

Appendix A

Annual complaints performance and service improvement report

1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024

Response to report from member responsible for complaints (MRC) – Cllr Hannah Ellis, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services and Transformation

This council values feedback and complaints. We handle complaints positively, aiming to resolve issues quickly, learn from them, and prevent them from happening again. We know things go wrong sometimes and we encourage our customers to let us know what we can do to resolve them. More complaints are now being resolved early in the process, showing that this approach is working.

As the member responsible for complaints, I ensure that Cabinet members regularly review complaint information as part of our performance checks. This gives them a chance to ask questions and hold us accountable, always focusing on improvement.

Delivering High-Performing Council Services is one of our corporate missions and we strive to continuously improve our service provision and provide excellent customer service in all that we do. Learning from complaints plays a key role in this.

In the past year, we've updated our Complaints Policy in line with the ombudsman joint complaint handling code and we have improved our processes making sure that complaints are dealt with using staff across a whole council to ensure there is more robust scrutiny and learning. We also discussed our complaint handling with the Regulator for Social Housing during a recent inspection and we have published our housing ombudsman self-assessment on our website in the name of transparency.

Our annual report and self-assessment was reviewed by the Cabinet in October 2024, and our Scrutiny Committee regularly review all performance measures, which I'm pleased to see.

We will soon be publishing our Housing Annual report to tenants and leaseholders for 2023-24 which outlines our commitment to empower our customers by placing them at the heart of everything we do. We offer a wide range of opportunities for residents to give their views, making sure their voice is heard and encouraging them to help us continue to tailor and improve the services we offer and influence our decision making through robust governance.

We will publish a complaints report on an annual basis to measure our performance and ensure that we make positive changes.

We take all feedback and complaints seriously – not because we have to, but to improve the services that we provide, we need to know what our residents and tenants think.

Cllr Hannah Ellis

Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services and Transformation

Introduction

This is the first annual report on complaints performance and covers the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

It includes a breakdown of all complaints received for the above period into the council as well as those complaints determined by both the Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman in line with their joint handling code.

Background

We will always try and provide the best service we can. Sometimes though, things can go wrong and if they do, we want to ensure that they are resolved as quickly as possible in a courteous, fair and consistent manner.

We take all complaints seriously as they help us learn and enable us to improve our services.

If a complainant has exhausted our process and remains dissatisfied, they can approach the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman or Housing Ombudsman depending on the nature of the complaint. Full details are provided in all responses on how to do this.

For the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, we have not refused to accept any complaints. The only time we would refuse a complaint is if it fell outside of our ability to investigate it. This could be in such cases whereby there was a legal challenge ongoing or it was covered by another appeal process such as a planning refusal.

As a member of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, we must comply with the complaint handling code. As part of this, we have carried out a self-assessment on against the code and we take appropriate action to ensure our complaint handling is in line with the code.

Full details on our complaints policy including any exceptions and the self-assessment can be found on our website.

<https://www.harlow.gov.uk/your-council/have-your-say/complaints>

Performance

Total Complaints

For the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, the council received 1,134 complaints.

Of these, 967 were stage one complaints and 167 were stage two complaints.

The table below shows the breakdown of both stage 1 and stage 2 complaints by service.

	S1	S2	Total
Housing	254	48	302
HTS - Housing	379	67	446
HTS - Environment	138	24	162
Communities and Env	137	16	153
Strategic Growth and Regen	15	3	18
Finance	16	3	19
Governance	28	6	34

Total	967	167	1134
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Categories

Complaints are categorised into three different types:

Performance – An example of this could be poor communication or a delay in work being completed.

Person – An example of this could be a member of staff being unhelpful to a customer.

Policy – An example of this could be a customer disagreeing with a council policy such as the repairs policy.

This is not exhaustive, and some complaints fall across numerous categories.

A total of 937 complaints received related to performance, 52 related to person and 145 related to policy.

The table below shows a breakdown of this by service.

	Category		
	Perf	Pers	Pol
Housing	246	22	34
HTS - Housing	388	12	46
HTS - Environment	126	3	33
Communities and Env	126	6	21
Strategic Growth and Regen	12	0	6
Finance	18	0	1
Governance	21	9	4

937	52	145
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Upheld, Not Upheld and Partially Upheld

Of all the complaints received, 320 were upheld (28.22%), 564 were not upheld (49.74%) and 250 were partially upheld (22.05%).

Upheld complaints are those where fault is found against the complainant. Not upheld complaints are those whereby no fault is found. Partially upheld complaints are those where there is not clear evidence of fault or in cases of multiple issues with a complaint, some are upheld and some aren't.

The table below is a break down by service.

	Upheld		
	Yes	No	Partial
Housing	68	177	57
HTS - Housing	149	191	106
HTS - Environment	35	90	37
Communities and Env	60	62	31
Strategic Growth and Regen	0	13	5
Finance	3	10	6
Governance	5	21	8
	320	564	250
	28.22%	49.74%	22.05%

Performance

Whilst we strive to answer all targets within the target of 10 days for stage one complaints and 20 days for stage two complaints, this is not always possible. Where we can't achieve this, we ensure that the customer is always informed of progress being taken.

A total of 1,020 complaints were answered within the targets set, with 114 being out of target. This equates to 89.95% of all complaints answered within target.

	Stage 1			Stage 2			Total		
	In	Out	% In	In	Out	% In	In	Out	% In
Housing	230	24	90.55%	42	6	87.50%	272	30	90.07%
HTS - Housing	360	19	94.99%	62	5	92.54%	422	24	94.62%
HTS - Environment	128	10	92.75%	22	2	91.67%	150	12	92.59%
Communities and Env	105	32	76.64%	12	4	75.00%	117	36	76.47%
Strategic Growth and Regen	9	6	60.00%	3	0	100.00%	12	6	66.67%
Finance	16	0	100.00%	3	0	100.00%	19	0	100.00%
Governance	22	6	78.57%	6	0	100.00%	28	6	82.35%
Total	870	97	89.97%	150	17	89.82%	1020	114	89.95%

Further graphical breakdowns of all complaints can be found in **Appendix A**

Analysis of Complaints

Almost 66% of all complaints received were related to housing or housing repairs which is fully expected given the outward facing nature of this area. These complaints relate to everything from tenancy issues, problems with repairs, property issues and housing requirements.

Just over 14% of complaints related to HTS environment and this relates predominately to grass cutting, fly-tipping and dumped rubbish.

More than 13% relate to communities and environment with waste and recycling covered under this area. This is where most complaints are regarding problems with collections.

The remaining services making a total of just over 6% of all complaints; Strategic Growth and Regen covers planning and building control as well as the regeneration of the town. Finance is predominately Council Tax and Benefit issues, and Governance covers Contact Harlow who as the front face of the council are always going to attract a level of complaints.

The table below shows a breakdown of the different areas the complaints received relate to:

Complaints Category	Total Complaints
Trees, Hedges, Shrubs & Grass	120
Taxi Issues	3
Residents survey	1
Repairs & Inspections	281
Rent, Council Tax & Service Charges	28
Planning Application	10
Pest control	2
Opening Times	1
Noise	1
Housing & Accommodation	96
Garages	4
Enquiries, Responses & Updates	336
Damage & Damp	45
Communal & Public Issues	20
Cleaning	18
Civic Centre	27
Car Parks & Parking	5
Boundary & Fencing	5
Bins, Bulk, Refuse & Waste	108
Anti-Social Behaviour	7
Not categorised	16
Total	1134

On a monthly basis, an overview dashboard of all complaints, performance, learning points and actions is presented to the Corporate Leadership Team. A detailed breakdown is also presented to the Wider Leadership Team that allows in depth scrutiny of complaints to assist with service improvements.

We have also appointed a member responsible for complaints who receives updates on current trends, issues and performance of complaint handling.

Learning from complaints

One of the key areas of learning from the complaints received is the need to ensure that we improve our communication with our customers. This is shown by almost 86% of all complaints relating to performance.

Keeping customers updated on a current case, ensuring that work booked in is followed through or by simply making things easier to understand, we know it is important to improve.

As a result of analysis into our complaints for 2023/24, we have undertaken the following:

Complaints Training

We ran a series of training sessions on how to respond to complaints which was targeted across all areas of the council and at all levels. This covered how to respond to complaints using clear and concise language, managing expectations and the importance of deadlines and following up on actions. It also addressed the roles of both the Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social care Ombudsman and the role that they fulfil in complaints and the duty that we have under the joint handling code.

Customer Service Standards

We formalised our Customer Service Standards to clearly set out what customers can expect from us when they deal with the council.

Complaints Policy

We have updated this to make it clearer how we handle complaints and we have also updated our letter templates to ensure that we provide a consistent approach to all responses.

We have changed how stage two complaints are responded to during the latter quarters of 2023/24. We have a two-stage process to ensure that all complaints are investigated thoroughly.

Stage one complaints are dealt with by the service manager of the area complained about. They have the authority to resolve most problems and should provide a full response within 10 working days.

If for whatever reason the complainant remains unhappy with the response they have received at stage one, they can escalate to stage two. The complaint is allocated to an Assistant Director, by the Chief Executive, to review the complaint meaning that an Assistant Director from an unrelated service reviews the complaint ensuring impartiality. This will be done with 20 working days.

Business Insight

We have significantly improved how we use the data from complaints. We have developed easy to use dashboards for service managers and above so that they can use the learning from complaints and provide in-depth analysis on all complaints received to improve service delivery.

Housing

We have increased the robustness of our approach to lessons learnt from Housing complaints, which can be complex where multiple agencies are involved. A 'council lead' approach to complaint handling is adopted where the council looks to echo comment from third parties, or signposting to other agencies, to provide a single response to complaints

Evaluation of trends in complaints has lead to a number of actions being put in place;

Data quality and record keeping	An expansion of the council's Housing management software to increase functionality in this area have been introduced.
Training	Staff training in specific areas has been commissioned and will be subject to more substantial and wide-ranging review in line with a full Technical Review (Building Compliance and Tenant Safety) that is underway.
Escalation of works from repair to replacement.	In a targeted response to complaint insight, there is a specific budget allocation to address escalation of roof replacement requests given higher than average roof repairs received.
Costs/requirement to undertake works to leaseholder properties.	We have bolstered our communications with residents and made enhancements to repayment options within policy following review by Scrutiny Committee.

HTS Housing

Service improvements implemented by our wholly owned company, HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd are tracked through regular monitoring meetings and performance reporting. Additional actions in two areas have been introduced as below;

Quality of repairs	Revised governance arrangements to address operational and strategic performance have been introduced, and HTS are introducing new systems and associated processes to help manage the recording and undertaking of repairs.
HTS/Contractor performance	Introduction of 'trusted partnership' governance model to address issues of responsibility and service accountability.

Housing Ombudsman Review

We are required by the Housing Ombudsman to include in this report any findings of non-compliance with their complaint handling code. There are none.

We are required by the Housing Ombudsman to include in this report any actions we have taken as a result of their annual report about our performance.

We have complied with all of the ombudsman's orders made for the period 2023-24 and we have put in place a number of operational processes, such as stock condition surveys and changes to our property repairs policy in order to address the root cause of complaints. The council has changed its internal complaints monitoring so that complaints are reviewed out of service at stage two, and provides complaint performance data to its Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet regularly for additional oversight and governance.

We are required by the Housing Ombudsman to include in this report any actions following any other reports or publications produced by them in relation to our work; there are none.

Local Government and Social Care Review

In line with best practice this report also includes any findings of non-compliance with the Local Government and Social care Ombudsman complaint handling code. There are none.

Changes to the internal complaints monitoring so that complaints are reviewed out of service at stage two, also apply to complaints handled under this code, and performance data provided to Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet regularly for additional oversight and governance.

