

# WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

## HOUSING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

8 JUNE 2021

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**Title:**

**Housing Service Complaints**

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**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr Anne-Marie Rosoman, Portfolio Holder for Housing, Community Safety & Emergency Planning

**Head of Service:** Hugh Wagstaff, Head of Housing Operations

**Key decision:** No

**Access:** Public

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### **1. Purpose and summary**

1.1 To review the implementation of lessons learned from customer complaints in 2019/20 as [reported](#) to the *Value for Money and Customer Service Overview and Scrutiny Committee* in January 2021. The report also includes the Council's response to the self-assessment audit by the Housing Ombudsman Service's Complaints Handling Code and shares further outcomes and progress made regarding complaints against the housing service.

### **2. Recommendation**

2.1 It is recommended that the Committee:

- i. reviews this report and identifies any areas of further scrutiny, and/or
- ii. agrees any observations or comments it wishes to pass to the Executive.

### **3. Reason for the recommendation**

3.1 To raise awareness of the complaints process, type of complaints and positive outcomes taken to learn from mistakes and improve service delivery.

### **4. Background**

4.1 We aim to give an excellent service to all our customers. If we get things wrong, we want to try to put them right, learn from our mistakes to help improve services for the future. The Council has a clear two stage complaint process that is promoted on the Council's [website](#) and by officers when a resident is unhappy with the Council services.

4.2 Complaints provide free feedback on how our services are operating. Rigorous analysis of complaints provides a greater understanding of issues and what matters to tenants. They enable us to recognise any common themes and identify areas to review and improve.

4.3 The Corporate Complaints Officer reported that Housing Operations received the highest number of complaints in the Council during 2019/20, a total of 111. The majority of these complaints concerned matters relating to property services and responsive repairs. This was as expected given the high level of interaction with residents in this service area and with the mobilisation of a new responsive repairs contract that started April 2019. However, there has been an overall decrease in the number of complaints received in recent years.

Year	Number of complaints re Housing Operations
2018/18	151
2019/20	111
2020/21	105

### **2019/20 Lessons Learnt**

4.4 The Value for Money and Customer Care O&S report identified eight examples of lessons learned from complaints received in 2019/20 for Housing. The lessons, progress and outcome are reported in the table below:

Ref	Action	Progress	Outcome
I	Contractors should make sure that they inform tenants of any changes to the timing of appointments	Discussed at contract monitoring meetings and toolbox talks. Improved focus on communication with contractor during the year.	Issue raised again during 2020/21 as lockdown restrictions eased and more appointments were scheduled with interim contractor. Regular item on contract monitoring meetings and communication identified as key indicator of performance in new contract specification
II	Contractors should ensure that tenants' personal possessions are protected during internal works to a property	Reminder at contract monitoring meetings and toolbox talks.	Ongoing awareness to ensure personal possession protected and clear instructions to tenants to clear space for works
III	Need to improve the wording and tone of reminder letters sent to	Letter reviewed and updated by new Compliance Manager	"Softer" less legalese letter in use

	tenants regarding their annual gas service		
IV	Officers need to supervise more closely the progress of major works and contractors need to improve the supervision of work carried out by sub-contractors	Increased number of on site / in progress visits scheduled. Supervision of sub-contractors raised at contract monitoring meetings	Closer working to ensure good quality works. Regular item on contract monitoring meetings
V	Tenancy Agreement needs to be amended to make clear that the maintenance of conservatories is the responsibility of tenants in all cases	Tenancy Agreement not due for review until 2021/22 Updated viewing and sign up advice where necessary	Ongoing awareness of responsibilities through letting process
VI	More thorough checks needed of void repairs before a property is re-let.	Void process reviewed joint sign-off of works with contractor and void officer	Increased level of inspection of works
VII	New tenants need to be made aware of the void standard and that their new home will not be redecorated	Updated void standards viewing and sign up advice	Raised awareness and set expectations during letting process
VIII	Officers need to ensure that they report back in writing to the tenant the outcome of each tenancy audit.	IT process developed to record audits and populate template letter with notes from meeting	Automated letters to provide outcome of audit and monitoring of actions

### **Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code**

4.5 In July 2020 the Housing Ombudsman Service published a [Complaint Handling Code](#) with the aim of promoting ‘a progressive use of complaints among social housing providers, providing a high-level framework to support effective complaint handling and prevention alongside learning and development’.

4.6 The Housing Ombudsman expected landlords to carry out regular self-assessment against the Code by 31 December 2020 with a view to taking appropriate action to ensure their complaint handling is in line with the Code. Waverley completed its self-assessment within this timeframe and a [copy of the completed self assessment](#) has been published online.

4.7 The assessment informed the development of the new Complaints database, providing details of categories, themes and reporting requirements and prompted refresher training on what is a complaint and that complaints may be received in any form.in

## **Information to Tenants**

4.8 Tenants are routinely advised how to make complaints through the tenants' newsletter, website and by individual officers. Information on the number of complaints and outcomes of complaints (you said, we did) are shared in the tenants newsletter/annual report as well as been available through Corporate Performance Reports. All tenants received an update in their quarterly rent statement, April 2021, encouraging them to keep in touch and let us know what is working well and what is not working well. The update also promoted tenant involvement and provided useful contact details.

4.9 The Q4 Performance Report states that there has been an additional focus on customer feedback that quarter. In addition to reviewing complaints an internal review of a disrepair claim was completed finding recommendations for improvements. The key learning was the importance and necessity of central record keeping and the routine monitoring of cases.

4.10 Further feedback will be collected during late May and June as Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR) is carried out. This perception study will assist us in understanding tenants views, what is important to them and areas for improvement in addition to benchmarking with other social landlords. Result from the survey will be shared in late-summer.

## **Conclusion**

4.11 The Housing service is open to feedback and welcomes complaints. We endeavour to learn from mistakes and not repeat them. By sharing the outcomes of complaints and lessons learnt across the team we acknowledge areas of weakness and promote improvements in service delivery. We recognise we can do better in some areas and share and seek good practice across the teams and sector. The Housing Ombudsman Service Complaint Handling Code promotes good practice and is a valuable resource for continuous improvement.

## **5. Relationship to the Corporate Strategy and Service Plan**

5.1 The report reflects the HRA Business Plan, Housing Operations Service Plan and the Council's Corporate commitment to promote "*Good quality housing for all income levels and age groups*" and aim to "*be the best council landlord in the South East and to be acknowledged so by our tenants*".

## **6. Implications of decision**

### **6.1 Resource (Finance, procurement, staffing, IT)**

Sometimes the appropriate remedy for a complaint will be to offer the complainant compensation and this may be financial. All compensation payments must be authorised by the relevant Head of Service.

### **6.2 Risk management**

Complaints can highlight areas where there are reputational and operational risks. The Council has a range of internal policies and procedure to provide good quality

services and carries out internal audits to monitor service delivery and ensure meet statutory requirements.

**6.3 Legal**

There are no legal implications associated with this report.

**6.4 Equality, diversity and inclusion**

Waverley's complaints handling policy helps to ensure that there is no discrimination in the way in which it delivers services so that all complaints are dealt with in a fair and equal way.

**6.5 Climate emergency declaration**

There are no specific implications regarding Carbon Neutrality relating to the handling of complaints.

**7. Consultation and engagement**

Report shared with Tenants Panel and the wider housing team

**8. Other options considered**

Not applicable

**9. Governance journey**

The observations of the Committee will be passed to the Executive

**Annexes:** None

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**Background Papers**

**There are no** background papers, as defined by Section 100D (5) of the Local Government Act 1972).

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Agreed and signed off by:

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Head of Finance: PV 26 May 2021  
Strategic Director: AR 26 May 2021  
Portfolio Holder: AMR 26 May 2021