

Scrutiny Board :	Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board
Report Title	Housing Complaints Annual Report
Date of Meeting	Thursday, 4 September 2025
Report Author	Tom Hogan
Lead Officer	Executive Director - Place
Wards Affected	(All Wards);
Identify exempt information and exemption category	Choose an item.
Appendices (if any)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Housing Complaints Annual Report 2024-25 2. Housing Ombudsman Service Complaint Handling Code Self-Assessment 2024-25

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 To consider the Housing Complaints Annual Report.

2. Recommendation

That the Board considers and comments upon the information presented and determines whether it wishes to make any recommendations to the Executive.

3. Background and Context

- 3.1 The Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS) requires landlords to produce an annual complaints performance and service improvement report for scrutiny and challenge, which must include:
 - the annual self-assessment against this Code to ensure their complaint handling policy remains in line with its requirements.

- a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the landlord's complaint handling performance. This must also include a summary of the types of complaints the landlord has refused to accept.
 - any findings of non-compliance with this Code by the Ombudsman.
 - the service improvements made because of the learning from complaints.
 - any annual report about the landlord's performance from the Ombudsman.
 - any other relevant reports or publications produced by the Ombudsman in relation to the work of the landlord.
- 3.2 This must be reported to the landlord's governing body (or equivalent) and published on the section of its website relating to complaints. The governing body's response to the report must be published alongside this.
- 3.3 The purpose of this report is to share an update and invite scrutiny of our complaint handling performance as outlined in the appendices.

Performance

- 3.4 The number of complaints received has increased significantly over the last 12 months. The number of Stage 1 complaints increased by 47% (from 604 to 890) and the number of Stage 2 complaints increased by 109% (from 100 to 209).
- 3.5 This increase has meant that our response times have not been good enough. 36% of Stage 1 complaints were responded to on time, and 55% of Stage 2 complaints were responded to on time.
- 3.6 As a result, we have recruited additional resource and changed our response timescales to reflect those set out by the HOS. We are confident this will result in an increase in performance over the next 12 months.

Repairs Complaints

- 3.7 Although all service areas saw an increase in complaints, the biggest increase was complaints about Asset Management and Improvement (Repairs) where there was a 60% increase in Stage 1 complaints (from 432 to 695) and 232% increase in Stage 2 complaints (from 46 to 153).
- 3.8 56% of these complaints are due to delayed or incomplete work, the majority of which relates to the backlog of outstanding repairs previously reported to the Board. A contractor has been appointed to address this backlog.

Benchmarking

- 3.9 The number of complaints we received is significantly lower than other local authority landlords of a similar size. Sandwell received 40 per 1000 properties, whilst our peers received an average of 70 per 1000 properties.
- 3.10 The HOS recognises that higher complaint numbers are a sign of a complaint process that is accessible and that customers have trust in. Therefore it is important that we understand why our complaint numbers are relatively low and ensure that we are accurately recording complaints when we receive them.

- 3.11 The HOS definition of a complaint is clear: ‘an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the landlord, its own staff, or those acting on its behalf, affecting a resident or group of residents however made’
- 3.12 We believe there is a significant amount of dissatisfaction that is not being recorded. Some of this is with good intention – for example, if someone contacts us because their appointment did not take place, we resolve the issue by rearranging the appointment. But without capturing the initial dissatisfaction, we are at risk of not knowing that things are going wrong.
- 3.13 As a result, we have made recording dissatisfaction easier, so that even where customers do not want their issue handled as a formal complaint, we will still have data that shows where dissatisfaction is arising.
- 3.14 Dissatisfied customers may also choose to approach an elected member or member of parliament. We are currently analysing the data from these enquiries to understand how many would be regarded as service requests, and how many would be regarded as complaints.

Demographics

- 3.15 We monitor the demographics of customers who make a complaint. This is so that we can identify if there are specific groups who are underrepresented or overrepresented. Underrepresentation may be due to barriers in our reporting processes, whilst overrepresentation could be a sign our service delivery is not meeting the needs of specific group.
- 3.16 The data indicates that there are some groups who are underrepresented and others that are overrepresented. Coupled with data from the Tenant Satisfaction Measures perception survey, there is work to do to ensure some of our customers are not left behind when it comes to complaint handling and service delivery.

Housing Ombudsman Cases

- 3.17 The HOS investigates cases where customers remain unhappy after exhausting our complaints process.
- 3.18 The HOS have also seen a significant increase in the number of complaints they are investigating. As a result, many of the complaints they are investigating are from previous years, when different policies and processes may have been in place.
- 3.19 When we receive the final report from the HOS, all relevant parties meet to look at the case and to identify whether the same mistakes would be repeated with a similar case today.
- 3.20 Record keeping remains a risk. A replacement for the software systems we use to record information will support with this, but there must also be cultural shift to ensure we record everything, so that our decisions can be evidence and data driven.
- 3.21 The HOS have also added additional resource to their service and so we expect future investigations to look at services as they are currently being delivered.

Challenges

- 3.22 There are a number of challenges we have identified over the last 12 months, including:
- We are encouraging a change in culture regarding complaints, promoting the view that these are a valuable insight for improvement, and not something we should be trying to avoid.
 - The systems we use for recording are not industry-leading, but we have made changes to improve the amount and quality of data we are able to collect and act upon
 - Having a dedicated team of investigators who are independent from the services being complaint about should reduce the inconsistency that some customers have experienced

Improvements

- 3.23 Several improvements have been made a result of the complaints we have received, as well as the work of our Tenant Audit Group, who recently reviewed our complaint handling process. These improvements include:
- Improving how we assess and record the needs of vulnerable residents
 - Provide clear and accurate repairs scheduling information on our website
 - Make logging a repair online easier

Policies

- 3.24 Two new policies were introduced because of complaints:
- 3.25 The Complaints Compensation Policy was introduced because of a number of HOS complaints where they determined that an apology was not enough to reflect the distress that had been caused by the poor service residents had received. The HOS expects some residents to be compensated for poor service, and this policy allows us to meet this requirement.
- 3.26 The Housing Repairs and Maintenance Policy details how we will deal with responsive repairs. It sets out which repairs the Council is responsible for as well as the timescales for work to take place. Being clear about what we will do and when we will do should reduce any confusion which may result in dissatisfaction.

Housing Ombudsman Service Complaint Handling Code Self-Assessment

- 3.27 A copy of our HOS Complaint Handling Code Self-Assessment is included in the appendices. This document sets out the requirement of the HOS and details how we are meeting them.

4. Consultation

No consultation was required for this report

5. Financial Implications

There are no financial implications regarding this report

6. Legal and Governance Implications

Failure to scrutinise the report would result us being non-compliant with the HOS Complaint Handling Code, which is a statutory requirement

7. Risks

There are no identified risks regarding this report

8. Equality and Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty)

There are no Equality and Diversity Implications regarding this report

9. Other Relevant Implications

There are no other relevant implications

10. Background Documents

There are no background documents

11. How does this deliver the Outcomes in the Council Plan?

Living in Sandwell

- 11.1 Providing safe and affordable homes requires services that are fit for purpose. An effective complaint handling process ensures we receive feedback where improvements in this service are needed.

One Council One Team Approach

- 11.2 Our aim is to deliver a high quality, inclusive complaint handling process. It needs to meet the needs of our diverse communities and ensure easy opportunities to engage.

The improvements we make will be driven by data and by publishing performance information, will ensure transparency.