

SUBJECT: ANNUAL COMPLAINTS PERFORMANCE AND SERVICE IMPROVEMENT REPORT 2024-2025

DIRECTORATE: CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND TOWN CLERK

REPORT AUTHOR: JOANNE CROOKES, CUSTOMER SERVICES MANAGER

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To present an annual complaints report including details from the Annual Review of Local Authority Complaints issued by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and the decisions of the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS).
- 1.2 To report on the overall number of complaints received by the Council on a Directorate basis for the full year 2024-2025, including performance against target response times and the percentage of complaints which were upheld.
- 1.3 To provide details of those complaints which were upheld and the lessons learnt from them.

2. Background

- 2.1 The council's complaints procedure includes two levels in response to formal complaints. Once the complaint has been considered and responded to by two separate officers the complainant is advised that if they are not satisfied with the final response, they can seek redress from the relevant Ombudsman service.
- 2.2 Complaints relating to the landlord function of the council, as a provider of social housing, are escalated to the Housing Ombudsman Service. All other complaints, about any other service or aspect of council business fall under the jurisdiction of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.
- 2.3 In April 2024, the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code (The Code), became statutory for all social housing providers. The Council's policy was updated to ensure compliance with the code and, as it represents best practice in dealing with customer complaints, the principles of the code were adopted as a corporate policy across all directorates. This report summarises the council performance in 2024-2025 and includes the annual self-assessment against The Code.
- 2.4 There are a number of elements in The Code which are designed to ensure that our complaint handling performance is both effective and transparent. The HOS has a statutory duty to monitor compliance with the code and they have powers to issue Complaint Handling Failure Orders where they find that performance is not conforming with The Code.
- 2.5 The Code requires an annual self-assessment where each of the 78 elements of the code is considered and certified as either "Complied with" or "Not Complied".

- 2.6 The self-assessment shows that there is a high level of compliance with The Code. The self-assessment must be available for inspection on the Council's website and is attached to this report as Appendix A. Once approved, this will replace the previous assessment currently published.

3. Complaints – Annual Performance (1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025)

- 3.1 Please see the comparison figures in the table below at 3.3. It is worth noting that there were some council services who had suspended their operations for several months in the year 2020-2021, due to Covid restrictions, and this will have reduced the potential for something to go wrong in that time and consequently kept complaints low.
- 3.2 In 2021, following the publication of the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, the council's measure of response times was updated to reflect the expectation that all complaints should be responded to within the agreed target time of 10 days for level one or 20 days for level two. Prior to this development the council reported on the overall average response time across all complaints.

3.3

Year	Number complaints	of	Average response time
2020-2021	260		8.1 days
2021-2022	392		66% within target
2022-2023	459		70% within target
2023-2024	418		67% within target
2024-2025	562		93% within target

4 Breakdown of Complaints

- 4.1 Of the 562 complaints received for 2024-2025 the broad categories they relate to are set out in the table below. The figures for the previous 2 years are included for comparative purposes.

4.2

Service area or responsibility	2023-2022	2023-2024		2024-2025
Repairs & Maintenance	199	178		228
Tenancy issues	75	29		97

Housing Solutions	51	26	67
Housing Investment	17	16	41
Community Services	15	36	38
Parking	39	33	32
Council Tax / NNDR	22	18	15
PPASB service	5	15	12
Customer Services	2	3	9
Planning and building control	9	17	5
Recreation and Leisure	1	7	4
Private Housing	7	6	3
Benefits	0	3	3
Major developments	1	7	2
Civic & Democratic Services	2	0	2
Bereavement Services	1	5	0
Events	7	13	1
Legal Services	2	1	1
Environmental Health	1	0	1
Neighbourhood Working	0	0	1
Financial Services	0	2	0
Licensing	0	2	0
I.T (website)	0	1	0
Property Services	2	0	0
Bus Station	1	0	0
Total complaints	392	418	562

- 4.3 Upheld complaints: Of the 562 complaints responded to in 2024-2025, Just over 53% (297) were upheld. This is in line with the 50% upheld last year.

In instances where a complaint is upheld customers are offered an explanation and an apology. In certain circumstances they may also be offered some other form of redress. Additionally, the officer upholding the complaint completes a feedback form for the Directorate Complaints Officer outlining lessons learned, training needs and any recommended changes to procedures.

- 4.4 Of the 562 complaints received across the year, there was little difference from quarter to quarter so there is no particular period where there has been peak in complaints. The complaints numbers were as follows: Quarter 1 – 141, Quarter 2 – 144, Quarter 3 – 131 and Quarter 4 – 146.
- 4.5 504 complaints logged were level 1 and 474 or 94% of these were responded to within the target response time. The remaining 58 complaints were escalations to level 2 and 46 (80%) of these were investigated and answered within target. Managers have been reminded of the importance of the target response times and this will be closely monitored over the coming year.
- 4.6 The lessons learned are reported through each Directorate Management Team (DMT) by the Directorate Complaints Officer. DMTs are aware of the complaints received. Where any changes to procedure are required or potential policy developments are needed these are discussed and taken forward as appropriate. For 2025/2026, DMTs will be presented complaints information in

a revised format to support service developments.

5. Lessons Learned from 2024-2025 Complaints

- 5.1 When an individual complaint is investigated and responded to, the responding manager or team-leader is required to complete a Complaint Outcome Report.
- 5.2 The Complaint Outcome Report asks for details about the response and the decision to uphold the complaint or otherwise. Where there is learning as a result of the complaint this is outlined on the report and details of changes to policies, processes, or information is described and recorded.
- 5.3 As part of the complaint process, as set out in our Corporate Complaints Policy a random sample of complaints are scrutinised to check the quality of the response and the outcome. Outcomes outlined in the response letters are examined to ensure that they were carried out and any promises complied with. Learning points are also recorded, and a sample are checked to ensure that lessons learned are acted upon to improve future performance.
- 5.4 In the CX directorate there were 8 upheld complaints this year. Learning points included individual training updates for staff in Council Tax and refresher procedure training in Customer Services. One of the complaints highlighted the potential for compromises in data security in future and therefore a full review of shared email inboxes and distribution lists was carried out across the authority.
- 5.5 In the Directorate of Communities and the Environment there were 34 upheld complaints. These varied between Parking Services, Community Services, Sports and Recreation and PPASB.
- 5.6 The largest single area of upheld issues at 18, was the Community Services Department where a number of complaints were about services provided by contractors. Although in some instances these may be classed as service requests, a senior manager has consulted with the contractor to remind them of the expected standards and their contract responsibilities.
- 5.7 A number of complaints upheld were regarding the Central Car Park and as a result various improvements have been/will be undertaken this year. One complaint which was upheld for PPASB has resulted in a procedure change between the council and another district council with which we have a shared service.
- 5.8 The Directorate of Housing and Investments received 433 complaints in total, which reflects the nature of the services provided, and the awareness of residents on how to make complaints. In terms of upheld complaints, last year there were 254 DHI complaints where the complainant's case was upheld and in many of these there were lessons that led to corrective action on our part.
- 5.9 For the purposes of this report, a random sample of 10% (26) of the upheld complaints were reviewed for details of the learning points and action plans. We also ensured that where remedial action or redress was offered to the

complainant, this sample check followed the process through to the end to confirm that this action was completed.

- 5.10 We found no instances where the promised solution, action or redress had not been carried out. In all cases reviewed, where the issue was an incomplete repair, a missed appointment, or a recurring issue the customer has now confirmed that they are satisfied with the completion of the works.
- 5.11 Where learning points identified a training need or a refresher briefing session for the tradesmen, checks have shown that this has taken place. One complaint referred to a data breach which was reported, and actions were taken to prevent a recurrence. Another example of remedial action taken included providing and reinforcing code of conduct information and details on standards of behaviour when visiting tenants homes to a new contractor.
- 5.12 Complaints about the Housing Solutions team are generally about the length of time that applicants wait, or the difficulty that they have getting responses to emails or phone calls once individuals are on the waiting list. This has been identified as an issue, and the team are reviewing how they work to seek a resolution to the backlog of applications.

6. Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Complaints

- 6.1 The LGSCO Advice team provides comprehensive information and advice to both the public and local authorities on complaints. It also produces an annual review of local government complaints which includes an overview of trends, followed by statistical tables detailing the numbers of complaints received from each local authority area broken down into general service areas. This data is published on their website. The published data for 2024-2025 is not yet available.
- 6.2 From council records it can be reported that in the year to 31 March 2025 the LGSCO made decisions on 4 new complaints about City of Lincoln Council services. This is a significant reduction compared with the previous two years, which had 13 complaints moving to the Ombudsman stage.
- 6.3 The general service areas of these were as follows:

Service Area	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
Environmental Services	1	0	1
Housing	7	6	1
Revenues and Benefits	3	1	1
Corporate Services	0	0	0
Highways and Transport	2	2	0
Planning and Development	0	4	1
Totals	13	13	4

- 6.4 All four of the complaints taken to the LGSCO were closed after initial enquiries: These complaints are where the Ombudsman has decided that it could not or should not investigate the complaint; this can be because the

complaint is outside LGSCO's jurisdiction, and they cannot lawfully investigate it. The early assessment of a complaint may also show there was little injustice to a complainant that would need an LGSCO investigation of the matter, or that an investigation could not achieve anything, either because there was no fault, or the outcome a complainant wants is not one that the LGSCO could achieve, for example overturning a court order.

7. Housing Ombudsman Service Complaints

- 7.1 Tenancy related complaints i.e., those which are classed as a landlord function, are referred to The Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS), rather than being dealt with by the LGSCO.
- 7.2 The Housing Ombudsman publishes its decisions and a summary of landlord performance on its website. They create individual reports for landlords with 5 or more findings in the year. These findings are counted individually and there may be multiple findings from a single complaint.
- 7.3 In 2024-2025 The Housing Ombudsman upheld 4 complaints made to it by council tenants. These 4 complaints resulted in 11 separate findings, and the Council will receive an individual report to this effect. The details of the findings were as follows in para 7.4:
- 7.4 Upheld Housing Ombudsman Complaints:
- a) The tenant complained about ongoing outstanding repairs which were not completed. There were reports of damp and mould which were not dealt with in accordance with policy, and there was a delay in responding to the tenant's complaints. This one complaint resulted in two findings. The HOS found fault with the council and issued a finding of Severe Maladministration in dealing with the reports of Damp and Mould and Maladministration for delays in responding to the complaint.

For this complainant, the following remedies were ordered:

- The council to perform an independent survey of the resident's property and provide the resident with a list of the works needed to combat any damp and mould identified in this survey along with timescales for completing the work.
 - Payment of compensation for loss of enjoyment of the property calculated as a percentage of the rent.
 - Payment of further compensation for distress caused by the delays.
 - Provide evidence to the HOS that we have complied with the orders.
- b) The tenant complained about incorrect information being issued at the time of signing up for a new tenancy. This included being told the incorrect postcode and 3 different rent figures for the property. A further issue was the condition of the property including the property being let in a poor state of repair and poor internal decoration. While the HOS did not find the errors to be severe enough to warrant a finding of Maladministration, this complaint resulted in two separate findings of

Service Failure. The following remedies were ordered:

- Payment of compensation for receiving poor information.
 - Payment of further compensation for missed repair appointments
- c) The tenant complained about damp and mould in the property and the HOS found that the council did not address the issues in line with policy. The Ombudsman found Maladministration in the handling of damp and mould and Service Failure in the handling of the complaint. The two findings in this investigation resulted in orders to:
- Pay compensation for the distress and inconvenience of the mould in the home.
 - Pay compensation in recognition for the delay in resolving the complaint.
 - Update the tenant's records to ensure that vulnerabilities are documented and referred to.
- d) This complainant made a complaint which covered 10 different issues and aspects of their property and tenancy. The HOS found no case to answer in respect of 5 of the issues. These were the information available on the Homefinder service; the issue of maintenance of leaves and gutters; the procedure followed for rent arrears and scheduled kitchen replacements. The fifth complaint, which the HOS did not investigate, was a complaint about another tenancy which the complainant had no authority to make. In 5 of the issues the HOS found incidents of service failures and delays. These included delays in responding to communication about staff, dog nuisance in communal areas, repairs to communal areas, repairs to the individual's home and complaint handling. This complaint led to 5 findings of Service Failures. The orders in this case were:
- A letter of apology
 - Compensation for the service failures.

8. Complaint Trends

- 8.1 In the full year to 31 March 2025 there has been a marked increase in the overall number of complaints received compared to the previous year. This increase has occurred across all sections of DHI; Repairs, Tenancy, Investment and Housing Solutions have all seen a rise in the number of complaints compared to 2023-2024. This increase was anticipated due to changes made following the introduction of the Housing Ombudsman Service Complaint Handling Code.

- 8.2 This has been the first year of reporting on a full year of complaints following our introduction of the statutory Housing Ombudsman Service Complaint Handling Code. The council made changes to our complaint policy and, significantly, trained front-line staff to recognise and record expressions of dissatisfaction as formal complaints in line with the best practice outlined in the Code. Where the council might have previously received an “informal complaint” and dealt with it to the customers satisfaction without recording it as such, this is no longer how these issues are dealt with.
- 8.3 In these four areas complaints have risen from a total of 249 to 433 complaints which represents an increase of 73.9% on the previous year. While complaints from tenants about repairs to their homes, continue to be the most common complaint, the areas which have seen the biggest increase in complaints are Tenancy and Housing Solutions which have increased by 234% and 158%, respectively. Complaints about Customer Services, mainly in terms of call waiting times have also increased by 200%, although the numbers remain relatively low at 9 complaints in total over the 12 months.
- 8.4 In the Annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report 2023-2024 it was noted that following introduction of the Code we expected to see an increase in formal complaints, including an increase in complaints escalated to level 2. This has happened and we are confident that a considerable proportion of this increase can be attributed to our HOS Complaint Handling Code compliant policy and guidelines.

9. Compliments

- 9.1 Despite the current challenges and pressures, the council continues to receive regular compliments from the public. These tend to acknowledge the professionalism of staff and occur across all service areas. Residents often take the time to appreciate the care and consideration demonstrated by council officers.
- 9.2 Examples of positive feedback are as follows:

Community Services – I just wanted to take a moment to say a huge thank you to the council for their prompt action. I'm sure you get inundated with complaints, but it is really important to acknowledge the good work that has been done. I bombarded you with emails ... It started off with a bit of graffiti and after a few weeks it was becoming a fly tipping site. Because of your prompt action it is clear of litter, the graffiti has been removed and all of the abandoned furniture cleared! You have no idea how much it was affecting my mental health, and I feel that a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. Thank you!

Parking Services - “Thank you so much for your amazingly fast response and rectification to my problem. This was our first visit to your wonderful city, and it won't be long before we return.”

Customer Service – “The man on the phone was brilliant. Really supportive and helpful regarding my council tax issue. He really listened to what I had to say

which seems rare when dealing with bills and customers. He suggested a few options and advised me about a different payment plan.”

Housing Repairs Service

“I called at 4pm yesterday about a blocked drain, just wanted to say thank you, someone attended in the dark and resolved the matter. Very happy with speed at which it was dealt with.”

“I would just like to say how incredibly professional and informative the plasterers came today to plaster my living room. They have done a fantastic job. I've suffered with OCD for a long time and they was really good and clean because I explained to them about my OCD.”

10. Organisational Impacts

Strategic Priority: High Performing Services

Finance – There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

Legal – There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

Equality and diversity –The Public Sector Equality Duty means that the Council must consider all individuals when carrying out their day-to-day work, in shaping policy, delivering services and in relation to their own employees. To ensure that we deliver our Equality Duty we accept complaints from customers via all communication channels. Customers can complain in person, verbally, in writing or via our online complaints template. Customers who need assistance to log a complaint can get help from Customer Services to ensure that they are heard. All complaints received are dealt with equally regardless of how they are made.

Community engagement and communications. The council encourages customer feedback and clearly promotes the Complaints procedure on our website and in public buildings, offering different ways for customers to raise complaints and supporting them to do so if they need assistance.

11. Recommendations

- 11.1 Members to consider and comment on the complaints report for 2024-2025

Is this a key decision?

Do the exempt information categories apply?

No

Does Rule 15 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules (call-in and urgency) apply?

No

How many appendices does the report contain?

1

List of Background Papers:

None

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