

**Report to:** **Housing Review Board**

**Date of Meeting:** 20 June 2019

**Public Document:** Yes

**Exemption:** None

**Review date for release** None



**Subject:** **Housing Service Complaints April 2018 – March 2019 inclusive**

**Purpose of report:** This report provides information on formal complaints received in relation to the Housing Service for the period April 2018 to March 2019. We monitor formal complaints carefully, learning from them and using them to improve services wherever possible.

**Recommendation:** **It is recommended that:**

- **That the contents of the report be noted;**
- **That the Housing Leadership team re-iterate the importance of outstanding customer care, considering additional training and awareness opportunities where appropriate.**
- **The Property and Asset Manager reviews processes to ensure the Repairs team are always providing timely responses to issues reported to them.**
- **The Landlord Services Manager reviews processes to ensure appropriate communication and response from officers is given when dealing with complaints regarding antisocial behaviour and noise.**

**Reason for recommendation:** To continue to improve the way we handle complaints, to learn from them and to meet agreed local standards.

**Officer:** Sue Bewes Landlord Services Manager 01395 516551 X2200  
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**Financial implications:** Ineffective complaints handling can cost the council significantly through not only associated fees and redress costs but also, and usually more significantly, through resource costs.

**Legal implications:** There are no legal implications identified in the report on which to comment.

**Equalities impact:** Low Impact

**Risk:** Low Risk

**Links to background information:**

**Link to Council Plan:** Continuously improving to be an outstanding council.

## 1 Background

- 1.1 The Housing Service deals with formal complaints through the corporate complaints two stage process:
  - Stage 1 - complaints will be considered by the Strategic Lead
  - Stage 2 - complaints will be considered by the Deputy Chief Executive/Monitoring Officer
- 1.2 If customers are still not satisfied they can take their complaint to the Housing Ombudsman. They can do this by waiting 8 weeks from the date of our final response letter and then approaching the Housing Ombudsman themselves, or by contacting a Designated Person.
- 1.3 The Designated Person can be an MP, a local district councillor, or the Designated Tenant Complaints Panel (DTCP), which is a group of tenants supported by an administrative officer and the Landlord Services Manager.
- 1.4 Most of the complainants who choose to contact a Designated Person will choose the Designated Tenant Complaints Panel, favouring the view of their peers in terms of reviewing the council's decision on their case.
- 1.5 We give tenants information about how we are dealing with complaints in general in the Annual Report to tenants each October.

## 2. Complaints received during 2018/19

- 2.1 Between April 2018 and March 2019 we received 37 formal housing complaints. 15 of these went from stage 1 to stage 2.
- 2.2 There is an increase in the number of new stage 1 complaints received and the time taken to issue a full response to all stage 1 complaints. There has been an increase in the number of complaints about staff and customer service, but predominantly the complaints are concerning repairs and maintenance, and antisocial behaviour.
- 2.3 The complaints have been broken down by service area as shown in the table below with comparisons each year from 2011/12.
  - 2.3.1 It is important to note that figures for 2016/17 represent a shorter time frame as the handling of complaints transferred from Housing to the corporate Complaints team in October 2016, and some of the records for the period were not available.
  - 2.3.2 Staff & Customer Service: the rise in complaints over the past year is concerning and has been noted by the DTCP. We have responded with training for all front line staff and the Housing Leadership Team is giving serious consideration to how this will be further addressed to keep up the positive momentum going forward. A consistent response across all teams to unacceptable attitude/behaviour is crucial.
  - 2.3.3 Antisocial behaviour: last year my team passed more complaints to the Complaints team to log at stage 1 as part of a new initiative to manage complaints more effectively. We aimed to work more closely with them to identify 'complaints' as opposed to 'service requests' and ensure officers are consistent in their responses to customers across all geographical patches. In the short term this was expected to result in greater volume but I would hope that the number of complaints will reduce in the next 12 months. New procedures were introduced to better manage tenant expectations and improve response times to queries and complaints made to the housing officers, particularly where negative decisions are having to be made.

The change in recording makes us more transparent in our dealings with customers and enables us to deal with service failure more quickly. It is very positive that I have seen a decrease in terms of complaints about officer attitude coming in as complaints are now more about their decisions.

2.3.4 An increase in the length of time taken on average to deal with a complaint at stage 1 is noted, but this is not necessarily a point for concern. This increase generally reflects the complexity of the case and relates to the fact that generally only the more complicated cases are now proceeding to a formal complaint and a deliberate effort being made to resolve issues and manage each case at an earlier stage.

• Service area	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Staff and customer service	10	6	4	6	10	4	3	8
Property and contractor issues	3	7	13	13	14	10	5	8
Devon Home Choice/Allocations	2	6	1	8	4	2	8	4
Estate services	0	0	4	3	5	3	6	6
Rents and service charges	0	0	0	3	1	2	2	4
Antisocial behaviour	1	1	4	0	2	4	0	7
Other	2	1	3	4	4	0	4	0
<b>No of new stage 1 complaints</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>No of stage 2 complaints</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6*</b>	<b>13*</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Local Government Ombudsman</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6 LGO 2 HO</b>	<b>8 LGO 4 HO</b>	-----
<b>Average time in calendar days to issue full response to all stage 1 complaints</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>21.5</b>	<b>17.64</b>	<b>24.93</b>	<b>26.85</b>

2.4 Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) – 2016/17 - 6 (4 not upheld); 2 x Housing Ombudsman both findings of no maladministration

Local Government Ombudsman – 2017/18 – 8 (4 not upheld); 4 x Housing Ombudsman

Local Government Ombudsman – 18/19 not available yet but will go to Cabinet after we have received the annual report from the LGO (due to us by end July).

2016/17 figures were published here

[https://democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/Data/Cabinet/20170906/Agenda/060917combinedcabinetagenda\\_opt.pdf](https://democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/Data/Cabinet/20170906/Agenda/060917combinedcabinetagenda_opt.pdf)

2017/18 here

[https://democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/Data/Cabinet/20181003/Agenda/031018-cabinet-agenda-combined\\_redacted-public-version.pdf](https://democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/Data/Cabinet/20181003/Agenda/031018-cabinet-agenda-combined_redacted-public-version.pdf)

#### 4. Complaints Panel Feedback

4.1 The Designated Tenant Complaints Panel has met quarterly throughout the year, and has had no cases referred for its consideration. It is possible that the new way of working between Landlord Services and Complaints as mentioned at 2.3 above are relevant here. Two complainants had tried to bring their cases to the panel but these had not yet completed stage 2 of the authority's formal complaints procedure. It is possible that the

DTCP will receive these complaints in the near future, if the complainants are dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaints at stage 2.

## **5. Lessons learned from other formal complaints**

- 5.1 The Designated Tenant Complaints Panel receives a quarterly Summary Report through which it assists me to monitor our formal complaints, identify any recurring themes and ensure that we are learning from our mistakes.
- 5.2 The main messages revealed by our complaints during 2018/19 were:
- Staff to be reminded of the importance of good customer care.
  - Officers need to be more mindful of individual circumstances especially with more vulnerable adults.
  - Better response and communication from Repairs department needed in order to respond in a timely manner to issues reported to them.
  - Better communication and response from officers required when dealing with complaints regarding antisocial behaviour and noise.
  - We should always strive, across the Housing Service, to improve our communication with tenants, keeping them informed even if there is no positive progress to report.
- 5.3 In order to respond to the learning points regarding the importance of good customer care and the need to improve staff attitude, I arranged for the Housing Ombudsman to run training sessions in the year with over 60 of our staff. This has proved very successful and was attended by members of the Designated Tenant Complaints Panel too. The major emphasis was that the way we handle first contact is very important, and it is crucial therefore that we get it right first time. This coupled with regular updates to the customer, and writing to them to let them know that we are closing the case or job, are critical to preventing waste within our Housing systems.

## **6. Additional complaints monitoring**

- 6.1 There has been no STAR survey during the year as we have replaced it with a longitudinal survey which we are working on with Birmingham University. The data collected so far as part of this study has revealed 79.8% satisfaction with how complaints have been handled (78.5% satisfaction in general needs properties, and 81.5% in sheltered) and 84.9% satisfaction with Repairs over all.
- 6.2 Satisfaction monitoring surveys: Feedback from tenants on our performance is collected for Repairs in the form of satisfaction surveys after the work is completed. This practice ceased in January 2016 following 'go live' of Open Housing, our new Housing system, but has recently started up again. Overall satisfaction with the customer's experience of the repairs service came in at 94.6% for the financial year 2018/19.
- 6.3 Under the new Repairs service which commences on 1 July 2019 the contractor, Ian Williams, will monitor customer satisfaction via PDAs (hand-held devices used by contractors) as well as survey forms, and appointments will be made at first point of contact which is likely to significantly improve communication with contractors and be popular with customers.
- 6.4 Service Review Groups for Repairs, Supported Housing, and Estate Management also respond to complaints that come in for their service area, and work to find ways to improve the service as a result of them.
- 6.5 The Tenant Involvement Forum is an opportunity for the Service Review Groups to meet four times a year to share learning and objectives. This also plays a positive part in strengthening the link between complaints received and service improvements.