

Decision Report

Committee: Executive

Meeting Date – 4 November 2024

Key Decision – No



Housing Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report 2023/24

Chair of Committee: Cllr Bill Revans – Leader of the Council

Executive Member(s): Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts - Lead Member for Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture and, Equalities and Diversity

Local Member(s) and Division(s) affected: All

Executive Director: Chris Hall - Executive Director Community, Place and Economy

Executive Summary

This report shows data from the in-house landlord function of Somerset Council only. The council's Arm's Length Management Organisation Homes in Sedgemoor currently work to their own Complaints Policy and undertake a separate self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code. A copy of their annual complaints report is available on the [Homes in Sedgemoor website](#).

To ensure compliance with section 8 of the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code (effective from 1st April 2024), we are mandated to share a copy of our annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report with our governing body and seek their feedback.

Any observations made will be published on our website as part of the Executive meeting minutes to ensure compliance with section 8.3 of the Complaint Handling Code.

Recommendations

The Executive is asked to note the Housing Complaints Performance and Service Report and provide any observations.

Reasons for Proposals

To meet the mandatory requirements of the Regulator for Social Housing and the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code. Any feedback received will be recorded and considered to shape the improvement of the housing service and complaint handling function.

Report Author: Claire Reed, Performance & Improvement Lead, Housing.

Contact Details: 01823 217505 claire.reed@somerset.gov.uk

Main report and supporting information



Background and purpose of report

At Somerset Council, we recognise that we must be open and transparent with our residents and provide regular feedback about how we are performing as a landlord.

As a member of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, we are also required to adhere to the Housing Ombudsman's [Complaint Handling Code](#). The new Code became mandatory on 1st April 2024 and included the requirement to produce an annual complaints performance and service improvement report for scrutiny and challenge.

Although we have successfully delivered an annual complaints performance report historically, the new Code stipulates that in our report we must provide:

- Both a qualitative and quantitative analysis of our complaint handling performance.
- A summary of the types of complaints we have refused to accept.
- What service improvements we have made as a result of learning from the complaints we have received.
- Any findings of non-compliance with the Complaint Handling Code by the Housing Ombudsman.
- Any annual report about our performance or in relation to our work which has been produced by the Housing Ombudsman.

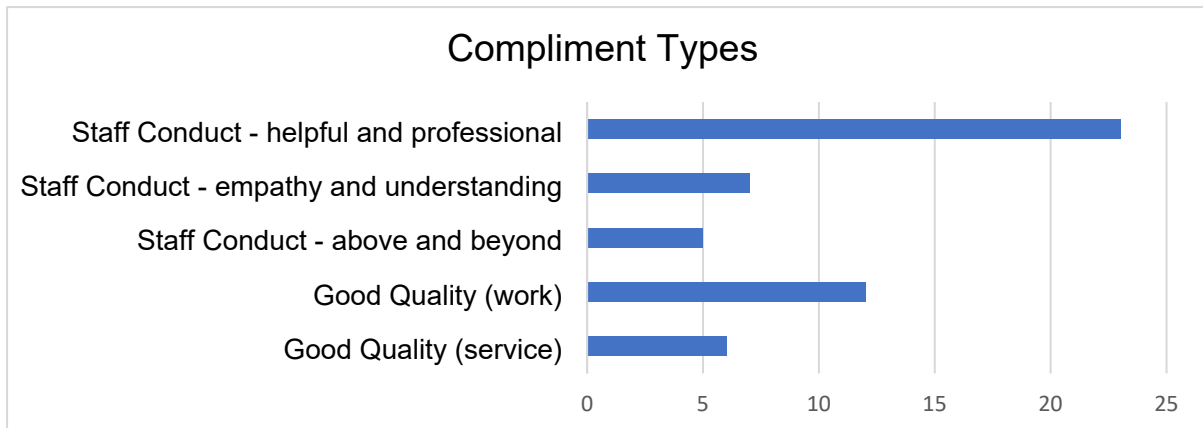
The new Complaint Handling Code can be viewed on the Housing Ombudsman's website. Our [self-assessment against the Complaint Handling Code](#) was most recently undertaken in September 2024 and is published on our website.

Compliments

During 2023/24 the Housing Service received 53 formally logged compliments.

We know there are many more compliments received by the service areas which are not logged as formal compliments. Over the coming months we will be working on communicating the importance of recording the compliments we receive with the service areas and our residents, so we can understand what it is that we do well.

Most compliments we logged in the year were in relation to the helpfulness or professionalism of our staff. This is testament to the work that our staff do, often going above and beyond in their work with our residents and properties:



Some examples of the compliments received:

“Very pleased with the service from the tradesman that attended to fill the cracks in the bedroom. He was very professional and did the job very well and the resident would like to say thank you.”

“The Housing Officer was supportive and showed me great empathy”.

“Just wanted to commend the service as they had someone there within an hour. The resident wanted to say how marvellous the service is, and they don’t know why we get complaints.”

Complaint volumes

As anticipated by us and the Housing Ombudsman, complaint numbers across the sector increased this year. This was in part because the government launched a ‘Make Things Right’ campaign from October 2023 to March 2024, in conjunction with the [Know How to Complain](#) promotion on the internet and social media.

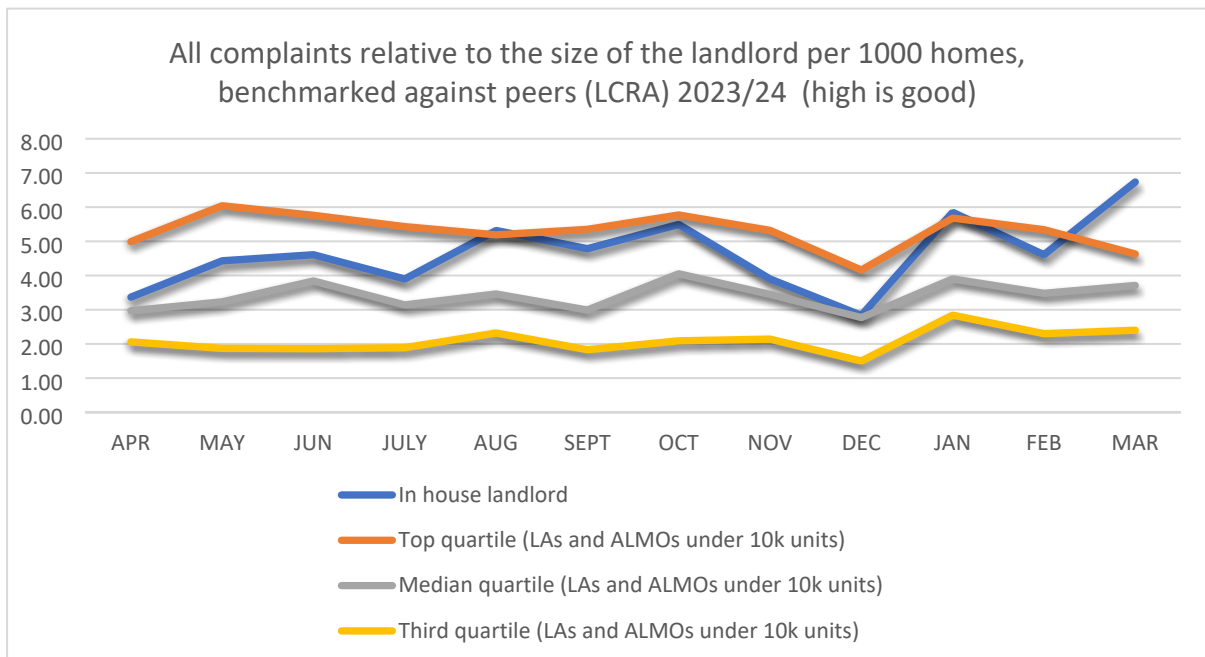


The campaign was a two-phased, intense advertising scheme, including adverts on commercial radio, digital audio and community radio (and included promotion in non-English languages). We saw a 5% increase in the number of complaints we received during this government campaign.

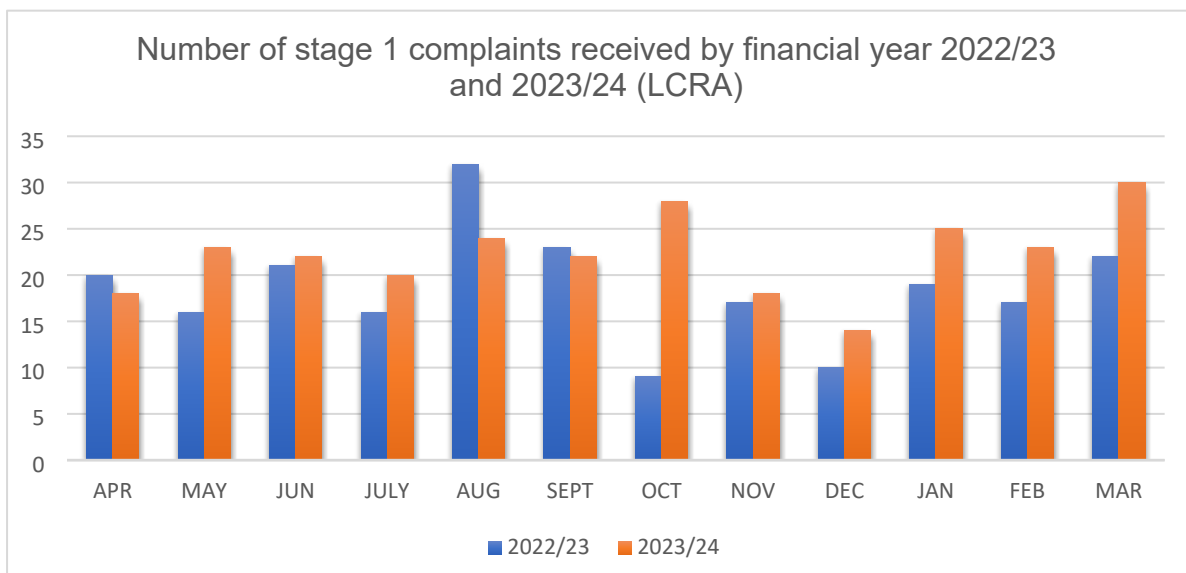
To promote our complaints process, we also included regular newsletter articles to our residents and a revised [tenant handbook](#), giving details about how to complain if a resident is unhappy with the service we have provided.

The Housing Ombudsman considers high complaint numbers as a positive, as it means our residents feel able to bring their concerns to us and know we will put things right if something has gone wrong.

The graph below shows the number of all complaints (stage 1 and 2) received during 2023/24 in comparison with our sector peers nationally (local authorities or ALMOs with less than 10,000 properties, sector data provided by Housemark).

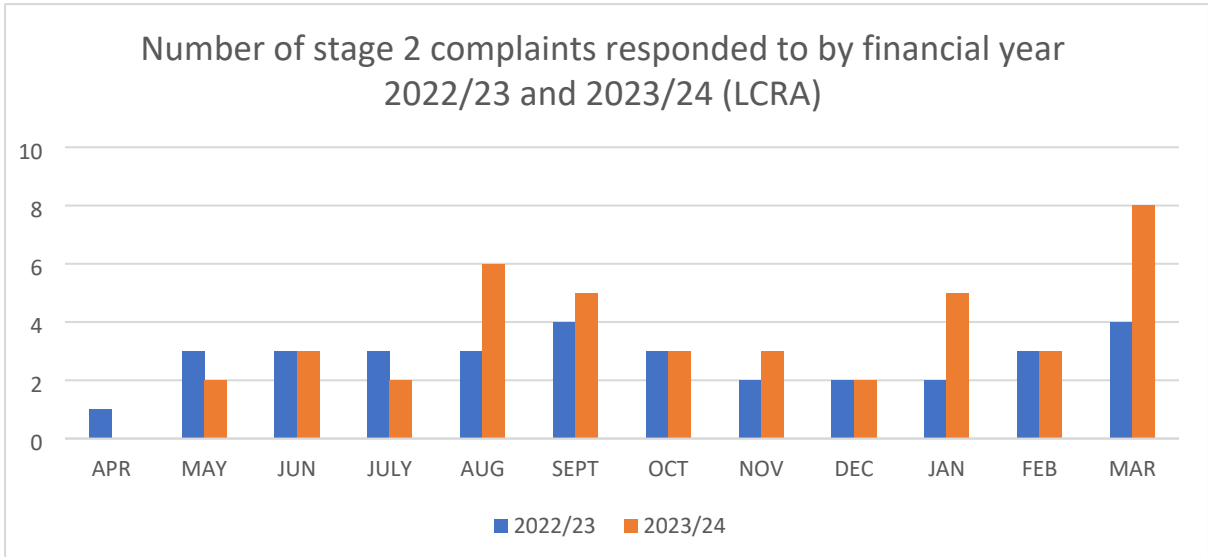


We received a total of 275 stage 1 complaints (low-cost rental accommodation) in 2023/2024. This is a 23% increase on the previous year. This is in line with the sector and what we expected to see this year.



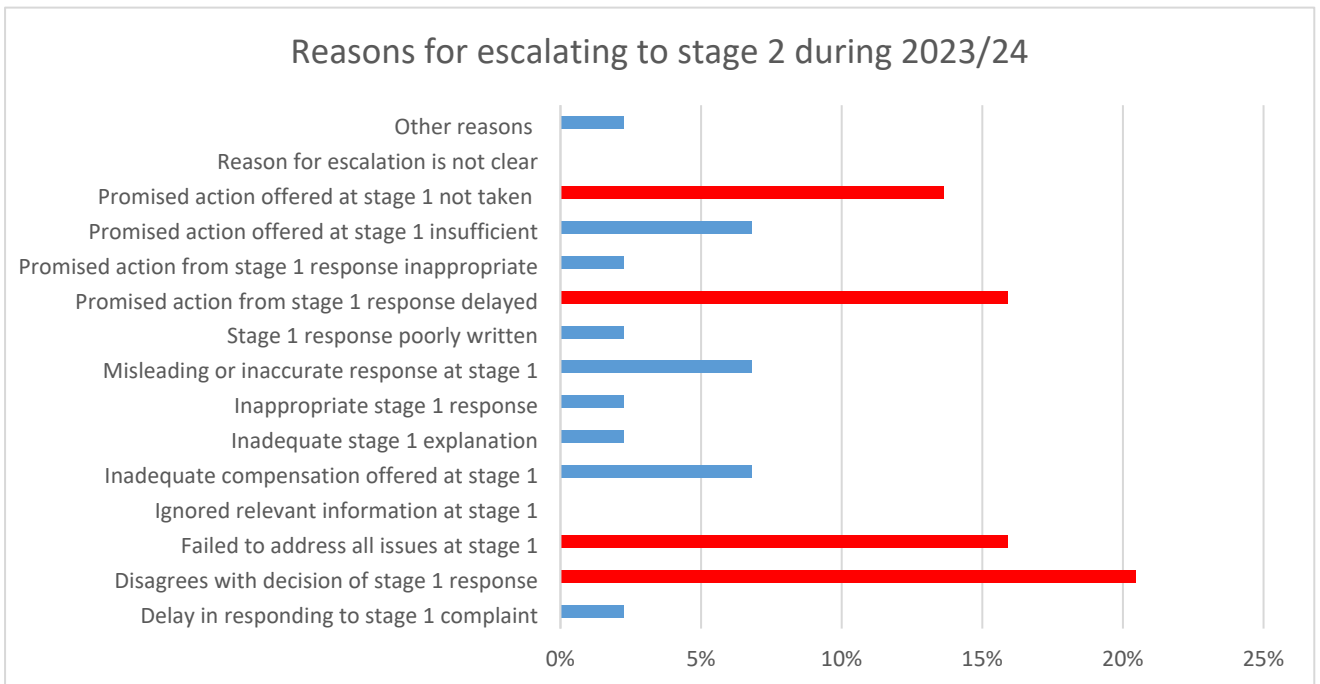
Complaint Escalations

Of the 275 complaints at stage 1, 42 were escalated to stage 2. This equates to 15% of all complaints escalated under our Complaints Policy and is an increase of just over a third (34%) on the previous year.



With awareness of and improved access to the Housing Ombudsman for social housing residents, this increase is expected in line with figures reported across the sector; however, this data also tells us that we're not always getting our responses right at stage 1.

The graph below shows the reasons given by our residents for wishing to escalate their complaint to stage 2 during 2023/24:



In February 2024, the Customer Resolution team delivered two training sessions to key complaint handling staff within the service areas on how to investigate and manage a stage 1 complaint. The focus of the training was to make sure we address all issues in the complaint, approach it without bias or judgement, use empathy and understanding and try where possible to put things right for the resident.

We also acknowledge that two of the biggest reasons for requesting an escalation to stage 2 of the Complaints Policy were where actions that were promised at stage 1 were not carried out or were delayed.

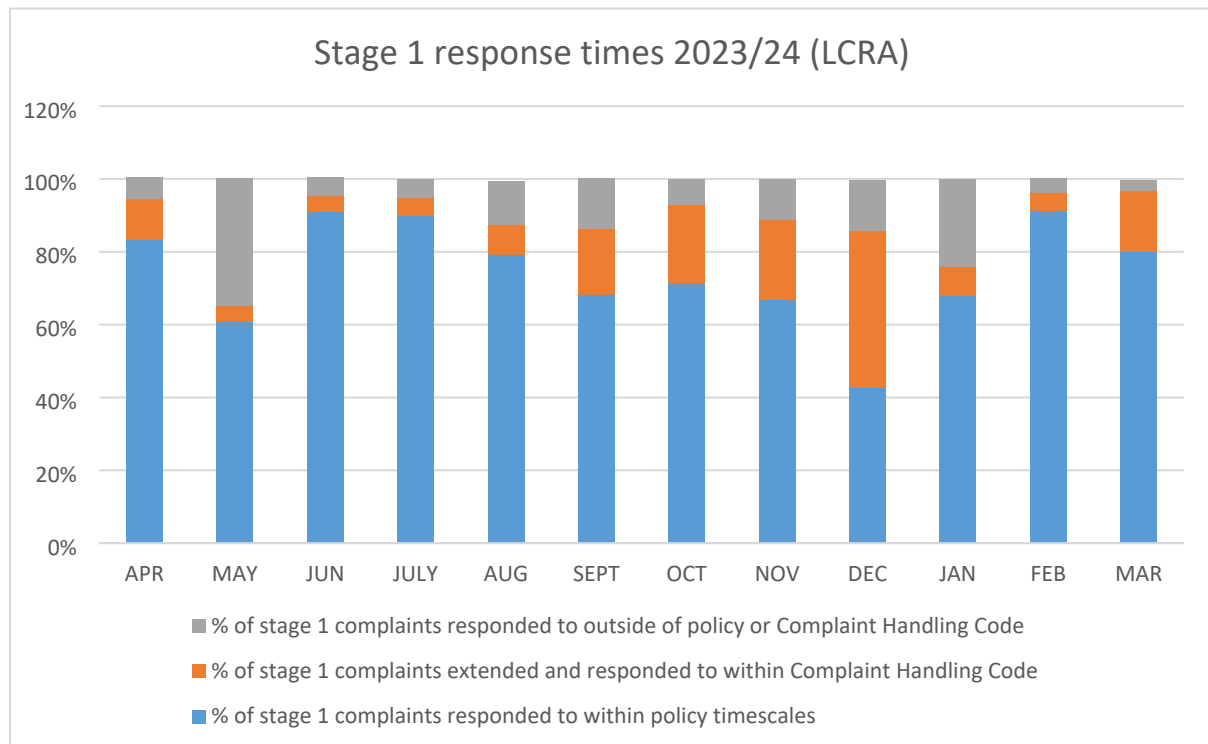
As we enter the 2024/25 financial year, we are working on a new process whereby the Customer Resolution team will regain more autonomy over our complaint handling, using their specialist skills and impartiality to get it right at stage 1 and follow up on outstanding actions; hopefully eliminating the need for residents to escalate their complaint to stage 2 in as many cases.

Complaint response times

Under Somerset Council’s Complaints Policy, we have 10 working days to provide a full stage 1 response to a complaint. In some circumstances (for example, where we need to carry out an inspection, the complaint is multifaceted or complex, or it crosses over different service areas), we can agree an extension with the resident and remain compliant with the Complaint Handling Code.

The chart below shows our stage 1 response times in line with our Complaints Policy and the Housing Ombudsman’s Complaint Handling Code.

Stage 1:

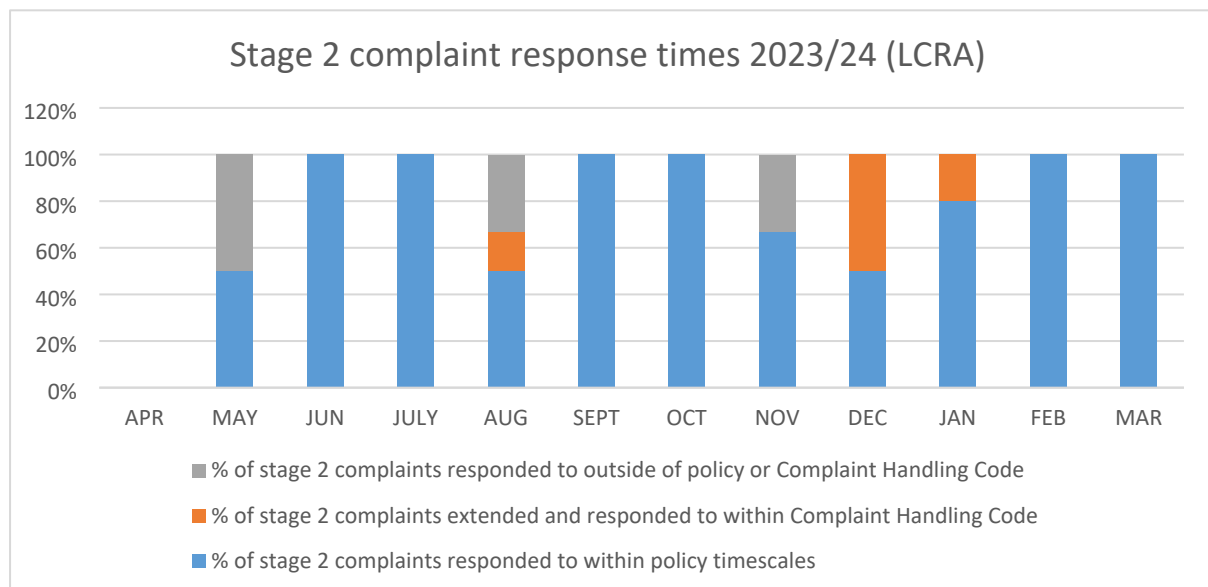


The percentage of stage 1 complaints per quarter which were responded to in line with our Complaints Policy and the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code in 2023/24 were:

Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4
84%	89%	90%	90%

Stage 2:

The next graph shows the number of stage 2 complaints which were responded to within Somerset Council's Complaints Policy timescales (20 working days) and the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.



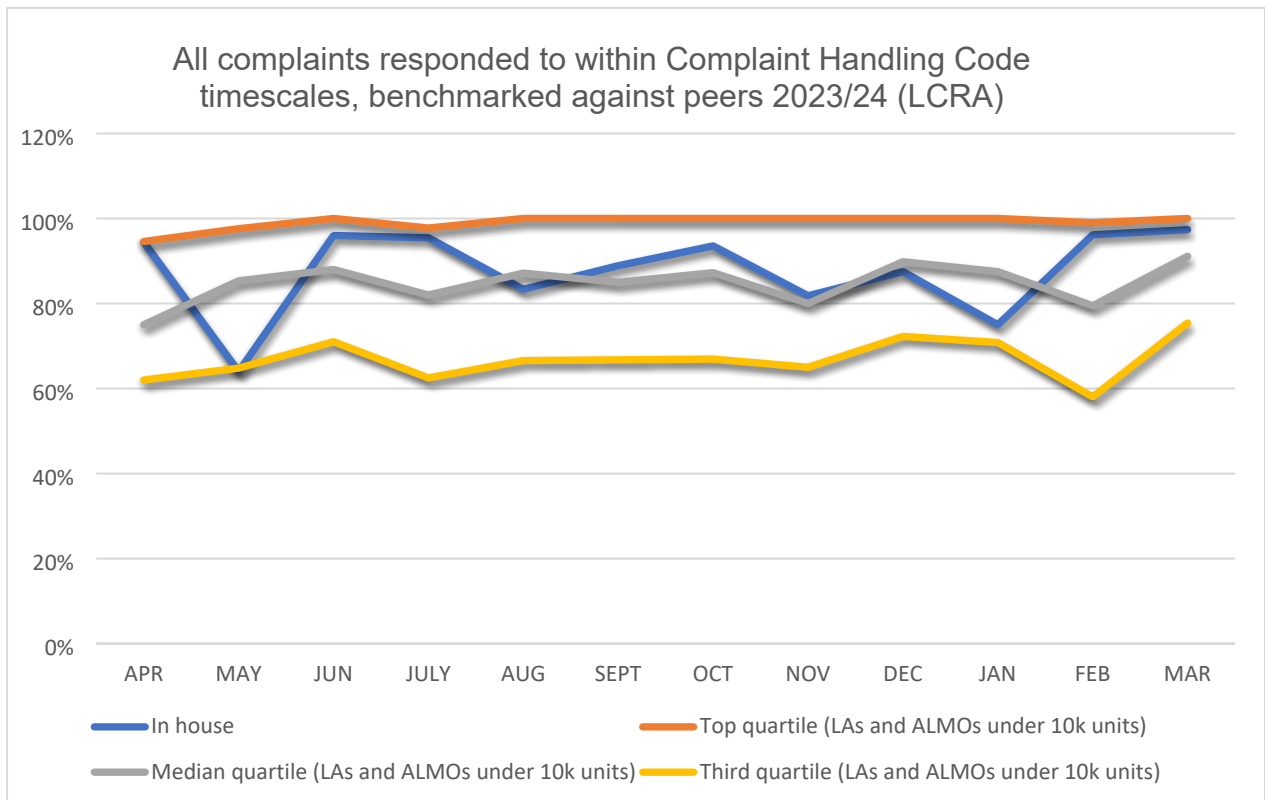
The percentage of stage 2 complaints per quarter which were responded to in line with our Complaints Policy and/or the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code in 2023/24 were:

Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4
67%	85%	88%	100%

Performance against our peers (local authority landlords or ALMOs with less than 10,000 units) shows that in 2023/24, we largely performed better than the median quartile in the time taken to respond to complaints received at both stages of our complaints process. For five months of the financial year we were close to performing at a top quartile level.

We strive to consistently achieve top quartile performance in our complaint handling. With the changes we will make in 2024/25 in how we manage complaints within the service, we are optimistic that complaint handling will be adequately resourced and recognised as a core service; and response times will be improved in the latter part of 2024/25.

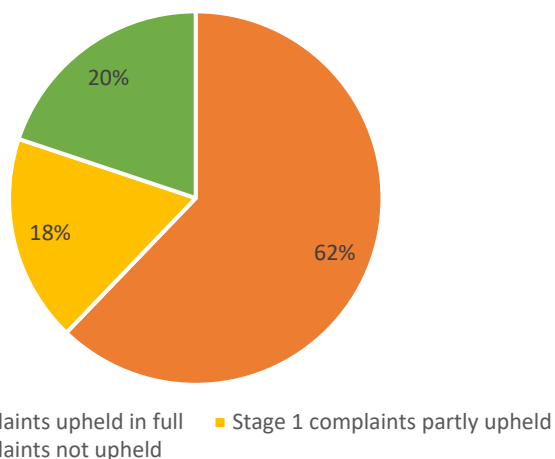
The chart below shows our 2023/24 response times for all complaints (stage 1 and 2) against our peers, using sector data provided by Housemark:



Complaint Outcomes

During 2023/24, 62% of all stage 1 complaints were upheld in full. Only 20% of the time have we been able to say that in the complaints raised, we have not failed in our service delivery and have therefore not upheld any part of the resident’s complaint. The chart below shows the percentage of all stage 1 complaints by outcome:

Stage 1 complaint outcomes by year 2023/24 (all HRA)



Although this figure demonstrates that we are acting with transparency and taking responsibility when we have gotten something wrong, it also tells us that we need to focus on improving our core service delivery.

Throughout 2023/24, a weekly meeting took place between the Customer Resolution team, Heads of Service and the Director of Housing to discuss open complaints, their resolution and learning.

A more in-depth monthly meeting also takes place between the Customer Resolution team and Heads of Service. Going forward, this meeting will consider data specific to each service area, looking at trends, root causes and identifying where we need to make improvements. We are hopeful that we will need to uphold less complaints in the coming year as we work hard to improve our service delivery across the directorate.

Complaint Types

In 2023/24, our residents told us that their biggest concern was the quality of the service we provided to them. *Service quality* made up 36% of all stage 1 complaints.

The *service quality* category includes complaints about:

- Where we have failed to do something
- Where we have refused to do something
- The quality of services provided by a third party (contractor)
- The timeliness of us doing something
- The quality or standard of service provided
- Other

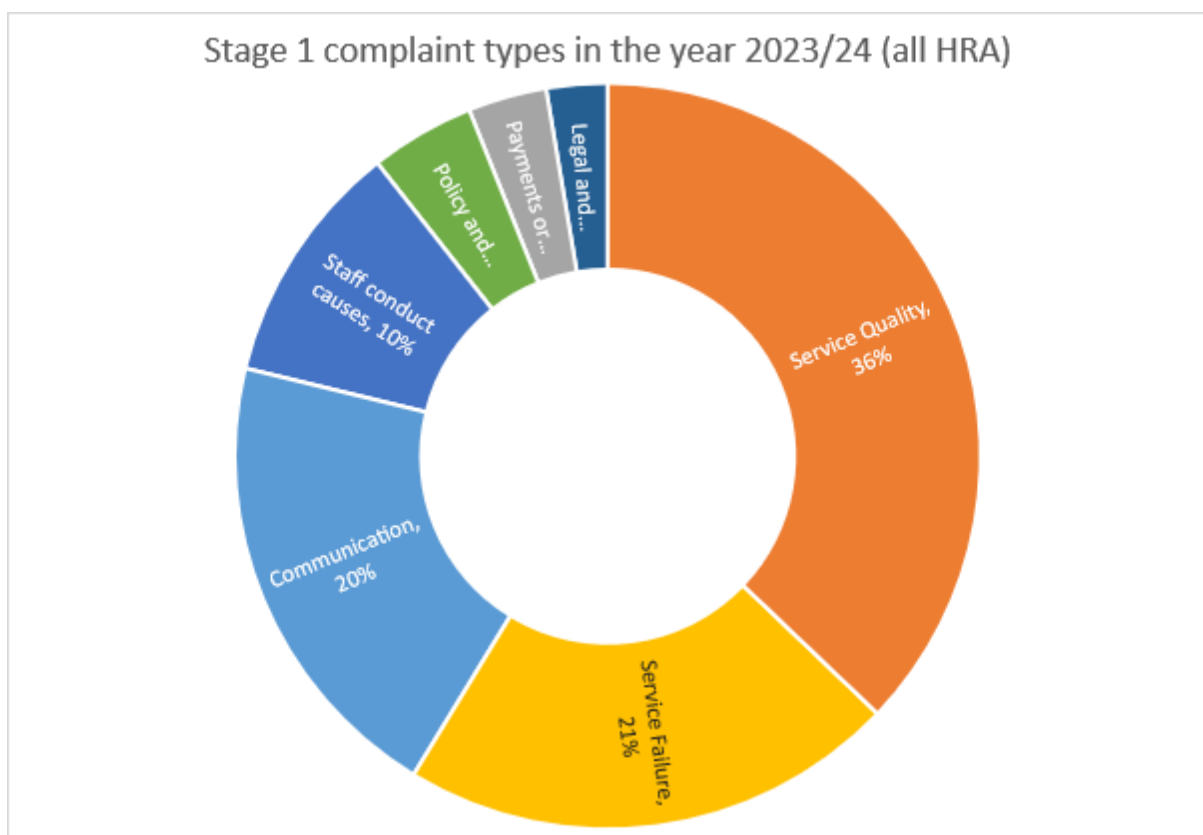
The most frequently used complaint categories under *service quality* were *the quality of services provided by a third party (contractor)* and *the quality or standard of service provided (by the housing service)*.

This means that we (or our contractor) have delivered a service, but that the resident has been unhappy with what we have done. This category ranges from the quality of workmanship, to causing damage to a resident's property during the course of the work, or where we have carried out an initial contact and then not followed through on the agreed actions.

Overall, 24% of all stage 1 complaints received in the year were about *the quality of services provided by a third party*.

Steps were taken during 2023/24 to address contractor performance if a high number of complaints were being received about their service. Two companies' contracts were terminated during this time due to resident feedback and complaints data.

The chart below shows the categories of stage 1 complaints in the year 2023/24.



The second biggest category of complaints reported to us at stage 1 in the year was in the category of *service failure*. A *service failure* includes complaints about:

- The cancellation or withdrawal of a service
- The failure to deliver a service
- The loss of a service previously in place
- Other

The greatest number of complaints received in this category were where we had failed to deliver a service at all. This ranges from us failing to attend a pre-agreed

appointment (and not always communicating the change), failing to get in touch with residents and delays in relation to promised capital programme works.

Poor communication with our residents continues to be a concern as it is mentioned in many of the complaints received which have been categorised as *service quality* or *service failure*.

A new housing Communications team was created in 2023/24. The team have set up and monitor a closed Facebook page specifically for our residents. The team have also worked hard on the newsletters which are sent out to our residents; are working with the council's IT team to improve the housing section of the website and have for the first time, used text messaging to keep residents informed about how they can get involved, or to provide details of where we are carrying out skip days or action groups.

Similarly, as a direct result of complaint feedback in 2023/24, the Capital Works team created an information pack for residents for when we are replacing kitchen and bathrooms as part of our capital programme. The handbook provides information about the scheduled work, records progress and provides contact information for the contractor and our in-house team. These packs have been welcomed by the residents who have been able to use them, and we have received positive feedback about them.

The service as a whole has openly struggled with staff resource and capacity as a result of the council's financial position and following the LGR process to form a single, unitary Somerset Council in April 2023. Recruitment is underway within the HRA to close the recruitment gaps we face. We are hopeful that our core performance will improve going forward as vacancies become filled, workloads become more manageable and staff become less stretched.

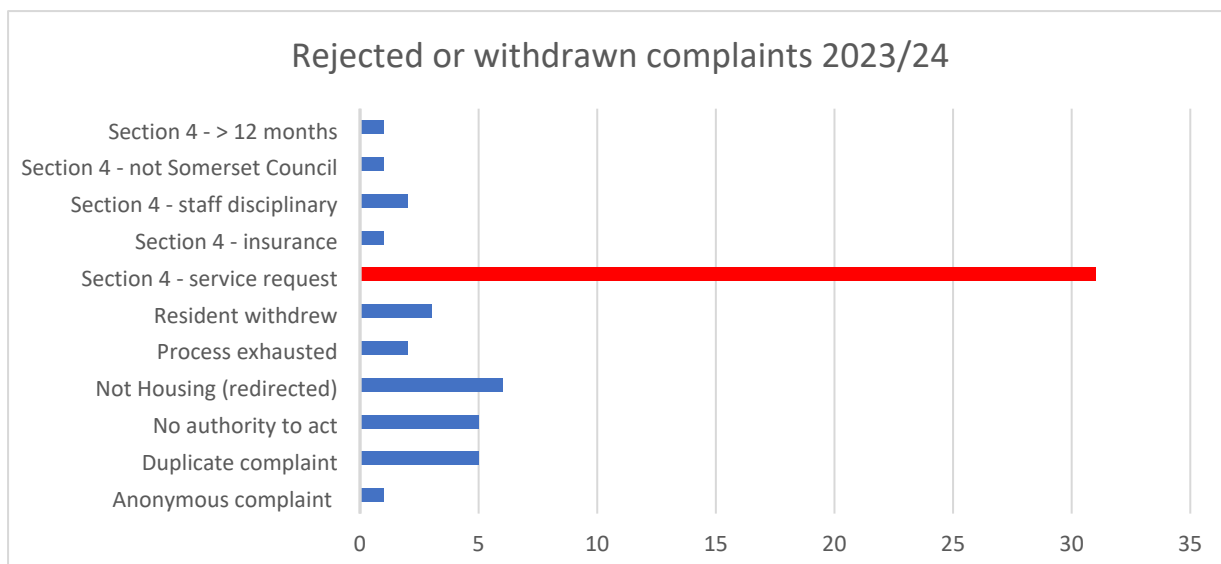
Rejected complaints

During 2023/24 we rejected 55 complaints at the triaging stage. 56% of these were categorised as service requests as we hadn't yet been told about the resident's request or been given the opportunity to put things right. These contacts were subsequently raised with the correct service area to action.

We found that residents sometimes use the complaints process to complain about anti-social behaviour in their neighbourhood, often for the first time. Unless the resident was complaining about how we have managed a known neighbourhood issue or anti-social behaviour, these contacts were recorded as requests for service and triaged accordingly.

In line with the Complaint Handling Code, whenever a complaint was rejected we wrote to the resident and provided a full explanation, along with contact details for the Housing Ombudsman if the resident was unhappy for our reason for rejecting the complaint.

A further 3 complaints were withdrawn by the resident at a later time.



This is the first year that we have monitored data on rejected complaints, so we do not know if 31 is a high number of service requests to have been received through the complaints process.

Towards the end of 2023/24 we noticed that we seemed to be receiving a lot of requests for service through the complaints process via our website. We worked with the IT team to make sure residents can easily find the online links to raise a repair, report damp and mould or contact their Estates Officer. It will be interesting to see if this improved accessibility reduces the number of service requests we receive through the complaints process during 2024/25.

You said, we did

In addition to the successes already identified in this report, in 2023/24 as a result of complaint feedback and performance data we also delivered the following improvements to our service:

- Implemented a new damp and mould process in line with the Housing Ombudsman's Spotlight report. This came into effect in September 2023 so we will soon have year on year comparable data.
- Updated our Redress Policy to include a flat daily rate of financial compensation when our service failure leads to a resident being reliant on temporary heaters.
- Improved our policies and procedures around neighbourhood noise transference (we were championed by the Housing Ombudsman as a landlord who had adopted best practice in this area).
- Implemented training for frontline staff who might be faced with a resident who is contemplating self-harm, to help signpost the resident and safeguard them.

The Housing Ombudsman

The Housing Ombudsman have reported that they are working through a backlog of historic complaints for investigation going back to 2022.

During 2023/24, the Housing Ombudsman investigated 2 complaints that were escalated to them by our residents. Of all stage 1 complaints that we answered, this equates to less than 1%.

This also means that less than 5% of the complaints we responded to at stage 2 ended up being investigated by the Housing Ombudsman.

Team	Complaint summary	Determination
Tenancy & Estates	Resident erected a fence sectioning off a communal garden without permission. Complaint challenges that the garden is communal.	Awaiting Housing Ombudsman determination
Capital Works	Resident challenged decisions made during kitchen replacement works and alleges discrimination.	Awaiting Housing Ombudsman determination

The Housing Ombudsman publish performance data about scheme members on their website so that residents can [see how your landlord is performing](#).

The Housing Ombudsman publish detailed performance information on their website for landlords who have been investigated five times or more in the year. As we have only been investigated twice in the year 2023/24 (and not at all in 2022/23) there are currently no reports relating to the in-house landlord of Somerset Council on the Housing Ombudsman's website.¹

Recently the Housing Ombudsman has provided its members with access to a portal which allows landlords to see active open cases. The new system provides for a more streamlined approach for submitting evidence for cases. It also provides the landlord with a direct link to the Dispute Officer handling the case.

Looking ahead

We have made strides in the right direction this year with our complaint handling performance but know there is more to do. Financial pressures on the council and the inevitable challenges brought about by the creation of a new, unitary authority have impacted on our service delivery this year. Housing staff continue to show dedication and passion about the service we provide to our residents.

As we settle into the new council and start to recruit more housing staff going into 2024/25, we will focus on improving our communication with our residents, managing their expectations and offering the very best service we can.

¹ Note that from 2023/24, Homes in Sedgemoor complaints as the council's ALMO are included in Somerset Council's data on the Ombudsman's website.

Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan

The purpose of this report links in particular to the Council Plan 'A Healthy and Caring Somerset' as we focus on promoting health and wellbeing to support our residents to stay as healthy as possible, for as long as possible. The feedback and learning we receive through our complaints enables us to do support this.

Additionally, the feedback we receive from our residents through their complaints supports the 'A Fairer, Ambitious Somerset' element of the Council Plan, whereby we will take residents' vulnerabilities into consideration when taking remedial action following their complaint, to make reasonable adjustments and provide additional support required.

This report also links to the Council Plan 'A Flourishing and Resilient Somerset' because the learning we receive from our complaints helps us to ensure well balanced communities in our neighbourhoods, supporting the regulator's consumer standards.

In relation to the Medium-Term Financial Plan, the report links to the HRA's revenue and capital expenditure again through the valuable feedback received from our residents about where the service needs to make improvements.

Other options considered

Production of this report is a requirement of the Housing Ombudsman Service and the Regulator for Social Housing (mandated by law) so no other options considered.

Key considerations for the Council

Scrutiny comments / recommendations:

This report has not been considered by Scrutiny as this is not a requirement of the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code or the Regulator for Social Housing.

Consultation and feedback

There has been no consultation although in addition to sharing this report with the Executive, this report will be presented to our Tenants' Strategic Group and our nominated Member Responsible for Complaints (currently Cllr Smith-Roberts), and comments invited from both.

Financial and Risk Implications

There are no financial risks or implications associated with this report.

Failure to have effective arrangements in place to adequately manage performance of key services would create a risk that service performance could deteriorate and/or the housing service fails to deliver its priorities for our residents.

As the council in its capacity as a landlord is regulated by law, failure to learn from our complaints data might initiate an investigation by the Housing Ombudsman or Housing Regulator, leading to a damaged reputation and lack of trust in our service from our residents.

Current Risk Score:

Likelihood		Impact		Risk Score	
-------------------	--	---------------	--	-------------------	--

Projected risk score if recommended actions are agreed and delivered:

Likelihood		Impact		Risk Score	
-------------------	--	---------------	--	-------------------	--

Legal and Procurement Implications

None have been identified.

HR / Workforce Implications

It is noted in the report that staff capacity has been a contributing factor to reduced performance.

Equalities Implications

This report provides an update on performance rather than seeking a decision. For this reason, no Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken as the report does not seek a change in policy, change in service or a decision.

No equalities implications have been identified within the narrative provided in relation to performance. However, it should be recognised that the diversity of the Housing Service's service users is varied.

Where a service is tailored for a specific protected group, any poor performance will disproportionately affect that group compared to the general population of our residents. Special attention should therefore be paid to the proposed mitigation measures in such cases to address any potential negative impacts on those specific service users, to ensure that all service users receive equitable and appropriate levels of service.

Community Safety Implications

There are no direct community safety implications associated with this report.

Climate Change and Sustainability Implications

There are no climate change and sustainability implications associated with this report.

Health and Safety Implications

There are no health and safety implications associated with this report.

Health and Wellbeing Implications

There are measures linked to the Council Plan priority 'A healthy and caring Somerset'.

It is noted in the report that there is a greater risk of increased workloads to Somerset Council employees due to staff capacity. This in turn has impacted on the quality of the service we have provided to our residents and in our complaint handling delivery.

Work is underway in 2024 to address the staff resourcing issues, with an active recruitment drive to improve our core service delivery and lessen the impact on remaining staff. We are also currently reviewing how we manage complaints as a service, focusing on injecting resource into a central complaints team to reduce the pressure on frontline managers who had been responsible for complaint investigations previously.

Relieving frontline staff of the duty to investigate and respond to complaints will free up their time to focus on a robust core service delivery, reducing any likelihood of negative impacts on health and wellbeing in both staff and residents.

Some of our social housing residents have complex needs or vulnerabilities, and a failure to deliver our core services to them may impact on their health and wellbeing.

Social Value

There are no social value implications.

Background Papers

None.

Appendices

None.

Report assurance

	Officer Name	Date Completed
Legal & Governance Implications	David Clark	08/10/2024
Finance & Procurement	Nicola Hix	08/10/2024
Executive Director	Chris Hall	08/10/2024
Executive Lead Member	Cllr Smith-Roberts	08/10/2024
Consulted:	Councillor Name	n/a
Local Division Members	n/a	n/a
Opposition Spokesperson(s)	Cllr Gwil Wren	23/10/2024
Relevant Scrutiny Chair(s)	Cllr Andy Dingwall	23/10/2024