



Improving customer outcomes

A summary of our report to the Housing Ombudsman

Introduction

When we don't get things right, we encourage our customers to escalate their complaints to the Housing Ombudsman. In 2017, some of these escalations related to our support for customers with leaks, damp and mould, and a number of these were subsequently upheld. The Ombudsman asked us to carry out a review of our practice which enabled us to reflect and build on some key outstanding service improvements. We were specifically requested to consider:

- Why the failings occurred
- Who else may be affected
- The findings of other relevant Ombudsman determinations
- How we can best equip and enable colleagues to deliver excellent customer care in this area
- How we comply with the Ombudsman spotlight reports on knowledge and information management (KIM) and damp and mould

We carried out this review internally, but independent from the teams involved. It was vital for us that the review was transparent, that it offered a comprehensive analysis of the root causes of these issues and provided us with assurance our actions would go far enough to support customers better. So, we took the step to commission Altair Ltd, an independent consultancy, to peer-review our findings.

The recommendations contained within this review considered the views of our customers, determinations from the Ombudsman, as well as insights from our colleagues. We also considered data and the contents of reports and training materials.

We committed to carrying out a review of the implementation of the recommendations within six months following their adoption by our Board. This is scheduled to take place in October 2024.

Context

When we received the determination from the Ombudsman in October 2023, a number of relevant service improvements were already underway:

- A **restructure of our Executive Management Team** including the introduction of Chief Customer Officer and Chief Property Officer, roles previously held by one person. In addition to this, the re-instatement of Repairs and Maintenance as a directorate in its own right.
- An **Enhanced Housing Management pilot** beginning in January 2023 which set out to achieve outstanding building safety standards and transform customer experience for residents of our tallest and/or most complex buildings. The pilot saw the introduction of extra site-based colleagues who were responsible for a smaller number of properties under the standard leasehold structure. By October 2023, we decided to make the pilot a core service offer.
- A **Repairs Improvement Plan** had already started delivering better customer outcomes. We updated our Responsive Repairs Policy, giving customers clarity on when we would carry out non-urgent repairs. We also significantly upgraded our main system, resulting in better diagnosis of repairs, and an improved interface with our joint venture repairs partner, leading to better tracking of works orders from creation to completion. We also re-procured our joint venture repairs partner in London to drive improvements.
- A **Complaints Improvement Plan** had been developed with a range of caseload improvements for managers and senior managers, resulting in a more focused approach to managing complaint handling compliance within service areas.

Learnings

The review identified areas where changes to our policy or practice would improve outcomes for customers, and so recommendations were made across multiple areas of work.

Latent defect management

What did the review find?

- Delays in dealing with latent defects and how we responded to customer issues were caused by using a third-party contractor, complexities of working through the Covid-19 pandemic, and the subsequent transfer of case management internally to a team without enough resources to manage this increase in cases.
- We needed better control of the progression of cases and communication between residents, developers, and the contractor.

What are we doing about it?

We are carrying out a comprehensive review of latent defect case management, including:

- Creating dashboards for management oversight and executive assurance that works are progressing.
- Scoping whether a new software system is needed, or if the existing system capability will be able to meet our requirements.
- Looking at how we use third-party consultants, how we monitor performance, and how data and information flows between us.
- Improving how we take handover and then store documents from developers.

Responsive repairs case management

What did the review find?

- Some areas of identified service issues were already within scope of our Repairs Improvement Plan.
- System limitations restricted our ability to efficiently raise repairs for jobs involving multiple trades, or where the work was complex. This meant we had problems in evidencing how we fulfilled our repairing obligations.
- We needed to identify dedicated project management resource for complex works, including customer liaison.

What are we doing about it?

- We have refreshed our Repairs Improvement Plan to incorporate findings from this review.

- We have established a working group to look at existing system capabilities and where necessary explore other systems.
- We have restructured our Repairs and Maintenance directorate to divide responsibilities more clearly and drive a culture of accountability for service delivery.

Colleague training, customer care and vulnerability

What did the review find?

- Large property management patch sizes limited our ability to 'own' the relationship with residents and resolve their issues quickly enough.
- The new pilot approach to housing management (Enhanced Housing Management) was having positive effects on dissatisfaction and complaints, and plans were already underway to expand the team further.
- There were some challenges with how colleagues recorded customer contact, partly due to the number of different housing management systems being used internally. As a result, in the determination case, we did not act on information that pointed to vulnerabilities within the household.
- We needed to do more to socialise our Prioritisation Policy, so colleagues knew how they could improve service access to customers who needed it.
- We needed to improve colleague training in four key areas: effective use of the repairs system, case management of planned and packaged works, contractor management and complaints handling.

What are we doing about it?

- We are evaluating the mandatory training requirements for colleagues within repairs, contact centre and complaints. We are setting clear standards and expectations across the organisation on record keeping, and providing training for managers to gain assurance that their teams are complying with those standards.
- We will embed resident feedback and learning from the Enhanced Housing Management pilot within our new customer offer - currently in development.
- We will refresh and widely socialise our Prioritisation Policy to ensure it is operationally practical and clear to colleagues how they should apply it.
- We have developed reports for colleagues to increase visibility of customer vulnerability in casework, so that we can better target additional support.

Complaint handling and learning from other Ombudsman determinations

What did the review find?

- We received eleven Ombudsman determinations relating to leaks, damp and mould in the six months leading to 31 October 2023. These cases further re-enforced our need to make improvements in complaint handling, fulfilling our repairing obligations, record keeping and customer care.
- Our Complaints Improvement Plan was starting to have an effect, but we needed to go further, particularly with preventing delays in case progression.

What are we doing about it?

- We have expanded our Complaints Improvement Plan to incorporate the findings of this review.
- We have updated our Complaints Policy, Complaints Procedure and Compensation Policy, to drive a positive complaint handling culture.
- We are updating templated letters and reviewing colleague training to improve written communication with customers.
- We have included complaints-specific performance objectives for relevant colleagues from 2024/25.
- We are making significant changes to how complaints about repairs are managed.

Other residents who may have experienced similar issues

What did the review find?

- We have identified 24 residents across 15 blocks who were potentially impacted by similar service failures.

What are we doing about it?

- We will contact each of the identified residents to understand the extent to which they were impacted, evaluate appropriate redress, and understand whether there are any additional lessons to learn around these service failures.

Compliance with Ombudsman spotlight reports

What did the review find?

- We needed greater assurance that our policy and practice was in line with both Ombudsman reports. Self-assessments relating to the Ombudsman spotlight reports on Damp and Mould, and Knowledge and Information Management

were completed, but the findings needed to be fully embedded into existing or planned programmes of work.

What are we doing about it?

- We will refresh the two relevant spotlight report self-assessments, and future spotlight reports will be 'owned' by an accountable service area to ensure findings are embedded with existing or planned programmes of work.
- We will be updating our self-assessment template to include version control and the ability to track the progress of actions.
- We will be reviewing our Damp and Mould Policy in line with Ombudsman recommendations, learning from our work on damp and mould to date, and sector best practice.

Our learning statement

We would like to offer our sincere apologies to the customers who were impacted in 2017 by the issues outlined in this report, and to offer reassurance that our number one priority is to vastly improve our services for them.

In this instance there were significant delays in our response in terms of repairs carried out, communications with our customers and in the way we escalated issues. We have since complied with all the orders in this case.

Full repair work has since been completed at this development and further investigation will take place to ensure that other customers have not been negatively impacted by the issues raised in this review.

We know that some of our services have not met the standards that we or our customers expect. Many improvements are already underway as a result of our new strategy, as we continue to work closely with the Housing Ombudsman.

Building on our existing improvement programs within repairs and complaints handling, we continue to invest in our structure, and promoting positive outcomes for customers. This includes a new approach to housing management, targeted at transforming customer experience in our tallest and most complex buildings.

We know there are still issues we are working to address to improve our services for customers, and that's why we are moving quickly to make wide-scale improvements.