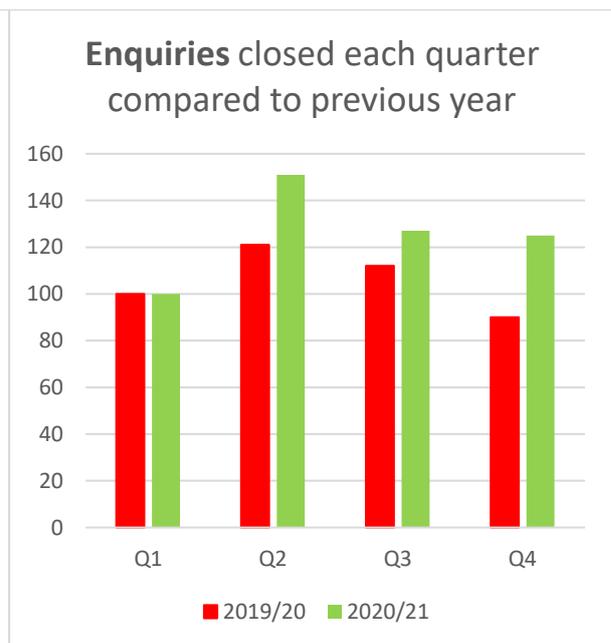
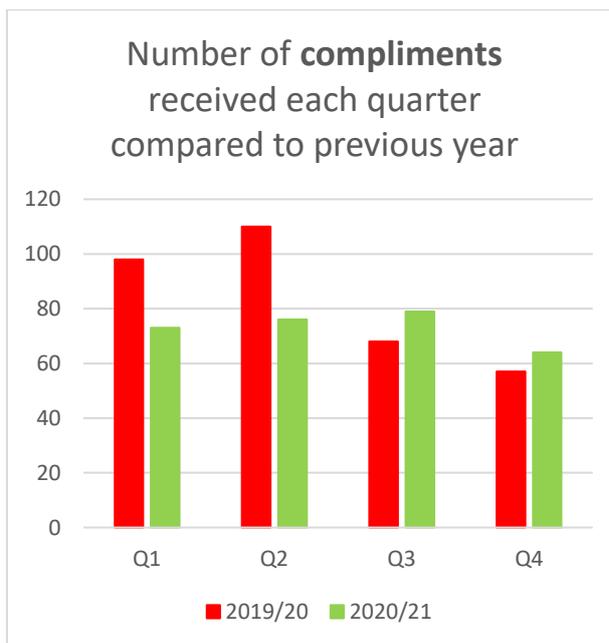
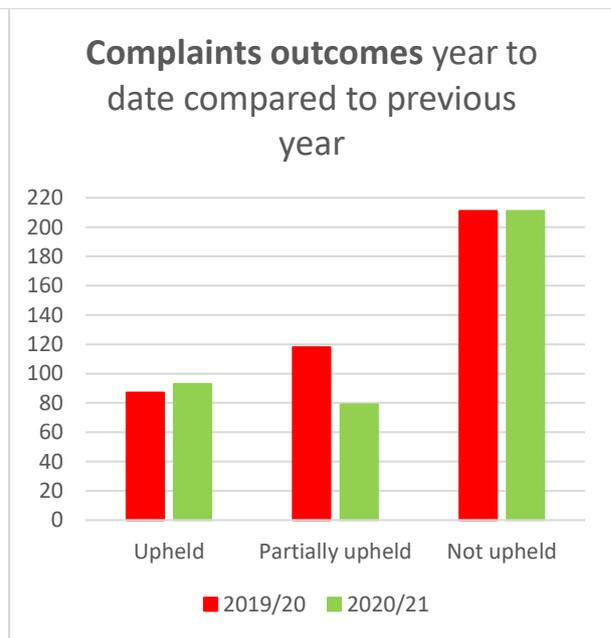
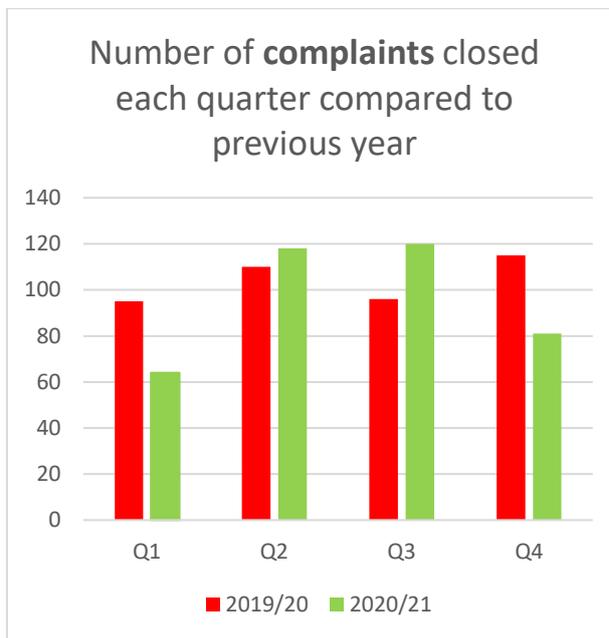


VISUAL EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – APRIL 2020 TO MARCH 2021

383
complaints
closed

292
compliments
received

503
Councillor
and MP
enquiries
closed



1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Customer feedback is analysed quarterly and reported to the Operations Committee on a half-yearly basis. This report provides an update on customer feedback received during 2020/21.
- 1.2 The Housing Ombudsman launched its new Complaint Handling Code in the third quarter of the year and the Government launched a Social Housing White Paper. Although SHG already reflects the good practice in the code, the Customer Feedback Policy and Procedure has been reviewed and updated to ensure that SHG continues to operate its customer feedback service in line with these changes. The new policy was approved by the Board at its meeting in December 2020. The service will continue to be reviewed and adapted to reflect any future changes within the sector.

2 CUSTOMER FEEDBACK OVERVIEW

- 2.1 There were 383 complaints closed during 2020/21, which is less than the number closed in 2019/2¹. The decrease is particularly noticeable in quarters one and four. There were 503 Councillor and MP enquiries closed, which is higher than the number closed in 2019/20². The increase is particularly noticeable in quarters two and four. There has also been a 12 per cent reduction in the number of compliments received³.
- 2.2 Most teams recorded a reduction or only slight fluctuations in complaint numbers during 2020/21, except for ASB and Customer Safety, who went up. Similarly, for enquiries, most teams saw a reduction or only slight fluctuations, except for ASB and Allocations who went up. The increase in cases for specific teams has been attributed to the wider impact of Covid-19 and the increased use of these services by customers during this time.
- 2.3 All 383 complaints except six were responded to within 10 working days, with the average response time being six working days. Of the complaints that received a delayed response during 2020/21, three were avoidable and were highlighted to and reviewed by the relevant teams. One MP enquiry received a delayed response due to an internal error when logging the case. The continued reduction in delayed responses compared to the previous year reflects the ongoing focus on positive engagement with case handlers/team leaders and further support from the Customer Feedback Team where needed. It is particularly important to ensure cases receive a response within ten working days, or where circumstances permit, within 20-workings days as set out in the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code. The risks associated with avoidable delays include the potential to receive a complaint handling order from the Housing Ombudsman.

3 TRENDS AND ANALYSIS

- 3.1 The Maintenance and Commercial Service Team has seen a 23 per cent reduction in complaints closed during 2020/21⁴. In the same period, there was

¹ There were 416 complaints closed during 2019/20

² There were 423 enquiries closed during 2019/20

³ 292 received compared to 333 received in 2019/20

⁴ 147 complaints closed compared to 190 in 2019/20

also a 5 per cent decrease in all repairs completed and an 18 per cent decrease in routine repairs completed specifically, compared to the previous year. During this time, the service has also maintained a high level of attendance, which has meant that there has been available resource to deliver the level of service required.

- 3.2 The ASB team has seen a 54 per cent increase in its ASB caseload, which reflects the trend across other housing providers. The increased use of the service has resulted in an increase in complaints and enquiries closed for the service due to court delays, Covid related breaches and customers generally raising more issues. Despite the increase in complaints and enquiries, customer satisfaction with ASB case outcomes remains high at 99.65 per cent⁵.
- 3.3 70 per cent of complaints closed for Customer Safety (16 of 23) were in the first two quarters of 2020/21. 52 per cent of complaints closed (12 of 23) related to fixed wire testing and gas safety checks. Although the service acted reasonably, operating in line with government guidance and adhering to safety requirements, there was difficulty gaining access to properties during this time as customers were hesitant to allow access because of Covid-19.
- 3.4 84 per cent of the enquiries closed for Allocations (98 of 116) related to information and advice given. There has been an increased demand for housing in the Borough over the last 12 months, with a 16 per cent increase in the average number of bids per property compared to 2019/20⁶. There has also been a 10 per cent decrease in the number of void properties during the year⁷, which has meant less properties available to re-let to those in need of housing. It is felt that the increased demand, along with the emotional impact of Covid-19, has resulted in the increase in enquiries. In response to the increase, the Customer Feedback Team are looking at a process to identify instances where the customer has not contacted SHG directly about the issue and instead made a formal enquiry via their local Councillor or MP. This will help SHG look at ways to better engage with customers accessing the service and encourage them to raise issues directly with SHG in the first instance.

4 LEARNING FROM CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

- 4.1 In complaint and enquiry cases where SHG was judged to be at fault the main reasons were due to a lack of communication (45 complaints and 31 enquiries) and lack of action (29 complaints and 31 enquiries). Three of the upheld complaints related to policies (Gas Safety, Adaptations for Tenants of Stockport Homes and Allocations, which is a Stockport Council owned policy), the details of which have been passed on to the service area for consideration when the policy is next reviewed. Although learning from customer feedback is a priority, there will be an increased focus on this going forward to improve the service.

⁵ 577 Stockport Homes and private renting customers completed the survey and only two were dissatisfied

⁶ Average of 161 bids per property in 2020/21 compared to an average of 139 bids per property in 2019/20. The number of bids depends on a number of factors such as age restrictions, type of property and area, with houses and one-bed flats sometimes receiving between 300-400 bids

⁷ 634 voids let during 2020/21 compared to 705 in 2019/20

This will include innovative ways to capture more in-depth feedback from customers and processes implemented to support this.

- 4.2 All fully or partially upheld complaints were reviewed to identify trends and learning opportunities. Although some of the generic themes identified include improved communication and additional support or training for staff, it is not always possible to distinguish themes. There were, however, a number of individual cases where ad-hoc learning points were recognised:
- Better monitoring of issues that concern both asbestos and repairs, to determine who takes ownership of remedial works and ensure works are completed in a timely manner
 - Following fixed wire testing, operatives now ensure that the fridge/freezers are in working order and record this on the condition report
 - Improve oversight of information across teams to limit duplication and ensure improved internal communication. This will be a key consideration when implementing future systems, which will allow information to be better accessed and shared across the organisation
 - Operatives reminded to liaise with colleagues for guidance in relation to non-standard fittings
 - Review the current process for Homechoice applications to ensure customers are informed when their application status has been changed
 - More effective interrogation of visitors by concierge
 - Remind staff and contractors to ensure working practices adhere to Covid-19 guidelines
 - Temporary monthly checks carried out for a block following reports of fly-tipping in the communal area

5 COMPLAINT SATISFACTION

- 5.1 There has been some fluctuation in customer satisfaction when compared with 2019/20 and, although the proportion of customers surveyed remains the same, the return rates were lower. Where further comments were provided for negative responses, these have been passed on to the appropriate service, some underlying themes include lack of communication, and outstanding issues or the length of time taken to resolve issues.
- 5.2 There has been an increase in customer satisfaction with 'easy to make a complaint' and 'outcome of complaint', the first of which is especially important as it demonstrates that customers have still been able to raise issues directly, despite the restrictions over the last 12 months. Both of these questions received a similar number of positive responses in 2019/20 and 2020/21, even though there were fewer surveys completed overall. The percentage of complainants that would use the complaints service again remains high but is slightly lower than the figure recorded in 2019/20. There were, however, less responses received compared to last year.

- 5.3 Customer satisfaction with ‘response was clear and easy to understand⁸’ and ‘how staff handled complaint’ has decreased compared to last year. Where customers felt the response was not clear and easy to understand and a reason was given, analysis shows that customer had misinterpreted the question and expressed dissatisfaction with the handling or outcome of their complaint, rather than the quality of the response itself.
- 5.4 Analysis of reasons for dissatisfied or neutral responses about how the complaint was handled suggests that better communication with customers, both at case-handling and survey stage, may have resulted in a positive outcome in four cases. In two cases, the customer said they would have preferred a quicker response, in both cases the customer received a response within 10 working days. In one case the customer was dissatisfied with the staff member that responded to their complaint and refused to read the response, as they felt it was beyond the staff members’ capabilities. There was also one case where the complainant felt the issue had not been resolved, which was passed on to the relevant team for further investigation.
- 5.5 Following a recent review of the Customer Feedback Policy and Procedure, case handlers are encouraged to take a more conversational, engaged approach to complaint handling, explaining the scope of the customer feedback process and reasoning for the outcomes. Going forward, there will be a review of the process for surveying complainants, with a focus on improving volume of survey responses, and ensuring customers understand the nature of questions being asked. It is expected that these efforts will reduce the proportion of negative and neutral responses received.

6 APPEAL PANELS

- 6.1 There were 21 appeal requests received for complaints closed during 2020/21. Six of the cases were resolved at stage one following further work and one did not progress due to a related legal disrepair claim. Of the 14 requests that were considered, 11 were refused in line with the previous Customer Feedback Policy and Procedure⁹, as they were received before January 2021. Of the three requests that were accepted, two have been heard at panel with an outcome of not upheld. The third appeal case is awaiting a panel hearing¹⁰.

7 HOUSING OMBUDSMAN

- 7.1 There were three requests for information received from the Housing Ombudsman during 2020/21. Two were received for Maintenance and Commercial Services, one of which was investigated with the outcome of ‘no maladministration’. The outcome was also published in the Housing Ombudsman’s report of individual cases¹¹. In the other case the Ombudsman recommended the case be referred to appeal panel, however, this was refused

⁸ Responses can either be written or verbal

⁹ Due to no new evidence being provided and a different outcome being unlikely

¹⁰ Customer asked to postpone due to Covid-19 restrictions and preference for panel to be held in person. The panel hearing will be arranged in-line with the SHG roadmap.

¹¹ <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/2021/03/09/housing-ombudsman-starts-publishing-its-investigation-reports-on-individual-cases/>

by the customer. The third request was received for Assets & Development and was investigated with an outcome of 'no maladministration'.

8 CONCLUSION

- 8.1 There has been some fluctuation in the number of complaints and enquiries closed over the last 12 months due to the impact of Covid-19, with an overall decrease in complaints and an increase in enquiries. Feedback on the complaints process does not indicate a barrier for customer raising issues with SHG directly and customers continue to have confidence in the customer feedback process. Data and trends will continue to be monitored as services continue to be delivered in line with government guidance.
- 8.2 Although SHG already complies with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code, it will have a direct impact on the number of appeal panels held and the timescales for responding to complaints and appeal requests. The customer feedback service will continue to be reviewed and adapted to reflect any future changes within the sector.

9 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That the Operations Committee notes and comments on the contents of this report.