

## **Responses to the consultation on our Business Plan 2023-24**

### **Introduction**

As a public service that is funded by subscription from our members, it is important that we are accountable for the way we use our resources. This is underlined by our openness value which emphasises being accountable for the service we deliver. We are an arms-length body of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities so we are accountable to parliament, but we also have a responsibility to:

- the landlords who are members of our Scheme.
- residents who have every right to expect prompt and proper consideration of complaints by their landlords and by us, and who ultimately fund our Scheme through their rent.

This report highlights the main themes and issues emerging from the consultation on our 2023-24 Business Plan, which set out the activities and targets for year two of our Corporate Plan.

This document is not intended to cover the detail of all the responses received but provides a summary of the feedback. We would like to thank all those who took the time to respond. We considered all the comments provided.

### **The consultation process**

We published the consultation document on our website on 6 February 2023 and the consultation ran for three weeks to 27 February 2023.

We published the consultation as an online survey and enabled stakeholders to submit responses through the online survey or by email. The exercise was promoted through direct mailing to stakeholders, press releases and ongoing social media promotion. Feedback was submitted anonymously.

Following extensive consultation on our Corporate Plan and Business Plan in the previous year, this year our consultation focussed on two key strategic programmes: awareness raising and developing the Centre for Learning. The exercise was geared towards gathering insight to inform service delivery during 2023-24. We also asked respondents to provide any general observations about the other aspects of our Business Plan.

### **Summary of responses**

We received 138 responses in total, a breakdown is provided below:

- 78 from residents (56%)
- 52 from landlords (37%)
- 8 from residents' representatives (7%)

We also received written submissions from stakeholder bodies, including the National Housing Federation, Northern Housing Consortium, Tpas and Shelter.

Respondents recognised the need for a strong and effective service in response to rising demand, and the subsequent need for resources for the Ombudsman.

Feedback demonstrated support for the objectives to increase awareness among residents and landlords and provide an enhanced learning offer.

### **Residents and awareness**

While a clear majority felt they had a good understanding of the role of the Ombudsman (80%), the consultation responses suggested areas where we could go further. This included landlords ensuring residents are aware of the Ombudsman and actively promote the service, particularly through digital channels. Landlords acknowledged the role they have to play.

Residents expressed a desire to deepen partnership working with HOS to develop content and campaigns which drive 'word of mouth' awareness in communities, as well as growing the digital offer to increase the reach of our channels and content.

*We still believe that not enough tenants are aware of the Housing Ombudsman Service.*

#### **Landlords' representation**

*Include HOS leaflets that are geared towards residents' needs in the many letters that landlords send out. Get on popular TV programmes, and show stories of the successes, and how tough and long-lasting cases can be resolved. **Residents' representative***

*Force landlords to promote awareness in their tenant handbooks and newsletters.*

#### **Resident**

We will use the feedback provided to inform our strategic objective to increase openness. In particular, this will inform the commitments we have made to:

- Raise awareness with demographic and geographic groups that are not accessing our service as much as others.
- Develop the 'Meet the Ombudsman' events, increasing their frequency and undertaking proactive promotion to encourage participation.
- Publish the conclusions of the Accessibility Expert Panel.

We will also increase the range of resources to support residents and landlords to raise awareness of our service in communities, working closely with the Residents' Panel to build advocacy and awareness locally.

### **Landlords and learning**

Landlords demonstrated an appetite to deepen their understanding of how the Ombudsman works and how they can learn lessons from complaints. They acknowledged and welcomed the leadership already shown to the sector and encourage further activity in this space.

Respondents emphasised the importance of the Ombudsman supporting landlords to embed change in both their delivery and culture. Landlord representative groups expressed a desire to work collaboratively with the Ombudsman to support this ambition, by sharing learning with their networks and helping deliver training.

The consultation asked about the biggest challenges facing landlords. Responses gave an indication as to the themes the Centre for Learning could explore as part of its further development. Respondents identified property condition (25%), staff (18%) and anti-social behaviour (16%) as the top three issues affecting the quality of their homes and services. Broken down further, general repairs, leaks, damp and mould, and heating and hot water were significant issues in relation to property condition.

*Our member organisations have seen a great improvement already in sector engagement with the Housing Ombudsman, including more consultation on cases and regular meetings to discuss trends and ideas. With the additional resources provided we hope that this can continue and grow with many more partners so that this good work focusing on prevention of complaints escalation can spread throughout the sector more widely. **Landlords' representative/sector body***

*We value the spotlight reports and take each one with the seriousness that is intended. Our Board is completely in the loop with recommendations and holds us to account to delivering improvements where they are required. Learning inside and outside of sector is very important to us and it would be helpful for the Ombudsman to lead capacity building sessions that brings people from the best organisations together to learn. **Landlord, Housing Association***

Respondents suggested the Centre for Learning could focus on highlighting best practice, case studies and creating opportunities to share learning, alongside practical tools such as templates and guidance on policies.

The Centre for Learning offer is being developed further, analysing the consultation feedback to identify additional learning and development opportunities. We will work closely with landlords during this process, establishing their needs and preferences, and tailor training to different roles and landlord types to create an integrated learning offer. We will continue to offer learning on timely and immediate priorities, through webinars, podcasts and events.

We intend to enhance our proactive stakeholder engagement with landlords' representative groups, to build understanding and trust, highlight good practice and develop a positive culture of learning from complaints. This will include inviting stakeholders to propose topics for systemic investigations.

### **Other comments**

A small number of landlords highlighted concerns with the subscription model in their consultation response. Although all landlords can access our learning tools and their residents can access our dispute support service, expanding the benefits gained from their subscription, we have already committed to looking at alternate fee structures in 2024-25. Any proposed change would require Secretary of State approval.

### **Conclusion**

The Ombudsman has carefully reviewed the consultation responses. Some of the feedback is already being addressed through the Social Housing Regulation Bill

where additional powers will be made available to us and our Complaint Handling Code will be placed onto a statutory footing. The rest will be used to inform our plans and we would like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking the time and trouble to respond.