirectly through a combination of data collection and surveys. Honeycomb report our complaints performance annually with the regulator.

### Number of Service Requests:

During 2023-24, we received 129 service requests (referred to as 'Informal requests' within the Complaints Policy) that did not run through our formal complaints process. Of the service requests recorded 60% were for repair requests, 15% were for anti-social behaviour, 9% were due to poor customer service, 8% were due to estate services, 5% were due to allocations, 3% were assigned as other, 1% were due to tenancy management and 1% was due to compliance.

### Complaints Refused:

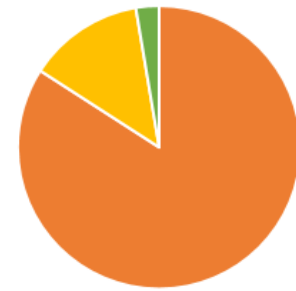
We have not refused any complaint.

### Number of Formal Complaints:

During 2023-24, we received 151 number of formal complaints, this compares to 70 in 2022-23, which is a 116% increase, we suspect this is due to an increased awareness of the complaints process and the Housing Ombudsman Service. Of all formal complaints 127 were closed at stage 1, and 24 escalated to stage 2.

**Complaint Themes:**

- Repairs and Maintenance: 91 (60%)
- Rents and Service Charge: 19 (13%)
- Staff & Customer Services: 14 (9%)
- Tenancy Management: 11 (7%)
- Compliance: 9 (6%)
- Other: 4 (3%)
- Estate Services: 2 (1%)
- Home Ownership / Leasehold: 1 (1%)



During 2023-24, 60% of complaints were made about our maintenance and repair service, this is consistent with the complaint data from 2022-23, a detailed breakdown on complaints with our maintenance and repairs service can be found in the next page 5.

In 2023-24, we did also notice an increase in complaints around rent and service charges in 2023-24, this was expected as Staffs Housing applied a rent increase from April 2024 to all customer in line with national annual rent increase rate as set by the Regulator of Social Housing. Although the rent increase was communicated with all customers and applied nationally by most social housing providers, we do understand this may have come as unwelcome news to many of our customers, particularly those in work, whose income may not have increased in line with the rent. Of the 19 complaints received, 5 complaints were escalated to for a stage 2, no complaints were referred to the Housing Ombudsman for external review.

In 2022-23, our complaint data told us that staff and customer services were the third highest proportion of complaints. During this time Honeycomb underwent a full restructure. Unfortunately, this left many roles vacant, and this may have translated in reduced customer service for our customers.

## Staffs Housing, a focus on Repairs and Maintenance

**Complaint Numbers year on year:**

The increase in the number of repairs and maintenance complaints is in line with the increase we have seen across the business and is likely this is due to an increased awareness of the complaints process and the Housing Ombudsman Service.

We have seen an increase in repair and maintenance complaints year on year overall, but the percentage of repairs and maintenance complaints as a business has reduced since 2022-23, we speculate that this is due to the significant changes made within our repairs and maintenance function over the last 12 months.

Repairs & Maintenance Complaints	2022-23	2023-24
Number of Complaints:	57	91
Percentage of Overall Group Complaints:	81%	60%

**You said, we did – acting on our customers concerns.**

The dissatisfaction in the repairs and maintenance area was well known to us and had been noted in detail in our last 2022-23 Annual Complaints Report <https://www.honeycombgroup.org.uk/media/4864/5-annual-report-on-complaints-summary-22-23-final.pdf> In this report we noted three key themes in our repairs and maintenance complaints:

1. Poor communication from contractors about obtaining parts and delayed or cancelled visits.
2. Poor quality repairs resulting in repeat calls from customers and return visits.
3. The time taken to resolve some repairs, particularly around issues with leaks, boilers and hot water.

Within this report we explained that we had been working with our then contractor to put solutions in place however ultimately, we agreed we would be parting ways with our main contractor as of August 2023 and we would be looking for a new contractor. We can confirm this has now been completed and we procured a new contractor Unitas, to deliver our repairs and maintenance service,

Following this report, we have made extensive improvements within this area over 2023-24, including:

- We introduced a new Head of Service over the repairs and maintenance function.
- We reviewed processes to ensure a better service delivery.
- We reviewed all customer communications to ensure better customer engagement.
- Following ongoing issues with our main contractor we parted ways with Ian Williams in August 2023.

**Where are we now:**

Although the general feedback regarding Unitas so far has been good, they joined us and inherited a backlog of repair cases that included poor quality works, overdue jobs and cases of poor customer communication, this has left many of our customers dissatisfied and is evident in the complaints data presented for 2023-24. We expect to see a significant improvement in our repairs and maintenance complaints moving forward and will be reviewing this regularly, with a quarterly complaints report being shared with our Customer Committee and our Board.

Of the 91 complaints received in 2023-24, 87% of complaints were closed at stage 1 and 13% complaints were escalated to a stage 2 review, no complaints were referred to the Housing Ombudsman for external review.

## Observations and Learnings:

**Observations:**

There are some important positives to take from the complaints review:

- An increase in complaint numbers supports the theory that our customers find it easy to complain when they need to. Customers are making more complaints and although they may be dissatisfied at the point of recording the complaint, they also have an expectation that the Honeycomb will respond and deal with their concerns.
- The proportion of complaints resolved at the first stage in the process remains high at 84%. This evidences that Managers can resolve complaints effectively without the need for a customer to request a review via a stage 2 escalation.
- Our work in the repairs and maintenance team is reflecting positively on our 2023-24 complaints data and we expect to see a continued improvement in this area.

**Learnings:**

Honeycomb is committed to improving our services and aim to embed all customer feedback into our business decisions moving forward.

Customers Said:	We Did:
<p>Concerns from customers about the repairs service, repair delays and communication issues.</p>	<p>We appointed a new repairs contractor to help ensure repairs service improvements were made – the contractor was appointed in August 2023.</p> <p>Close contractor management is in place to monitor performance and to continually review customer feedback. For more information see the page 5 ‘ Staffs Housing, a focus on Repairs and Maintenance.</p> <p>Given the increased Government scrutiny on damp and mould and wider customer awareness, we made the decision to introduce a damp and mould specific policy to ensure efficient compliance with our obligations for damp and mould related repairs.</p>

<p>Customers were unhappy about the increase to rents and services charges.</p>	<p>We reviewed our approach to the rent increase for 2023-24, we are confident with our approach to communicating the increase to our residents however we recognise that customers in work will be most impacted by the rent increase due to the potential that wages have not risen inline with the rent increase and wider inflation.</p> <p>We are recruiting to a vacant inhouse money advice post and we have an outsourced SLA provision with the Citizens Advice Bureaux which is currently being reviewed.</p>
<p>Our customers expressed dissatisfaction with the contact offered by our Customer Services, Neighbourhood and property teams.</p>	<p>Following the Housing Ombudsman spotlight on 'Noise Complaints - Time to be heard' 9'Noise Complaints - Time to be heard (<a href="#">Spotlight-on-noise-complaints-Ombudsmans-Summary.pdf (housing-ombudsman.org.uk)</a>) and inline with customer complaints data. We have fully reviewed our service offer to customers. As part of this we held customer roadshows to understand and listen to our customers. We started to develop a new Neighbourhood Model during 23/24, (go live May 2024) to address this feedback and to improve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer experience</li> <li>• Customer involvement &amp; customer voice</li> <li>• Customer hub at the heart of the business.</li> </ul>

## Next Steps for 2024-25

**New Ombudsman Code:** The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 gave the Housing Ombudsman new powers and duties from 1 April 2024, including a new statutory code for handling complaints and a duty to monitor whether landlords comply. Prior to this the Complaint Handling Code offered guidance only, however Honeycomb must now ensure that all complaints received after 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 are handled in accordance with the code. The Ombudsman must monitor our compliance with the new code, and it can issue a complaint handling failure order if we do not comply.

**New Policies and Procedures:** Given the strengthened Housing Ombudsman Code and the Housing Ombudsman's spotlight on 'Attitudes, Respect and Rights' ([Spotlight on: Attitudes, respect and rights – relationship of equals \(housing-ombudsman.org.uk\)](#)) we have taken the decision to introduce new group wide policies for:

- Complaints Policy
- Discretionary Compensation Policy
- Unacceptable Behaviour Policy
- Vulnerability & Reasonable Adjustments Policy

These policies are currently going through the formal approval process. Supporting these policies, we are also working on robust processes regarding complaint management and data collection. We are also working on new customer facing communications around complaints. We plan to fully launch our revamped complaints function in July 2024.

**New Complaints Training:** We have launched new complaints training that is mandatory for all staff and new joiners, this training offers a foundation in good complaint handling and will be built on with further training over the coming months. We have also introduced a new mandatory target for all staff as part of the new appraisal process being launched in June 2024.

**Increased Resource in the Complaints Team:** We have created and recruited into a new role of 'Customer Voice Specialist', this role will oversee customer engagement across the group ensuring that our customers voices are heard when we are making decisions across the business. This role is responsible for complaints and customer feedback in general. This role is responsible for training, reporting and auditing, and will also take ownership of the correspondence with the Housing Ombudsman in the event of escalated complaints and in the form of annual self-assessment submission. One of the first objectives will be to complete training with all complaint handlers on the importance of responding to complaints within the agreed targets. Furthermore, we are also recruiting a 'Complaints Advisor', who will sit within our Customer Hub Team, to provide a first point of contact for all complaints and service requests. This role will coordinate and monitor compliance with deadlines and ensure that all customers engaging with us about any level of dissatisfaction receive a consistent and efficient response.

**Launch of the New Corporate Plan:** Honeycomb Group is going through a period of great transformation, adapting to the evolving Housing Sector. Our new corporate plan covering 2024 – 2029 was approved by Board in March 2024, we are currently working on how we're going to measure our performance, we plan to fully launch our new plan in July 2024. The plan places customer voice at the heart of all we do, and we expect this to positively impact on our complaints moving forward.

**Launch of a New Customer Voice Strategy:** Alongside our new corporate plan we have taken the decision to introduce new and improved group wide Customer Voice Strategy. This new strategy aims to put customers at the heart of all business decisions and is linked into the wider organisational aims and objectives. We aim to launch this strategy alongside our new corporate plan in July 2024.

**Complaints Data Collection:** Following the Housing Ombudsman's spotlight review in May 2023 on 'Knowledge and Information Management' ([Knowledge and Information Management \(KIM\) | Housing Ombuds \(housing-ombudsman.org.uk\)](https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk)). As a short term solution, we are undertaking a review on our information management systems for complaints, however this will feed into a business wide housing management system review.

**Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC):** Our governing body has appointed an MRC who will work closely with Executive Lead for complaints. The MRC will champion a positive complaint handling culture of openness and transparency. They will provide assurance through active engagement with the complaint team and wider teams that complaints are seen as learning opportunities, and early warning of changes needed to policies, processes or behaviours.