



# **Annual Housing Complaints and Service Improvement Report 2023-24**

## **Introduction**

This report provides an update on Durham County Council's complaint handling performance as a landlord over the previous financial year and presents the learning from complaints.

We aim to provide good and affordable homes to improve the lives of our residents. Complaints help us do this by giving us an opportunity to put things right in a fair and reasonable way for our customers.

This report will cover:

- recent changes to the Housing Ombudsman Code
- our self-assessment against the Code
- an overview of the complaints we have received
- a summary of the complaints we have not accepted
- determinations received from the Housing Ombudsman
- improvements to our complaints process.

## **Complaint Handling Code 2024**

The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 (the Act) empowered the Housing Ombudsman to issue a code of practice about the procedures that members of the scheme should have in place for considering complaints. It also placed a duty on the Housing Ombudsman to monitor compliance with a code of practice that it has issued. The Code clarifies the definition of a complaint, how complaints can be made, the process that should be used and the governance structure around complaints. The Code also directs landlords to produce this report and demonstrate compliance with the Code. The Complaint Handling Code became statutory on 1 April 2024.

## **Self-assessment**

A self-assessment against the Complaint Handling Code can be found on our website's corporate complaints page here: <https://www.durham.gov.uk/complaints>. The key points in our first published assessment are:

- James Rowlandson, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Resources, Investment, and Assets is the Member Responsible for Complaints, to ensure a positive complaints-handling culture.
- Michael Kelleher, Head of Planning and Housing, is the senior lead person accountable for complaint handling and will analyse themes or trends to identify potential issues, risks, or policies and procedures that require revision.
- Training has been rolled out to housing colleagues within the Allocations and Lettings Team (responsible for managing tenancies and responding to stage 1 housing complaint responses), the Service Development and Intelligence Team (responsible for co-ordinating housing complaints and responding to stage 2 complaint responses), and the Customer Services' Feedback Team (responsible for

corporate complaints and directing housing complaints to the housing service, where required).

Our new Housing Complaints Policy reflects these key points and the new Code.

### **Complaints overview 2023-24**

Over the course of the previous financial year, Durham County Council logged zero (nil) housing complaints.

Our Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM), an annual survey across our tenants, returned a response that no complaints had been made (by those returning the survey). Only three responses were received to the survey due to the minimal number of homes managed but one did state they were 'fairly satisfied' (100% satisfaction) with our complaints handling, despite stating they had made no complaints and despite no complaints being recorded by us in 2023-24. This may have been an error by the customer on completing the form or they may have rated a service request they had previously made.

### **Summary of complaints Durham County Council has not accepted**

All complaints are acknowledged within five working days of them being raised. If a complaint is not accepted, the Allocations and Lettings Team provides an explanation to the customer setting out the reasons and what actions the council is taking to resolve the issues raised. Just because issues are not accepted as a complaint, does not mean they are ignored.

In 2023-24, there were six issues raised that we did not accept as complaints. These issues were raised as service requests due to being issues that had not previously been raised to the council as a landlord. These issues were resolved as first-time service requests and were not dealt with under our complaints policy.

There were no housing complaints recorded by Durham County Council in 2023-24.

The Member Responsible for Complaints and the senior lead for handling complaints (Head of Planning and Housing) were notified of the zero complaints in 2023-24 and have been provided with the findings in this report. Both are satisfied that there are no barriers to tenants complaining and that the number of complaints in 2023-24 reflects the minimal number of homes and the new management of properties, rather than any issue with process or training.

### **Non-compliance found by the Housing Ombudsman**

We received no correspondence regarding determinations from the Housing Ombudsman in 2023-24. No complaints were logged at stage 1 or stage 2 of our complaints process. We received no correspondence regarding non-compliance against the Code during 2023-24.

## **Service improvements**

This is our first annual housing complaints report. Durham County Council manages a small number of homes but will potentially increase its portfolio to a maximum of 500 homes in the coming years.

To ensure a good response time to complaints, and to bring it into line with the Housing Ombudsman Code, Durham County Council has placed the co-ordination and administration of complaints within its Service Development and Improvement Team (which sits within Planning and Housing). This team also co-ordinates responses for Corporate Complaints made against the wider Planning and Housing Service. The Service Development and Improvement Manager will work with the Allocations and Lettings Manager, responsible for the day-to-day management of council homes, to ensure the Code is adhered to and our new complaints policy is successfully implemented (both at stage 1 and stage 2).

The officers within the Service Development and Intelligence Team have been assessed as being in the correct role and at the correct pay grade for the responsibility and complexity of housing complaints, with which they will deal.

In preparation for the new statutory Complaint Handling Code, training has been delivered to the relevant teams, to increase knowledge of the Code and the council's new policy.

## **Service Improvement Plan 2024-2025**

This year we will implement the new processes developed by the creation of our new housing complaints policy.

We will focus on:

- meeting the timescales for complaint resolution, aiming to acknowledge all complaints within five working days, and responding to Stage 1 responses within 10 working days and Stage 2 responses within 20 working days.
- increasing customer satisfaction with our complaint handling policy.
- following the recommendations in the Housing Ombudsman's Spotlight Reports on Knowledge and Information Management (KIM), and Damp and Mould (escalating each instance of a first report of potential issues to the senior lead for complaints handling, and the Member Responsible for Complaints).
- refresher training with colleagues, to deliver a good customer service.
- ensuring good communications between frontline colleagues, the senior person responsible for complaints, and the member responsible for complaints all scrutinise the complaint handling process and suggest improvements.

Future service improvements will show how we are listening to, and learning from, the complaints we receive.