



Annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report


April 2023 to March 2024



Introduction

This report covers our compliance with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code, and our complaints handling performance from April 2023 to March 2024.

We've included in the report:

- ◆ Our statement about performance from the board
- ◆ A summary of complaints including the numbers of complaints received and resolved, and the response times
- ◆ Compliance with the [Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code](#) 
- ◆ Housing Ombudsman cases and reports on our complaint handling
- ◆ Service improvements made as a result of complaints.

Our self-assessment of compliance with the Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code has been scrutinised by the Resident Complaints Panel. The Resident Complaints Panel, which is made up of individuals from diverse backgrounds, bring a range of perspectives to influence improvements to complaints handling. Over the past year the panel reviewed and challenged performance to help drive better resident experiences.



Board statement

We're committed to providing the best possible services to residents. Sometimes things go wrong and it's important we put things right for you as quickly as possible.

We recognise this hasn't always happened in the past and we're sorry. We're determined to improve both the complaints handling service and services such as repairs. We've made these a top priority and have, over the last year, started to make changes. But we're on a journey and expect you to see and feel more changes over the coming year. We're listening to feedback and involving residents throughout, to help us improve and deliver better services for residents.

We've carried out a self-assessment of the complaint handling service and are assured we're meeting the new Housing Ombudsman Code (April 2024). Our board member responsible for complaints, and the Resident Complaint Panel, have scrutinised and challenged the self-assessment to make sure it gives a true reflection of our complaint handling. While we comply with the code in policy terms, further improvements can be made, these are highlighted in the report, and we've plans in place to address these.

We'll communicate any changes resulting from the self-assessment and embedding the approach to complaint handling across Southern Housing to provide the best possible service to residents.

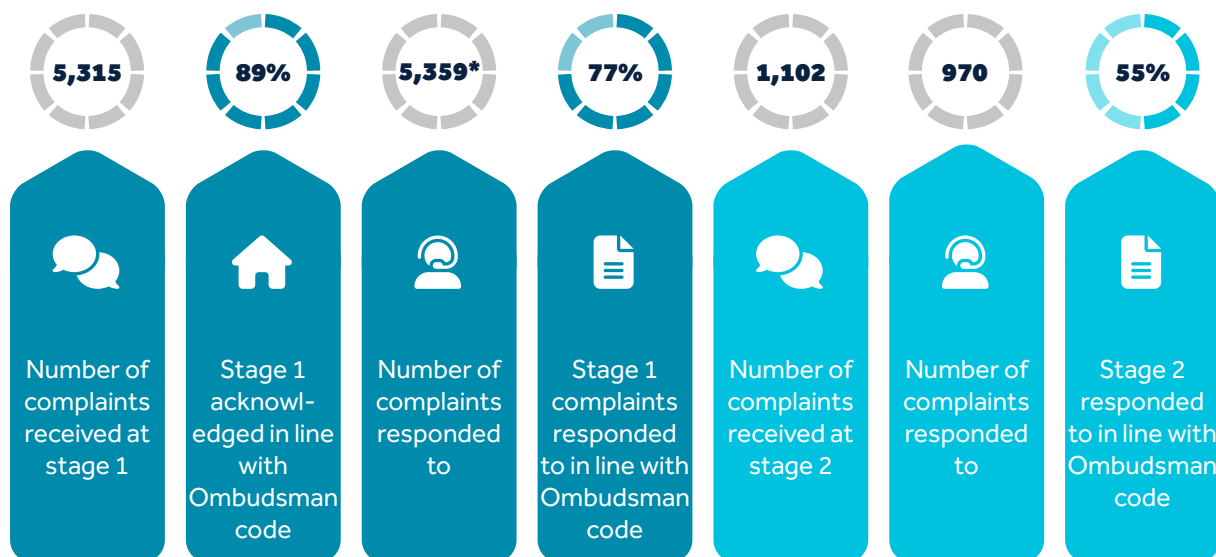


Complaints performance April 2023 to March 2024

We recognised we needed to improve how we handled complaints and over the past year we've made many changes. The table below summarises our performance from April 2023 to March 2024. For residents, the improvements we've made has meant:

- More consistency in acknowledging complaints on time.** We acknowledged 89% of complaints on time and currently, we're consistently answering over 90% on time. We recognise we can answer a higher percentage on time
- More consistent delivery of the complaints service for residents,** because we've increased the size of the Complaints Team, changed the way we manage complaints, changed technology systems so we can track progress effectively, and changed our policy and procedures. Again, there's still more we can do
- Improvements to keeping residents informed** throughout the complaints process through allocated case handlers
- More consistent compensation payments** in line the Housing Ombudsman requirements
- More effective learning from complaints** so we avoid repeating the same mistakes
- Improvements to service delivery where health conditions affect a residents' circumstances,** so the potential risks to residents are managed and reduced.

Summary of complaints April 2023 to March 2024



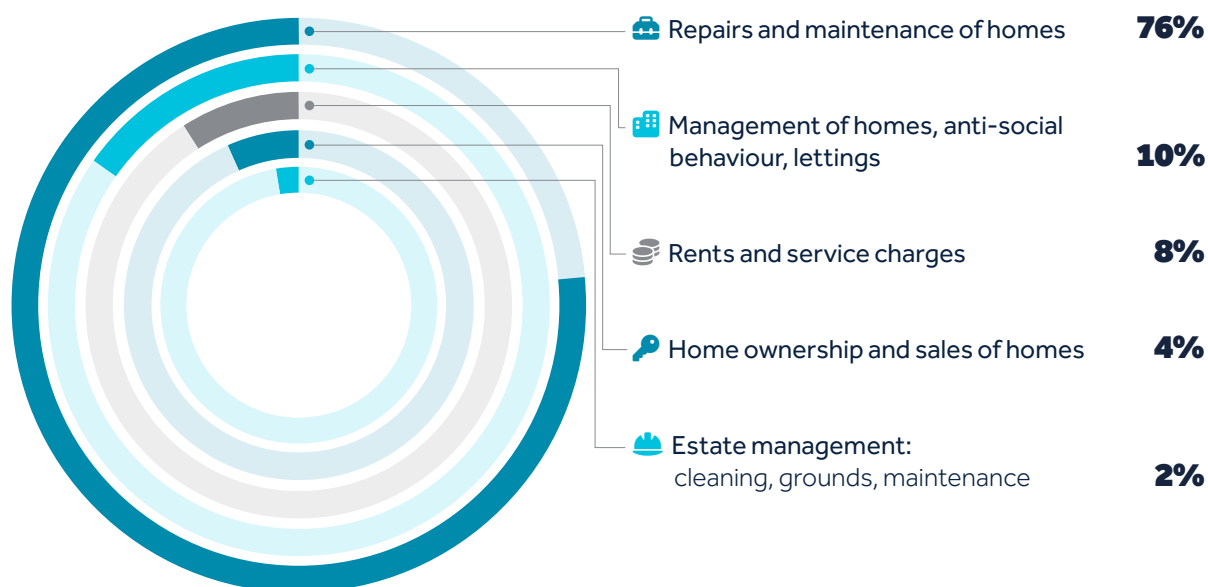
*Includes complaints first reported before 31 March 2023 and responded to after 1 April 2023

We're not aware of any complaints being refused during the year. On occasions, residents resolve matters outside of the complaints process. This includes legal proceedings, service charge disputes, and disrepair claims. We've changed the way we record refusals to better understand the reasons for refusing a complaint.

Reasons for complaints April 2023 to March 2024

The chart below shows the service areas where we receive complaints. Repairs is one of our largest services and one that residents care about the most. We get most complaints about repairs and the condition of residents' homes. We've outlined the issues, learning, and the action we're taking in the lessons learnt from complaints section later in this report.

Reason for complaint



We must meet the [Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code](#) and have completed our self-assessment against the code, with the help of our Resident Complaints Panel. The code changed in April 2024, some of the requirements are new and we've made changes to ensure we meet the new code. Areas where we can make further improvement against the Housing Ombudsman code include:

- ◆ **Acknowledging and responding to more complaints on time, and keeping residents informed during the complaints process.** We increased the size of the team and changed the way we work, and this has already led to improvement
- ◆ **Reporting complaints through our website.** We're integrating our technology systems and making changes that will lead to improvements from September 2024
- ◆ **Updating our information leaflet 'Putting it Right'** by October 2024
- ◆ **Recording the reasons for refusing complaints.** We now have a new way of recording and monitoring refusals
- ◆ **Continuously embedding our approach to complaint handling** across our business and with our contractors through training and communication throughout 2024-25
- ◆ **Making sure all members of staff have a complaints performance objective for 2024-25**
- ◆ **Integrating and changing our technology systems from September 2024.**




When Southern Housing was created in December 2022, following the merger of Southern Housing Group and Optivo, we recognised that we must improve complaint handling. We've made significant changes to complaint handling over the year to improve resident experiences. These include:

- ◆ **Increasing resources and reorganising the Complaints Team**
- ◆ **Changes to the way we work and handle complaints**, so we're delivering a consistent service to all residents
- ◆ **Changes to our policy and procedures**, including our compensation policy
- ◆ **Carrying out training** to help ensure the effective ownership of complaints, and the continuation of a culture of complaint handling and learning from complaints. Training staff in the contact centre to effectively recognise complaints in line with the Housing Ombudsman code, and making sure they're sent to the Complaints Team
- ◆ **Making sure we understand all the circumstances** surrounding a resident complaint and acting on that information – for instance, whether there are health conditions that we need to consider
- ◆ **Recruiting a Complaints Panel** of residents who challenge performance and help drive improvement
- ◆ **Recruiting a board member responsible for complaints** to challenge our performance at the highest level
- ◆ **Improving our complaint handling technology systems** – we've more work to do in 2024 and this will help to drive better resident experiences
- ◆ **Improvements to tracking and monitoring complaints** - meaning we can report on the time taken to acknowledge complaints and our stage 1 and 2 responses more effectively
- ◆ **Changing to how we record refusals** – from April 2024
- ◆ **Changing the way we track and monitor actions** arising from complaints
- ◆ **Improved the way we learn from and act upon lessons from complaints** – please see learning from complaints section in this report.

Housing Ombudsman

The Housing Ombudsman is a free (to residents), independent, and impartial service. Their work is funded through landlord subscription fees. They investigate complaints and resolve disputes involving the tenants and leaseholders of social landlords, (housing associations and local authorities) like Southern Housing. Residents can take a complaint to the Housing Ombudsman Service for investigation after going through the landlord's (Southern Housing) complaint process, if the issues have not been resolved. The service also helps where the landlord is not responding to a complaint they've received.

Members of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme must comply with the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code. The code aims to achieve best practice in complaint handling. The Ombudsman has the power to make orders to landlords, this might mean ordering the landlord to apologise, carry out works or pay compensation. Please see the [Housing Ombudsman website](#)  for more information.



Housing Ombudsman determinations 2023-24

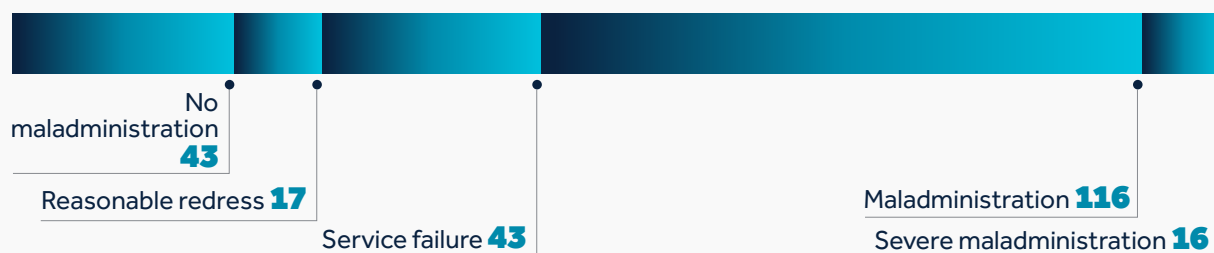
The Housing Ombudsman will make recommendations and a determination when they review a complaint. There are several types of determination including:

- Maladministration:** where the landlord, for example, has failed to comply with its legal obligations, its policies and procedures, or unreasonably delayed dealing with the matter. This could be a finding of **service failure, maladministration or severe maladministration**, depending on the seriousness of the failure and the impact on the resident. **Service failure** is the lowest level of maladministration and is reserved for minor failings where action is still needed to put things right
- No maladministration:** where the landlord is found to have acted appropriately
- Redress:** where the landlord made redress to the resident which resolved the complaint satisfactorily in the Ombudsman's opinion
- Resolved with intervention/early resolution:** where the complaint was resolved with the Ombudsman's intervention
- Outside jurisdiction (OSJ):** where the Ombudsman didn't have the authority to investigate. This could be for a variety of reasons including: the complaint had not been made within a reasonable timescale; the complaint did not meet the conditions of the scheme; or the matter was more appropriately dealt with by the courts, a tribunal, another complaint handling body or regulator.

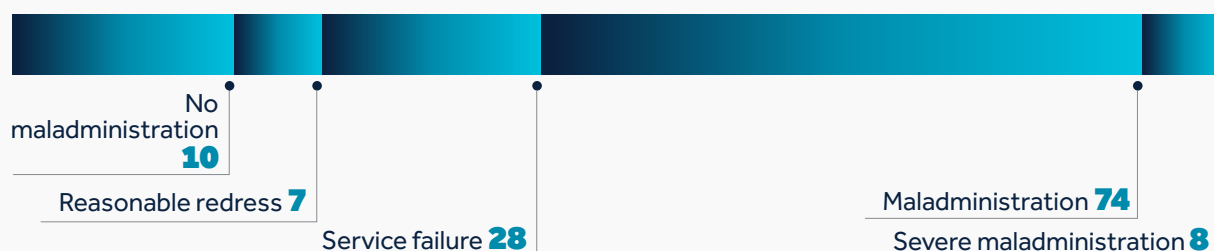
The table below summarises the determinations made by the Housing Ombudsman for Southern Housing from April 2023 to March 2024. Most of these determinations were relating to complaints made between 2020 and 2022. You can find individual cases on the Housing Ombudsman website by following this [link](#).

The Housing Ombudsman does not publish all cases due to data protection issues, and to protect residents' identity. We were fully compliant with responding to orders and requests made by the Housing Ombudsman, meaning we received no Complaint Handling Failure Orders. If you need help finding information, please contact the [Housing Ombudsman Service](#).

Service determination



Complaint handling determination


























The Housing Ombudsman annual report about Southern Housing: 2022-23

The Housing Ombudsman publishes reports each year for some organisations. The latest reports for Southern Housing are for April 2022 to March 2023. You can see a summary in the table below, or for more detail please see the [Housing Ombudsman website](#).

Southern Housing was formed in December 2022, following the merger of Southern Housing Group and Optivo. The Ombudsman has published information for the years 2022 to 2023 for the organisations before merger, including:


- **Southern Housing Group:** From April 2022 to March 2023, Southern Housing Group had a maladministration rate of 63%, compared to the national average of 55%. You can find the [full report here](#).
- **Optivo:** From April 2022 to March 2023, Optivo had a maladministration rate of 48%, compared to the national average of 55%. You can find the [full report here](#).

HOS outcomes	Southern Housing Group	Optivo
 Determinations	 30	 20
 Findings	 61	 33
 Maladministration findings	 38	 16
 Orders Made	 56	 24
 Recommendations	 28	 20
 Complaint handling failure orders	1	 0
 Compensation	 £21, 323	 £26,274
 Maladministration rate	 63%	 48%

Special Investigation into Southern Housing by the Housing Ombudsman:

June 2023 to September 2023

In May 2024, the Housing Ombudsman published a report following its investigation. The report covers events between October 2018 and September 2023. In this report, the Ombudsman issued determinations on 77 cases, making 184 findings with a maladministration rate of 79%. Regarding complaint handling, the maladministration rate was 92%. 76 of the 77 determinations reviewed in this investigation started before our merger in December 2022. The Ombudsman's 2022-23 data shows that at merger, Optivo had a maladministration rate of 3.5 per 10,000 homes. This was less than a third of the London average of 11.5, and just over half the national average of 6.8. Whilst Southern Housing Group had a higher-than-average rate of 13.1, the combined rate for the two organisations was a third lower than the London average.

Throughout this investigation, we worked collaboratively with the Ombudsman and its team, and we welcome the learning from this report. These cases are also included in the details above for 2023-24. You can find the [full report here](#) 

We're truly sorry to all residents who've experienced service failures, including the 67 residents that this report shows we let down.

The report identified seven key themes and made recommendations to improve in those areas:


- ◆ **Complaint handling:** improving ownership and access to complaints
- ◆ **Reasonable adjustments:** making sure we recognise, respond and record when dealing with vulnerabilities
- ◆ **Unreasonable behaviour and contact restrictions:** making sure we consistently apply our unacceptable behaviour policy
- ◆ **Risk management:** identifying resident vulnerabilities and acting on the outcome of risk assessments
- ◆ **Repairs:** revise the repair policy and improve record keeping
- ◆ **Managing agents and third parties:** being clear about responsibilities with residents when managing agents are in place.
- ◆ **Knowledge and information management:** improve record keeping to help to deliver a better service to residents.



We've taken, and continue to take, action to address the recommendations of the report and will continue to make improvements. Please see the next section 'learning from complaints' for more information.





Learning from complaints

In this section, we focus on what we've learnt from complaints, Housing Ombudsman determinations and the special investigation by the Housing Ombudsman, the root causes of problems, and the action we're taking to improve services for residents. We've also included learning from the Housing Ombudsman [Spotlight reports](#)  (best practice guidance).

When we formed Southern Housing in December 2022, we were aware service improvements were needed. Through complaints and our discussions with residents before merger, we recognised the areas where we needed to improve and set these as priorities for action in our strategic plan. Below we've outlined the action we've taken to learn lessons and improve services. In each case we work with residents to make sure the changes we're making will result in better services. Residents on our local panels, committees and board are making sure services improve for residents.

Complaints handling service: we've covered complaint handling performance in the section above, 'summary of complaints April 2023 to March 2024'


Unreasonable behaviour and contact restrictions: we've changed our approach and policy to address the issues highlighted in the Housing Ombudsman special investigation.


Risk management, reasonable adjustments and reducing resident vulnerability related risks: our reasonable adjustments and vulnerable needs policy has been updated, guidance developed, and training for frontline colleagues is being rolled out. This will mean we can take more effective action to tailor services and reduce risks for residents. There is more we can do to improve. We're working with residents to codesign our approach. Within this, we'll be addressing the recommendations in the Housing Ombudsman spotlight reports on [Attitudes, Rights and Respect](#)  and [Knowledge and information management](#) .

Repairs services: delivering an effective repairs service is important to us and to residents. Residents said in too many cases we're missing appointments, taking too long to complete repairs, not keeping residents up to date, and inconveniencing residents by carrying out multiple visits to complete the repair. This isn't in all our repairs services but is specifically related to two main repairs contractors. We replaced two contractors operating in London from June 2024 and have put in place more effective systems to make sure they deliver the quality service our residents deserve. The expectation is this will result in more repairs being completed on time, more appointments kept, and improved quality. We expect this to lead to an improved service from August 2024. We've our own repairs teams in some areas and these teams are delivering an effective service to residents according to residents' feedback.

Repairs is our main priority, and we'll make further improvements. Board have developed, and will monitor, a strategic performance indicator 'complaints per repair' to make sure repairs related complaints are reduced. As well as replacing contractors who weren't delivering the services we expect for residents, we're also increasing resources in the repairs call handling team, operatives, and scheduling colleagues, which will all be managed by us, rather than a contractor. We're carrying out a further review with residents to improve experiences, which we'll finish in June and will implement from July 2024. We're working with residents to change our repairs policy, to be clearer about timescales for repairs. We want residents to have homes that are in good repair, and to receive a great service.

Communal repairs: we also carry out repairs to communal areas and this is sometimes a source of complaint. Failure to do communal repairs on time and to a good quality can affect many people on an estate. In addition to the repairs above, we identified specific issues relating to the timeliness of communal repairs and keeping residents up to date. To address timeliness, we've implemented a new standard for completion for our new London repairs contracts – this effectively means communal repairs have a higher priority than was previously the case. To help keep residents informed proactively, and so they do not have to chase, we're piloting an automated messaging solution that informs all residents in the block/ estate of the progress with communal repairs. If successful, we can roll this out across other estates.

Improving damp and mould services: living in a home with damp and mould can cause health and wellbeing issues for residents. We reviewed damp and mould complaints, asked residents to review the service with us, and worked with residents to make improvements. This led to increased resources into fixing damp and mould in residents' homes. We created an expert dedicated Damp and Mould Team – this means better diagnosis of damp and mould in residents' homes, getting repairs done quicker, and improved communication so residents are kept up to date. We also recognise damp and mould can affect residents' health, and when residents report damp, we assess the impact on health, prioritising residents who have ongoing health conditions. In addition, we're implementing recommendations from the Housing Ombudsman spotlight report on [damp and mould](#) .


Anti-social behaviour (ASB): ASB is a key concern for residents, leading to complaints including inconsistency of advice, not showing empathy, and not being kept up to date. We worked with residents to develop a revised policy, good neighbour procedure and toolkit. We're changing how we manage ASB when residents first contact us, to make sure we get residents to the right person for the right advice quicker. We're also making sure we assess residents' needs when we're contacted about ASB, and using this information to tailor services for health conditions and potential risks. We're working with residents to make further improvements to residents' experiences of the ASB service and will implement changes from July 2024. In addition, we're implementing recommendations from the Housing Ombudsman spotlight report on [noise nuisance](#) .

Cleaning and grounds maintenance: while we don't get high numbers of complaints about grounds maintenance and cleaning in communal areas, we've still learnt lessons. The key lesson we've learnt is that our in-house service offers better quality, a better resident experience, and gives rise to fewer complaints than when we employ contractors. Where we can, we'll bring more cleaning and grounds maintenance services in house.

Service Charge enquiries: residents are naturally concerned about value for money, and this can lead to complaints about service charges. In addition, communication was an issue raised by residents. We increased the size of the Service Charge Team and have made improvements to processes, which has led to better communication and information for residents. We're making more improvements over the next 12-18 months, which will mean further improvements including:

- Better estimates provided with the rent change letters with more transparency about costs
- Quicker turnaround of requests for supporting documentation
- Better information and communication.

External managing agents (EMA): some of our homes are in blocks and on estates where we don't own the freehold. This means we're not responsible for many of the services we'd otherwise normally provide, such as, cleaning in communal areas, grounds maintenance, repairs to the common areas, keeping the lifts in service etc. These services and many more are the responsibility of the freeholder, who, in these arrangements, is also our landlord. Freeholders will usually employ a managing agent to act for them (we refer to them as External managing agents). With an increased focus on how housing associations manage their homes on such estates both by the Housing Ombudsman and Homes England, and with the requirement to have assurance on various safety requirements known as the 'Building Safety Measures', we've created a Managing Agents Relationship Team within our Home Ownership Department. The team have an overall responsibility of helping make sure we're working together collaboratively, for the benefit of residents living in these estates and blocks, to provide a better service and reduce complaints. This includes:

- Liaising with all EMAs and making sure we're both clear on what our respective obligations are, as they vary between estates and blocks
- Working through our action plan, which includes full implementation of all the recommendations in the Housing Ombudsman's [spotlight report on managing agents](#) .

Conclusion

We welcome the recommendations of the Housing Ombudsman in their investigation report and are taking action to implement these. We've made significant changes to improve complaint handling and services to residents and are continuing to work with residents to drive better experiences across all services.

Importantly, we're learning from complaints and other feedback to focus improvements on the areas that matter most to residents, in particular repairs.

