

**SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL**

**Annual Complaints
Performance and Service
Improvement Report**

2023/24

Executive Summary

South Kesteven District Council is responsible for the management and maintenance of nearly 6,000 houses so it is essential that we are committed to delivering an exemplary and high-quality housing service. Effective services are founded upon honesty and trust. Trust can only be earned if the organisation is outward looking and always open to honest scrutiny and challenge from our tenants.

Complaints are a key method of communication between us and our tenants. We have a positive approach – not shying away from challenge but recognising feedback as a crucial guide for where things need to be put right, and for where we can further improve.

As the Cabinet member responsible for Housing I ensure that Cabinet members and the member led scrutiny committees receive and consider information on complaints performance management arrangements, providing opportunity to ask questions, seek assurance and to hold ourselves and our teams to account with a focus on continuous improvement.

Over the past year, we have made key strides to improve. In 2021 the Council self-referred to the Regulator of Social Housing. Significant work was undertaken to transform the service via a comprehensive Housing Improvement Action Plan, including changes to our complaints handling processes and culture. The Regulatory Notice was lifted in October 2023.

Operationally, we established a new centralised approach with three officers acting as complaint handlers in Housing and Technical Services. This has led to a greater timeliness and consistency in responses. Strategically, monthly meetings are held between senior managers to review complaints, identify lessons learnt and to implement the required service improvements.

Tenant feedback has directly informed the review of our key policies and procedures. Including the Repairs and Maintenance Policy, the Tenancy Management Policy, Estate Management Policy and the Housing Services Anti -Social Behaviour Policy. We have also created a dedicated damp and mould team which will ensure a proactive response from the Council.

A dedicated Housing Strategy team has been established to ensure feedback from complaints, surveys and tenant meetings are collated along with performance information to ensure a continuous cycle of review and improvement becomes embedded into the service.

We will continue to use feedback to improve the housing service for all of our tenants.

Cllr Virginia Moran

Cabinet Member for Housing

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide information regarding how the Council responded to the Housing complaints received during 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 and the actions we have taken in response to these complaints. During this period the Council received 284 complaints relating to Housing Services and Technical Services of which 39 (14%) were escalated to Stage 2.

Overview of complaints process

Council housing in South Kesteven is managed by the Housing and Projects Directorate. The directorate is divided into two Housing service areas who are responsible for service delivery:

- Housing Services - responsible for tenancy services, sheltered housing, estate management and lettings
- Technical Services - responsible for voids, repairs and improvements

Complaints about the Housing and Technical Services are addressed through the Housing Customer Feedback Policy. There are two main stages to this process:

- Stage 1 complaints – the Council will acknowledge a formal complaint within five working days and provide a full response within ten working days.
- Stage 2 complaints – If the complainant is not satisfied with the response, the complaint can be escalated with a request to review the Stage 1 response. Council will acknowledge the request within five working days and provide a full response within twenty working days.
- If the complainant remains dissatisfied by the Stage 2 review, the matter can be escalated to the Housing Ombudsman, who will conduct an independent investigation into allegations of maladministration.

A copy of the Housing Customer Feedback Policy is available at the following link on the Council's website <https://www.southkesteven.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/Housing%20Customer%20Feedback%20Policy%202024.pdf>.

All social landlords are members of the Housing Ombudsman, who regulate how complaints relating to social housing are dealt with. To ensure this is consistent across social landlords, the Ombudsman produces a Housing Complaints Code setting out the standards expected. Landlords are required to conduct a self-assessment of how they meet this code and publish it on their website. A copy of SKDC's self-assessment for 2023-24 can also be found on our website at the following link <https://www.southkesteven.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/Complaints%20Code%20Self-Assessment%202024.pdf>.

Definition of a complaint

As defined by the Housing Ombudsman a complaint is:

“An expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the organisation, its own staff, or those acting on its behalf, affecting an individual resident or group of residents.”

Complaints can relate to:

- The quality of service offered, or work carried out
- The action or lack of action carried out while carrying out a service
- The attitude or behaviour of those providing a service or completing work
- Missed appointments
- Failure to comply with policies, procedures, or service standards
- Failure to provide information when requested that a complainant has a right to
- A decision we have made or delayed in making
- Failure to respond to a previous complaint
- Where it is feedback from a consultation or survey we have sent as part of a consultation or feedback

The Council also receive ‘complaints’ which are identified as ‘service requests’ as they relate to an initial request for a service rather than a complaint regarding something the Council has already done. Service requests are not recorded as complaints but assigned to the relevant service area to address as a request for action.

An example of a service request would be where a tenant ‘complains’ that their heating is not working but this has not previously reported to the Council as an issue. This would be recorded as a service request because it relates to a repair to their heating system.

An example of a complaint would be where a tenant complains about a repair we have carried out on their heating system which they are not satisfied with.

How we manage complaints

A centralised Complaints Team records Housing complaints on the Council’s Complaint Management System, Meritec, as either a Stage 1 or a Stage 2 complaint. Once recorded, the complaint is allocated to Housing Services or Technical Services. This ensures complaints are managed and monitored in a consistent manner across the Housing Service. Stage 1 complaints are allocated to a Service Manager, and Stage 2 complaints are allocated to a Head of Service to respond to.

Complaints Performance

Stage One Complaints

Customer feedback is initially recorded as a Stage 1 complaint. The following table details how the 284 complaints received by the Housing and Projects Directorate were allocated between Housing Services and Technical Services:

Service Area	Stage 1
Housing Services	69 (24%)

Technical Services	215 (76%)
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A benchmark of the Council's volume of complaints when compared with neighbouring Social Landlords shows that the Council had a higher level of complaints per 1,000 homes as detailed in the following table:

Council	South Kesteven	Melton	Lincoln City	North Kesteven
Number of complaints per 1,000 homes	49	46	47	24

Responding to Complaints

The Council aim to respond to all Stage 1 complaints within 10 working days of them being acknowledged. Where we are unable respond within 10 working days, which will ordinarily relate to the complexity of the complaint, the lead officer will contact the complainant to explain why and provide a date by which a response will be given. This will ensure that a comprehensive response can be provided.

The complaint response provides details regarding the escalation process of complaints to Stage 2 if the complainant is not satisfied with the Stage 1 response provided.

The following table below provides details of how the Council performed in terms of closing stage 1 complaints within the expected 10-day period. The average time to close a complaint was **12 days** across both Housing and Technical Services.

Response Time	Within 10 days	Over 10 days
Housing Services	25	44
Technical Services	87	128
Total	112 (39%)	172 (61%)

The Council responded to 39% of stage 1 complaints on time compared with neighbouring social landlords who had the following rates for responding to stage 1 complaints on time: Melton 93%, North Kesteven 76% and Lincoln City 39%.

Upholding Complaints

Complaints may be categorised after investigation as either being upheld or not upheld as defined below:

- Upholding the complaint – where the Council are found to be at fault
- Partially upholding the complaint – where the Council are found to be partially at fault
- Not upheld – where the Council are found not to be at fault

The following table provides details of the outcome of Stage 1 complaints:

Complaint Outcome	Upheld	Partially Upheld	Not Upheld
Housing Services	29	10	30
Technical Services	174	15	26
Total	203 (71%)	25 (9%)	56 (20%)

Root Cause of Complaints

The Meritec system is in the process of being updated to change the 'root cause' field for complaints to a mandatory field. This will ensure that going forwards the Council will be able to analyse all complaints, identify trends and actions that need to be taken to avoid repeat complaints being received about the same issue.

Root causes are categorised into several categories of which the main ones are:

Service Delivery Failure – which include issues relating to taking too long to resolve an issue, not meeting the expected standard or not being kept informed of actions to the Council is intending to take.

Service Requests – relate to complaints where a request has been reported to the Council which has not been completed.

Other – includes issues relating to officer conduct or breach of policy.

Communication – includes poor communication between the Council and tenant, ability to contact the council, or unclear communication.

In 2023/24 a 'root cause' had been recorded for 126 of the 284 Housing complaints received. For 2024/25 a review is currently being undertaken to ensure that a 'root cause' is recorded for all complaints as the Council recognise the importance of having this information to implement service improvement.

The following tables provides details of how the 129 complaints were categorised.

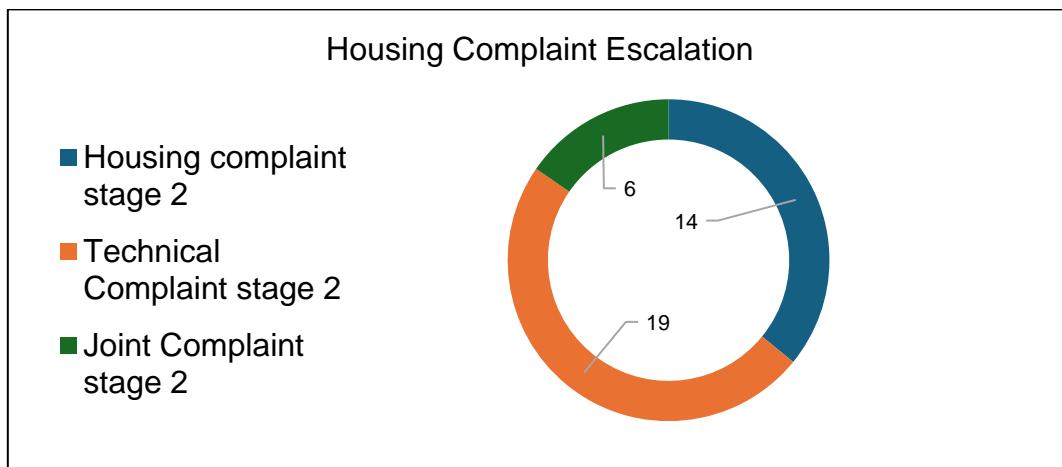
Root Cause	Service Delivery Failure	Service Requests	Other	Communication
Housing Services	12	3	7	6
Technical Services	89	4	4	1
Total	101 (80%)	7 (6%)	11(8%)	7(6%)

Housing Complaint Escalation

If a complainant is not satisfied with a Stage 1 response they can escalate the complaint to Stage 2. Stage 2 complaints are allocated to a Head of Service who will review the Stage 1 response to check that it has been adequately investigated and all available information has been considered.

A response is expected within 20 working days of the Stage 2 complaint being acknowledged. If escalated complaints include issues which cover both Housing and Technical Services they will be dealt with as a joint complaint co-ordinated by the lead officer.

As shown in the following chart 39 stage 1 complaints were escalated to stage 2:



Time taken to respond to Stage 2 Complaints

Time to respond	Within 20 days	Over 20 days
Housing Services	2	12
Technical Services	5	14
Joint complaint	3	3
Total	10 (26%)	29 (74%)

The average time response time for a stage 2 complaint was **21 days**.

Stage 2 Complaints Upheld

The following table details whether the complaint was upheld, partially upheld or not upheld following the review at Stage 2 of the complaints process.

Complaint Outcome	Upeld/Partially Upeld	Not Upeld
Housing Services	8	6
Technical Services	17	2
Joint complaint	2	4
Total	27 (69%)	12 (31%)

The Stage 2 complaint response provides details regarding referring complaints to the Housing Ombudsman if the complainant is not satisfied with the final response.

Ombudsman cases

If a complainant is not satisfied with a Stage 2 response, they have the right to refer their complaint to the Housing Ombudsman. The Housing Ombudsman will review the complaint in terms of how it was handled by the landlord and if all the factors have been taken into account. The Housing Ombudsman has a range of options to address

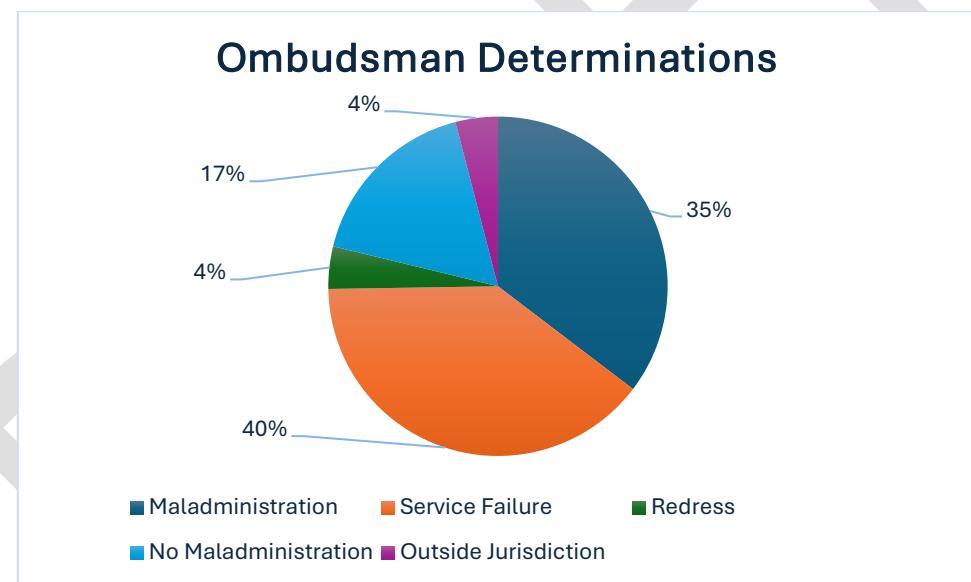
any issues it finds, from instructing the landlord to pay compensation, review or develop a policy, or reviewing how we currently do something and amending it.

The Housing Ombudsman publishes a 'Landlord Performance Report' each year detailing how a landlord has performed in complaints handling. The latest report can be found on the Council's website.

The Housing Ombudsman will inform the landlord of its determination of the complaint and their findings. The most frequent finding is 'Maladministration' which refers means the landlord has failed to do something, done something it should not have done or there has been unreasonable delay in completing an action.

The determinations contain recommendations outlining how the landlord should address any issues found as part of this case review. The Housing Ombudsman will usually instruct the landlord to explain how they will complete the identified recommendations. Recommendations can range from reviewing a policy to providing further training to staff.

During 2023/24 the Housing Ombudsman made determinations on 7 cases, resulting in 23 findings, 26 orders being made and 15 recommendations across all cases. The following chart summarises the 23 findings:



- 8 maladministration findings were identified – the most frequent reason for this being in how we communicated to the tenant.
- 9 service failures were found which related to the Council not completing agreed works.
- The 26 orders can be broken down as follows:
 - Compensation – 14
 - Repairs – 6
 - Take Specific Non-repair Action – 2
 - Apology – 2
 - Process Change – 1
 - Staff Training – 1
- The key issues raised related to property condition and handling of complaints

- £3,475 was paid out in compensation.
- 15 recommendations which included reviewing how we respond to complaints, reviewing policies and providing training on complaint handling.
- No major maladministration was found.

Learning from customer feedback

The Council reviews complaints to ensure that lessons are learnt, and service improvements are implemented. The following table details the recurring themes that have been identified and the actions the Council has taken.

Theme	What did we learn	What did we change
The time taken to complete a reported issue took too long to resolve	We need to complete repairs and address tenancy management issues in a reasonable time to prevent the situation from getting worse	We are in the process of amending the timelines for reactive repairs and have implemented a repairs scheduler which will increase the efficiency when planning repairs jobs. In tenancy management initial contact is made with the reporting tenant to obtain further information about an issue so that a response plan can be developed.
Response times to reports of Damp and Mould	Response times need to be reviewed	The Council has developed a damp and mould team to ensure that a response can be provided within the proposed legislative timelines.
Outstanding repairs on void properties when relet	Our relet standard was not sufficient	The Council has a voids standard and ensures that all properties meet this before being relet. Tenants are also visited after 6 weeks of a new tenancy to review whether any issues have been identified.
Communication	Tenants want to be kept informed of progress on issues they have reported	The Council have improved how tenants are informed regarding repairs appointments. When dealing with tenancy issues, we arrange regular contact to keep them updated regarding the issue they have raised.
Being able to contact the Council to report an issue	Tenants should be offered a variety of contact options to ensure they are able to	The Council has improved the online reporting forms which sends an acknowledgement email to confirm the form has been received.

	report issues to the Council	When contacting the Council by telephone, tenants are offered a call back or message options
Being passed between teams to identify who can help	The Council need to ensure the tenants are not transferred to multiple service areas	Tenants can report an issue at the point of contact and the officer taking the call will pass the information onto the relevant team.
Officer conduct is a regular theme, particularly on the tone of language used in verbal and written communication	Officers should be aware of how their tone and manner of response will be perceived by the tenant.	All staff are reminded of the importance of customer care and empathy towards the tenant. If reports are received regarding officer conduct, telephone calls will be reviewed by senior management any necessary action will be taken.

Complaints and Service Improvements

A review of complaints and comments made as part of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures Survey has led to improvements in the both the complaints process and service delivery.

Improved complaints handling

The Council has a centralised approach to handling complaints. Three officers in the Housing and Projects Directorate are responsible for logging and assigning complaints in the Meritec system to officers for investigation and response. This has led to better response times and consistent responses being produced.

Regular meetings are held with the complaint handlers and management, to monitor progress and performance on complaints. This enables recurring issues to be identified, actions to be determined and improvements to be implemented.

Monthly meetings are held between the Director of Housing and Projects, the Head of Housing Services, the Head of Technical Services, the Tenancy Services Manager and the Repairs Manager and the Service Managers. These meetings review complaints and identify the lessons that can be learnt and identify and implement service improvements to address these.

All Housing and Technical Services staff are aware of the complaints process and their role in responding to complaints. Training has been provided to all officers who deal with complaints to ensure a consistent approach, and a more comprehensive response is provided. All Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints are now reviewed prior to being sent to ensure they fully respond to the issues that have been raised.

Improved service delivery

The Council has reviewed its key housing policies in response to the feedback from complaints and surveys such as the Tenant Satisfaction Measures. This has included changes to the Repairs and Maintenance Policy, the Tenancy Management Policy and

Estate Management Policy. The Council has developed a Housing Services Anti - Social Behaviour Policy following a recommendation from the Housing Ombudsman.

Tenants were asked to review the amended policies in terms of how they met their expectations and made changes based on their feedback. Feedback was also reviewed from surveys, complaints and resident meetings to identify recurring issues that could lead to improvements.

An example of this has been the creation of a damp and mould team within the repairs service which will support the Council with meeting the proposed legislative timelines relating to reports of damp and mould. The team will also provide advice on how to prevent and manage damp and mould issues within the home.

Our Housing Officers have also established strong working partnerships with the police and other agencies to enable a partnership approach to addressing tenancy management issues and wider community issues that affect our neighbourhoods.

Improved communication with tenants

Following feedback from tenants the Council has made it easier for issues to be reported online, an automatic response is sent to acknowledge the online form has been received.

Target times have been set for responding to tenants regarding the issue they have raised. Responses are recorded on the tenancy management system and our complaints management system. The team ensure their responses are comprehensive and easy to understand.

What we will do to improve further

The Council are developing an 'information management framework' to ensure that data relating to how we perform, recurring issues, lessons learnt, and actions implemented can be collated and shared.

Tenant engagement will be increased so that the Council has a greater understanding of the improvements that could be implemented from a customer perspective, for example:

- The Council plans to implement tenant surveys and research regarding complaint handling to identify improvements that could be implemented from a 'customer' perspective.
- Tenants involvement in reviewing and challenging how we deliver the housing service will be increased
- A Housing Strategy Team has been established which will ensure feedback from complaints, surveys and tenant engagement is collated along with performance information. This will ensure that a continuous cycle of review and improvement becomes embedded into the Housing service.