

Housing

Ombudsman Service



Quarterly complaint handling report: Setting a positive complaints culture

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Introduction

Welcome to the first edition of our new quarterly complaint handling report. These reports now include information on landlords engagement with the statutory Complaint Handling Code, as we fulfil our duties under the Social Housing Regulation Act. The Complaint Handling Failure Orders (CHFOs) continue to be published, including where they are issued for non-compliance with the Code, but most of the report is dedicated to insights from our review of landlord approaches to promote a positive complaints culture across the sector.

Good complaint handling is not just about ticking a box or meeting statutory obligations. While essential this is done, landlords must adopt an ethical complaint handling stance, which looks at the person behind the complaint and understands the detriment it can have when not completed successfully. There is also the need for increased scrutiny and oversight by governing bodies. I have been extremely encouraged to see a vast improvement in approaches in recent years, but landlords can go further and tease out the learning the organisation needs to do, as well as test how those complaints show its culture.

Throughout our submissions we are seeing plenty of good practice, especially in relation to involving governance and the new Members Responsible for Complaints and putting residents at the heart of complaint handling. The statutory Code has been met positively by landlords and we have had some constructive conversations with a variety of sector leaders about how we work together to deliver a brighter future for the sector and its residents.

Two areas of concern. There are 10 landlords who received more than 1 CHFO in the last quarter and in some cases multiple times. In many cases, these are landlords where we have seen high maladministration rates and have had to intervene over several quarters. In some cases these landlords are now subject to regulatory intervention. CHFOs are issued rarely and may signal wider concerns – these warnings must be heeded to avoid unnecessary detriment to residents.

Related to this is the second concern about complaint handling resources and staffing levels. This function is a vital touch point for the resident-landlord relationship which should be central to any landlords existence as well as helping the organisation manage risk. Again, under the self-assessment of the Code, landlords must be confident they have adequate resources in place so there is not a disconnect between policy intent and actual practice.

Finally, we have a whole host of resources for landlords and residents through our free to access [Centre for Learning](#), including eLearning modules, workshops and drop-in sessions. We have also updated our [Complaint Handling Code pages](#) so that residents, landlords and third parties are able to understand how landlords must legally respond to complaints.

Richard Blakeway
Housing Ombudsman



Complaint Handling Code annual submissions

The Complaint Handling Code was first published in 2020.

Landlords have been asked to self-assess against the Code since its introduction. However, landlords are now required to submit their annual self-assessment to the Ombudsman, as part of the Code becoming statutory since 1 April 2024. All landlords must also publish and submit an annual complaint and service improvement report to demonstrate learning from complaints.

For all landlords, the deadline for submission was aligned to the return date for the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs). For landlords responsible for more than 1,000 homes, this is 30 June each year and for smaller landlords their year-end.



We have ensured that when a complainant submits a complaint, they are dealt with through the guidelines of the complaint handling code to ensure consistency.

To support landlords ahead of the Code becoming statutory, the Ombudsman offered eLearning and webinars through its Centre for Learning, with:



1,185

confirmed attendees from **754** landlords at webinars on monitoring the Code.

1,891

learners participating in Code related eLearning, with a **95%** recommendation rating.

We heard in feedback surveys that:



95%

of landlords found the Code has helped to embed a positive complaint handling culture.

92%

of landlords found the Code has helped them to embed a more consistent approach to complaint handling.

Data on assessments

We have set out return rates for different size and types of provider. These tables only include landlords that were expected to have submitted its self-assessment and supporting documents by this stage. This means all landlords responsible for more than 1,000 homes and for smaller landlords where the year-end was before 31 August 2024.

42 landlords provided their submission ahead of their respective deadline, demonstrating positive engagement with the requirements of the Code. The majority of these were co-operatives.

Landlord size	Within timescale	Out of timescale	No submission	Submission rate
Large (+1k properties)	332	4	48	88%
Small (<1k properties)	149	41	415	31%

Landlord type	Within timescale	Out of timescale	No submission	Submission rate
Abbeyfield	17	2	47	29%
Almshouse	19	9	89	24%
Co-operative	14	7	85	20%
For profit	4	1	22	19%
Housing association	288	22	153	67%
LA/ALMO or TMO	127	4	45	74%
Voluntary	12	0	22	35%
Grand total	481	45	463	53%

These return rates highlight a significant difference in engagement with the Ombudsman between large and small landlords.

Most of the large landlords who submitted outside the timescale told us they were awaiting sign-off from the relevant governing body prior to publication of key documents. In response, we explained that submissions should still be provided, along with an explanation for when any missing documents would be published.

Across smaller landlords, the majority of those with overdue submissions are responsible for less than 100 properties and many have not had a complaint referred to the Ombudsman

by a resident. Many told us they were unaware of the new requirement and requested further information and guidance. We have supported these landlords by signposting them to our Centre for Learning and agreeing extended submission dates.

We have also increased our engagement with relevant trade bodies to ensure that members receive information about our Service and the obligations of membership. We are also issuing proactive letters to smaller organisations due to provide their submissions later in the year to ensure they are aware of the requirements and can access our guidance ahead of the submissions date.

Insights from assessments

Our initial focus on monitoring the adoption of the statutory Code is ensuring landlords' provide evidence of self-assessment and its complaint policy aligns with the Code. In future, we will consider whether landlords are compliant in practice as well as policy, in addition to our CHFO process.

Our review of policies provides a plethora of insight to share with landlords as we aim to drive further improvements in future submissions. Encouragingly, we have already seen much good practice in the submissions.

Annual complaint and service improvement report

The annual complaint and service improvement report was a new requirement during the first year of submissions, and we

have seen many landlords embrace this and provide some clear and in-depth reports, that show they have looked closely at their complaint handling, reporting on what is good and what requires improvement.

Governance statement

Many landlords have also included their governing body response to the report within the body of report, which has provided fuller transparency of scrutiny and oversight by the landlord of its self-assessment and policy.

In addition to this, we have seen landlords understand the importance of accessibility for residents around this information, with some landlords creating audio and video versions of the documents, as well as easy read versions.

Annual report

Muir Housing – clear report that features complaint handling performance, the Housing Ombudsman Service 'view' of the organisation and sets out improvements made as a result of complaints.

[PowerPoint Presentation \(muir.org.uk\)](#)

Railway Housing Association

Relatively small organisation, has done a comprehensive report based on a small volume of complaints and handled data protection carefully to protect the identity of the person(s) involved.

[annual-complaints-report-june-2024-365.pdf \(railwayha.co.uk\)](#)

Granville Community Homes

Really good example of a small organisation and how they have set out further action that they will be taking, despite not receiving any complaints in the period.

[Complaints | Granville Community Homes](#)

Governance statement

Populo Living – small housing association (less than 500 properties) has set out a clear overview of the approach taken by the MRC and responded on behalf of the Board. Particularly highlighting the ongoing work / scrutiny involved in ensuring that complaint handling is effective (including an external audit). [Housing Ombudsman Board Report \(populoliving.co.uk\)](#)





The self-assessment has provided a useful guide in adapting our complaint policy in providing a positive complaint handling culture.

We have had several landlords, where upon initial submission have provided encouraging annual reports and governance statements. This is extremely important for the Member Responsible for Complaints function to work effectively for landlords.

For example, Gloucester City Council's annual report is engaging, colourful and structured.

Granville Community Homes, despite reporting no complaints for 2023/24, contained a governance statement and provided insight into its work.

We also saw how Gravesend Churches promoted its annual report to residents, a positive step which shows transparency.

We also saw landlords respond positively to concerns raised by the Ombudsman. Following a severe maladministration finding for Christian Action Housing Association last year, which ordered the landlord to undergo an extensive set of reviews to comply with the Code and improve its knowledge and information management, the landlord went a step further and ensured its report was easy to read and included photographs to aid stakeholders.

Positive engagement with landlords

We have spoken to many landlords throughout the submissions process, providing explanations and sharing knowledge about the specifics of the Complaint Handling Code. Many landlords have engaged positively with us where they required further guidance and support.

This included the Almshouse Association, who reached out to us requiring guidance for their members, all of which are small landlords that may have not had contact with us. We are currently working with them closely to agree templates they can use moving forwards to ensure complaints policies are compliant, as well as creating a toolkit that their members can use to ensure all the requirements for a submission are met.

We have also had positive engagement with Confederation of Cooperatives and the National Federation of ALMOs, as these trade bodies examine the new duties for their members.



Non-compliant areas

While the Code has been in place for some time, we recognise this is the first year requiring a return to the Ombudsman, and greater oversight and scrutiny of the self-assessment against the Code. Wherever landlords are reporting aspects they do not yet comply with, our Duty to Monitor team will engage with the landlord to track this to completion and offer support if required.

Where we have not seen a response to our call for submissions, we are engaging with all landlords to remind them of the statutory obligations and will ensure these are provided within a reasonable timescale. We have also agreed extensions with landlords where requested and with good reason. The main reasons for the extensions so far are the impact of the election (mostly councils) and small landlords. We have taken a pragmatic approach, focussing on thoroughness rather than speed.

In several instances, landlords have demonstrated openness and transparency in their self-assessments, highlighting areas where further work is required to fully embed the provisions of the Code beyond policy and into practice.

Others have focussed on ensuring published policies and associated documents meet specific requirements and have yet to comment on how this has been implemented into service delivery. We would encourage these organisations to work closely with their Member Responsible for Complaints to test how these policies are applied in practice.



The Code has helped us to raise awareness of positive complaint handling with staff and residents.


The largest area of non-compliance we have seen reported by landlords at the time of submission so far is due to timings of governance and oversight activities.

While some of this has been because of the General Election purdah for councils, we have seen good practice in this area that all landlords can learn from. Namely, this is recognising the need for this oversight and planning this into delivery timescales, and providing high quality, honest commentary, which sets out clear reporting on Ombudsman findings and general complaint handling practice.

In Q1, only one landlord did not provide its response within the target timescale and failed to respond to our interventions. It was issued a CHFO. This is included in the [Annex](#).

Why it is important to get it right

Getting the complaints policy right is important but must be matched in practice. In this section, we highlight cases where we see how effective complaint responses and doing so within the confines of the Complaint Handling Code, can have huge benefits for both landlord and resident. Where we see it, we will also raise cases where we see this has a detrimental impact for both too – with this often being the start of a relationship breakdown.



We saw good practice by **Hammersmith and Fulham Council** (202211844), making a finding of no maladministration following poor contractor works on repairs. It went to great lengths in pursuit of the answers it required to adequately provide the resident with a stage 2 response.

When it realised it would not be able to hit stage 2 response timescales, it wrote to the resident and explained this in detail, providing as much information as possible at that time. When it did get the information it needed to issue a response, it did so on the same day.

The landlord also showed learning throughout the complaint and willingness to put things right through appropriate levels of compensation, and internal staff emails showed that complaint handlers had due concern to the resident's issues and were consistently proactive in acting upon them.



We also saw good complaint responses by **Longhurst Group** (202121961) with the landlord recognising issues with its service and seeking to provide compensation for those failings. It also took a person-centred approach to reimbursing the resident by replacing the carpet, rather than simply pointing them towards an insurance company.

The landlord went above and beyond for this reimbursement, which shows they understood the impact it had on the resident and wanted to put things right.

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The Code, our policy and subsequent training to all staff ensured that we adopt a consistent, rigid approach to complaints. It ensures that no matter who receives the complaint, it will be handled in the same way and any complainant will be treated fairly.

Complaint Handling Failure Orders

These orders are clear examples of where landlords are failing to comply with the Code in practice, and these will be used as part of Duty to Monitor assessments.

However, it is not just an issue because it is non-compliant with the Code in practice, these failings to resolve a complaint will directly impact on residents receiving redress. Landlords should be ensuring there is a fair culture for redress and the Member Responsible for Complaints can ensure this is taken seriously within the governing body.

CHFOs are a last resort where a landlord has failed to handle complaints in-line with the Code and have failed to act in response to the Ombudsman's intervention.

We have continued to see an increase in the number of these orders being made to landlords for failing to provide evidence of compliance with the orders made in our determinations. This is on top of the increase that we saw last quarter. In 50% of those cases where we extended

compliance timescales, the landlord then failed to comply with the new deadline.

We have also seen delays in landlords' complaint handling due to staffing issues. Landlords are expected to suitably resource their complaints function and there are several benefits to landlords prioritising this vital function.

Benefits include insight into recurring issues which can lead to service improvement initiatives and a highlighting of where the strengths and weaknesses lie in their service provision. Residents are already dissatisfied and likely to be frustrated at the point of making a complaint and where these delays occur, they can feel like they are not being listened to and their concerns not being taken seriously.

This can lead to the escalating of complaints which results in landlords having to find more resources than if they had been able to prioritise resolving that complaint at earlier stages.



Support and guidance for landlords and residents

We have developed various website pages for the [Complaint Handling Code](#), which provides information on what the Code is, guidance notes for landlords and information for residents.



Additionally, you can currently find the following on the [Learning Hub](#):

- Complaint Handling Code eLearning
- recordings of self-assessment webinars for:
 - landlords with over 1000 homes
 - landlords with less than 1000 homes
- recordings of annual complaint handling and service improvement report webinars for:
 - landlords with over 1000 homes
 - landlords with less than 1000 homes
- recordings of submissions webinars for:
 - landlords with over 1000 homes
 - landlords with less than 1000 homes
- recordings of statutory Code webinars for:
 - local authority and ALMOs
 - housing associations with over 1000 homes
 - co-operatives
 - small landlords and Abbeyfields
- podcast: Complaint Handling Code and Duty to Monitor



For any other resources you may need, please visit our [Centre for Learning](#).

Annex

Complaint Handling Failure Orders from April to June 2024.

Type 1 - Unreasonable delays in accepting or progressing a complaint

Date issued	Landlord	Case ref	Complied with?
05/04/2024	Warwick District Council <i>An order was issued due to unreasonable delays in a stage 1 response being provided. As the order was not complied with the case was accepted for investigation.</i>	202312721	No
23/04/2024	London & Quadrant Housing Trust	202335378	Yes
23/04/2024	Soho Housing Association <i>An order was issued due to unreasonable delays in a stage 2 response being provided. As the order was not complied with the case was accepted for investigation.</i>	202309829	No
24/04/2024	London Borough of Barking and Dagenham <i>An order was issued due to unreasonable delays in a stage 1 response being provided. As the order was not complied with the case was accepted for investigation.</i>	202337409	No
24/04/2024	London Borough of Harrow	202338325	Yes
21/05/2024	Haringey Council <i>An order was issued due to unreasonable delays in a complaint response being provided. As the order was not complied with the case was accepted for investigation.</i>	202332178	No
21/05/2024	Soho Housing Association <i>An order was issued due to unreasonable delays in a stage 1 response being provided. As the order was not complied with the case was accepted for investigation.</i>	202338431	No
21/05/2024	Royal Borough of Greenwich	202341112	Yes
18/06/2024	Waltham Forest Council	202309076	Yes
21/06/2024	London & Quadrant Housing Trust	202345836	Yes
27/06/2024	Somerset Council	202332945	Yes
28/06/2024	Haringey Council	202327417	Yes
28/06/2024	London Borough of Newham	202326332	Yes

Type 2a - Unreasonable delays in providing the Ombudsman information

Date issued	Landlord	Case ref	Complied with?
11/04/2024	London Borough of Harrow	202115424	Yes
26/04/2024	North Northamptonshire Council <i>The landlord did not provide all of the information requested by the Ombudsman and the case proceeded to investigation without it.</i>	202209812	No
29/04/2024	Lewisham Council <i>The landlord did not provide all of the information requested by the Ombudsman and the case proceeded to investigation without it.</i>	202231986	No
16/05/2024	Soho Housing Association	202220416	Yes
16/05/2024	A2Dominion Housing Group	202300620	Yes
22/05/2024	Southway Housing Trust <i>The landlord did not provide the information requested by the Ombudsman by the deadline given. The information was subsequently provided.</i>	202300663	No
07/06/2024	Warwick District Council <i>The landlord did not provide the information requested by the Ombudsman by the deadline given. The information was subsequently provided.</i>	202226965	No
10/06/2024	Warwick District Council	202234620	Yes
21/06/2024	Haringey Council	202218734	Yes
26/06/2024	Hexagon Housing Association	202014900	Yes
27/06/2024	Hexagon Housing Association <i>The landlord did not provide the information requested by the Ombudsman by the deadline given. The information was subsequently provided.</i>	202218130	No

Type 2b – Evidence of compliance not provided by the landlord

Date issued	Landlord	Case ref	Complied with?
04/04/2024	Paragon Asra Housing	202116273	Yes
04/04/2024	London & Quadrant Housing Trust <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. The deadline within the order was not met but the landlord engaged with us and has now complied with the orders and provided appropriate evidence of this.</i>	202204170	No
05/04/2024	Milton Keynes City Council	202102710	Yes
08/04/2024	Birmingham City Council	202210450	Yes
09/04/2024	Peabody Trust	202104507	Yes
10/04/2024	Southwark Council	202231848	Yes
11/04/2024	London Borough of Hackney <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. The deadline within the order was not met but the landlord has now complied with the orders and provided appropriate evidence of this.</i>	202207096	No
01/05/2024 and 21/05/2024	Lewisham Council <i>Two orders were issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. The landlord subsequently engaged with us on compliance.</i>	202231881	No
02/05/2024	Hexagon Housing Association <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. We are considering whether further action regarding the non-compliance is now necessary.</i>	202210306	No
07/05/2024	Hyde Housing Association	202220591	Yes

Date issued	Landlord	Case ref	Complied with?
10/05/2024	Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. The deadline within the order was not met but the landlord engaged with us and has now complied with the orders and provided appropriate evidence of this.</i>	202212984	No
14/05/2024	Havering Council <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. The deadline within the order was not met but the landlord engaged with us and has now complied with the orders and provided appropriate evidence of this.</i>	202203107	No
15/05/2024	Soho Housing Association <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. We are considering whether further action regarding the non-compliance is now necessary.</i>	202123144	No
17/05/2024	A2Dominion Housing Group	202105943	Yes
24/05/2024	Lewisham Council	202204031	Yes
29/05/2024	Camden Council	202003074	Yes
05/06/2024	Metropolitan Thames Valley (MTV) <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. We are considering whether further action regarding the non-compliance is now necessary.</i>	202210757	No
05/06/2024	Southwark Council	202226627	Yes
05/06/2024	Canterbury City Council	202303492	Yes
06/06/2024	Lewisham Council <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. The landlord is engaging with us on compliance.</i>	202224026	No

Type 2b – Evidence of compliance not provided by the landlord

Date issued	Landlord	Case ref	Complied with?
07/06/2024	Orchard (Weybridge) HA <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. We are considering whether further action regarding the non-compliance is now necessary.</i>	201911876	No
07/06/2024	Haringey Council	202123490	Yes
12/06/2024	Soho Housing Association <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. The deadline within the order was not met but the landlord has now complied with the orders and provided appropriate evidence of this.</i>	202121347	No
18/06/2024	Great Places Housing Association	202302849	Yes
20/06/2024	London & Quadrant Housing (L&Q)	202223461	Yes
21/06/2024	London Borough of Harrow <i>Two orders were issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. The landlord is now engaging with us on compliance.</i>	202115424	No
21/06/2024	Westminster City Council <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. The deadline within the order was not met but the landlord has now complied with the orders and provided appropriate evidence of this.</i>	202225506	No
27/06/2024	Sovereign Network Homes <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. The deadline within the order was not met but the landlord has now complied with the orders and provided appropriate evidence of this.</i>	202301622	No

Date issued	Landlord	Case ref	Complied with?
27/06/2024	Sanctuary Housing Association	202304970	Yes
28/06/2024	London Borough of Newham <i>An order was issued due to the landlord failing to provide evidence of compliance with our orders within a reasonable amount of time. The deadline within the order was not met but the landlord has now complied with the orders and provided appropriate evidence of this.</i>	202301580	No

Type 3a – non-submission of annual return or required documentation

Date issued	Landlord	Case ref	Complied with?
15/08/2024	Slough Borough Council	Duty to Monitor submission	Yes



Housing

Ombudsman Service

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