

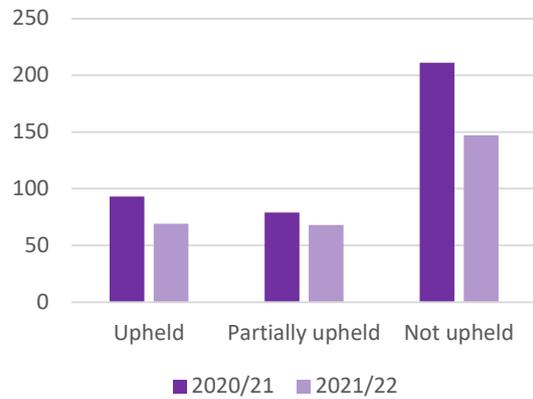
# VISUAL EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – APRIL 2021 TO MARCH 2022



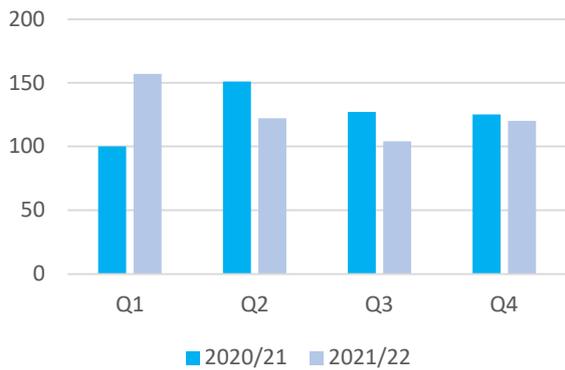
Number **complaints** closed by quarter compared to previous year



**Complaint outcomes** compared to previous year



Number of **Enquiries** closed in each in quarter compared to previous year



Number **compliments** received by quarter compared with previous year



# **1 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Customer feedback is analysed quarterly and is presented to the Senior Leadership Team and circulated to the Wider Leadership Team on a half-yearly basis. This report provides an update on customer feedback received during the whole 2021/22, prior to presentation to the Operations Committee.
- 1.2 During the year services have had to adapt to the challenge of working within the context of a pandemic with varying degrees of disruption. Within this setting the service has sought to continue to implement a range of improvements which align with the aims of the Social Housing White Paper and Housing Ombudsman Service.

# **2 CUSTOMER FEEDBACK OVERVIEW**

- 2.1 There were 303 complaints received and 288 complaints closed during 2021/22, a significant reduction on the complaints closed in the previous year (383 closed, reduction of 25%). 15 cases were received before the end of the year but responded to in the following year, within the 10 working-day timescale for complaint responses. Of the closed complaints, 69 (24%) were fully upheld, 68 (24%) were partly upheld and 147 (51%) were not upheld. Four were withdrawn. Accordingly, evidence of service failure was found in 137 cases (48%), a small increase against the previous year (45%).
- 2.2 Eight complaints were heard at Stage 2 of the Customer Feedback Process, an increase against the two which were heard in the previous year. This is in-keeping with the Housing Ombudsman Services' (HOS) Complaint Handling Code and the Customer Feedback Policy which seeks to maximise prospects of successful resolution via the two complaint stages and minimise cause for escalation to the Ombudsman.
- 2.3 There were 513 Councillor and MP Enquiries received, and 503 closed during the year, the same number as were closed in 2020/21. This reflects cases which were received before the end of the year but responded to in the following year given the 10 working-day timescale for Enquiry responses.
- 2.4 The volume of compliments received has notably fallen against the previous year (204 versus 292, reduction of 30%). There was a significant reduction in compliments received for the Independent Living Service. It is noted that this service received many compliments in the previous year relating to additional or enhanced services which were being provided on a short-term basis in response to the Covid pandemic. Across the organisation, there was a small reduction in the number of compliments for most service areas, demonstrating a continuing downward trend. This may illustrate an increasing challenge in exceeding expectations in a changing customer service landscape. Further detail can be found in Table Three of the Appendix.
- 2.5 While there has been an overall reduction in the number of cases handled by the Customer Feedback Team, efforts are ongoing to

promote the service via an enhanced presence on the website and via social media and marketing campaigns. Furthermore, the Team continue to provide fast and local resolution to customer requests where this is appropriate, and in-keeping with the Housing Ombudsman Service's guidance around effective complaint handling and indicating the openness and accessibility of the Customer Feedback Team.

### **3 CUSTOMER FEEDBACK PERFORMANCE**

- 3.1 Of the 288 complaints closed, nine were responded to outside of the target of 10 working days, with the average response time being eight working days. Of the complaints that received a delayed response during 2021/22, in five instances an extension for the complaint was agreed with customers owing to the complexity of the case. This is in-keeping with Policy and the HOS' Complaint Handling Code. In the four other cases, delays were found to have been avoidable and primarily owing to a failure of internal communication, and so constitute complaint handling failures. These were highlighted to and reviewed by the relevant teams<sup>1</sup> to ensure learning. Given the potential for a negative judgement from the Ombudsman, and associated reputational damage this brings, improving monitoring and oversight of cases is a priority for the Customer Feedback Team. A new IT solution being developed as part of the CX Project will provide enhanced visibility of cases for relevant managers, and improving tracking of progress and approaching deadlines, minimising the possibility of overdue responses.
- 3.2 Of the 503 Enquiries received from MPs and Councillors, five received a response outside the target timeframe of 10 working days, owing to colleague errors in ensuring an update was provided despite having investigated the Enquiry<sup>2</sup>. Following a move to an interim IT solution at the end of the third quarter there were no further instances of Enquiries being responded to out of time. This relates to improved oversight of pending cases by the Customer Feedback Team who are focussed on ensuring colleagues respond to queries within time. As indicated, CX Project will further build on this improvement. The average time taken to respond to Enquiries was five days.
- 3.3 Customers who have raised complaints through the Customer Feedback process are surveyed to understand their satisfaction with the handling of the complaint. In particular, customer responses to the following questions provide an insight into levels of confidence in the Customer Feedback process:
- **'Would you use the complaints service again in the future?'**  
87% of those surveyed responded positively, against 97% in the previous year.

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<sup>1</sup> These four cases related to the following teams: Assets, Development, Maintenance and Commercial Services, and Home Owner Service.

<sup>2</sup> Of these five cases, three related to Housing Options, one to Maintenance and Commercial Services, and one for ASB.

- **‘How satisfied are you with the way staff handled the complaint?’**. 73% of customers surveyed responded that they were satisfied or very satisfied. This is a decrease against a score of 83% in the previous year.

On both measures there has been a notable drop in terms of positive responses. Analysis of negative responses found that more effective communication at both case handling and survey stage may have resulted in more positive responses. There was a pronounced increase in negative responses being provided following surveys being undertaken by the Reception team, in accordance with an internal audit recommendation that surveys are not conducted by the Customer Feedback Team themselves. Better awareness of the customer’s particular complaint and the Customer Feedback process is beneficial to colleagues undertaking the surveys to be able to ensure that customers are responding to the questions being asked, as opposed to giving a broader opinion of dissatisfaction that may have driven the complaint itself.

- 3.4 While it is the anecdotal experience of the Customer Feedback Team that meeting customers’ expectations generally is becoming more challenging, it is essential that there is a focus on ensuring that Customer Feedback is handled effectively and in a way which provides confidence to customers.
- 3.5 It is essential that customers are aware of the Customer Feedback process and are confident and see the value in raising concerns. In addition to regular communications from the Marketing team, SHG work with the Council to raise awareness of the complaints process and the Housing Ombudsman Service as part of a government-led Levelling-Up media campaign.

## **4 OMBUDSMAN JUDGEMENTS**

- 4.1 The Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS) publish quarterly Insight Reports, which provide an overview in terms of complaints data and learning, relating to complaints handled by the Service. This offers some insight into sector-wide trends, and so some broader context. As per their most recently published report, relating to quarter three of 2021/22, there has been a significant increase in contacts to the Ombudsman, with them reporting an increase of 53% against the same period in the previous year. This is part of a longer-term trend of increase in enquires and complaints made to the HOS. Where investigations are undertaken and judgements are made, the Ombudsman reports an increase (47%, from 42% in same period 2020/21) in the proportion of cases where maladministration or partial maladministration was found against the landlord.
- 4.2 During 2021/22 HOS opened four and completed three investigations in relation to Stockport Homes. In one case it was determined that ‘reasonable redress’ had been offered through the Customer Feedback process. In the two other cases some service failure was found as detailed below, although this is of lesser severity to maladministration.

One judgement is pending. In comparison, there were two judgements made by the HOS in the previous year, with no rulings of service failure or maladministration. During 2021/22 Stockport Homes received:

- A ruling of no service failure in relation to dealing with a customer's complaints about anti-social behaviour. However, for the same complaint there was a ruling of service failure in relation to complaint handling owing to miscommunication relating to the customer having exhausted the complaints process. The HOS have recently published a revised Complaint Handling Code which provides clearer guidance to landlords where mediation efforts are ongoing between Stage 1 and 2 of the Customer Feedback process. This is being reflected in the design of a new IT solution which will ensure clearer tracking and monitoring of the progress of complaints between stages.
- A ruling of service failure (this was initially ruled as maladministration but downgraded upon appeal by the landlord) in respect of Stockport Homes' response to the complainant's report of repairs needed at the property which the customer and the Ombudsman considers should have been identified by the landlord's mutual exchange inspection. Additionally, remedial efforts following improvements works carried out at the property, which were identified after the mutual exchange, were adjudged to have not been carried out within a reasonable timeframe. The HOS also determined that there was service failure in relation to the handling of the complaint, with respect to the complainant's request to escalate the complaint to Stage 2 of the Customer Feedback process, which was refused in line with previous policy. All steps and actions were taken to ensure full compliance with the HOS' orders.
- A ruling of reasonable redress having been in relation to a complaint about a burst on a communal heating pipe, meaning the resolution provided at Stage 2 of the Customer Feedback process was deemed to be suitable with no further actions required. In this case, the complaint response was determined by a 'fair and reasonable' approach, resulting in an enhanced level of support and remedy provided to the customer. This reflects learning from previous HOS judgements.

4.3 It is perceived that the HOS are focussing efforts on being more visible to customers, and are becoming more challenging in their rulings, in-line with an increasing remit as set out in the recent government White Paper. While the HOS have indicated they are seeking to work constructively and positively with landlords where they find service failure, it is potentially the case that a propensity for negative rulings may be increased, which poses a limited risk to Stockport Homes by way of reputational damage and an increased number of compensation awards and other remedial action. There is a focus on improving the customer experience, with a Customer Experience Manager expected to be recruited in the next quarter who will proactively identify and work

with service areas to implement improvements and reduce customer dissatisfaction. This is expected to have the effect of reducing exposure around escalating complaints, albeit within the challenging context of a more visible and assertive HOS. Stockport Homes will continue to work closely with the HOS to ensure adherence to best practice and demonstrate a commitment to improving standards across the sector, both to customers and the HOS. To this end Stockport Homes hosted the first ever in-person 'Meet the Ombudsman' event at Cornerstone in the fourth quarter, allowing customers to speak directly with the Ombudsman and better understand their role.

## **5 TRENDS, ANALYSIS, AND INSIGHTS**

5.1 As demonstrated in Table One in the Appendix, there were small fluctuations in complaint numbers for most service areas against the previous year, including for Maintenance and Commercial Services which accounts for by far the largest share of complaints. Although a full responsive repair service has been provided continuously throughout the year, with Stockport Homes undertaking more repairs than the sector average<sup>3</sup>, there is an ongoing impact owing to Covid-19 upon the delivery of this service, given operational challenges seen across the construction industry and housing sector specifically. Although there was a small reduction in the number of complaints received for this service, there was an increase in the number of Enquiries received from MP's and Councillors. While Enquiries can often constitute requests for service or information, in the case of Maintenance and Commercial Services contacts are usually driven by constituents' dissatisfaction and may be considered as de-facto complaints. Further information on Enquiries received by team can be found in Table Two in the Appendix.

### **Maintenance and Commercial Services**

5.2 Analysis of the drivers for complaints and Enquiries relating to Maintenance and Commercial Services indicates a clear area for improvement nevertheless, with many complaints having been because of 'repeated repairs/time taken to resolve' and 'lack of action', during a year which saw a decrease in performance in terms of the percentage of routine repairs completed on time<sup>4</sup>. This customer experience has also been highlighted via the One Number Team 'radar' which picks up on customers' concerns or issues at an earlier stage and is used to raise awareness with relevant managers with a view to implementing more agile and responsive improvements.

### **Anti-Social Behaviour Team**

5.3 There was a reduction in complaints and Enquiries for the Anti-Social Behaviour team, following sharp increase in the previous year, although

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<sup>3</sup> In terms of emergency and non-emergency repairs per 1,000 properties, as indicated in Housemark Bespoke Quarterly Forecast at Q3.

<sup>4</sup> 98.1% completed on time in 2020/21, 94.8% completed on time in 2021/22,

the caseload remains elevated against historic norms. This supports earlier analysis which linked an increase in complaints for this service area in 2020/21 with the impact of Covid-19 restrictions, in terms of the apparent relationship between these and customer behaviours and perception, meaning effective mediation and case resolution became more challenging. Given the complete lifting of Covid restrictions, it is expected that complaint levels for these service areas will revert to the lower levels seen prior to the pandemic, and the aim should be to reduce these further through learning from customer feedback and improving the service.

### **Allocations and Housing Options**

- 5.4 The Allocations and Housing Options teams continue to receive a large volume of Enquiries, although complaint numbers remain low. A review of these Enquiries indicates that in almost all cases they relate to a request for information and advice regarding an applicant's rehousing options and status on the Homechoice register, rather than dissatisfaction with the standard of service provided by these teams. This likely reflects the extremely high levels of demand for housing currently and the difficulties many applicants are facing in terms of finding suitable housing. It is anticipated that this will continue to drive Enquiries for the foreseeable future while the issue of housing supply remains so acute and applicants believe that the efforts of their elected member may result in a change of circumstances, although this is seldom the case owing to the need to work within the framework of the Council's Allocations Policy. Enhanced efforts to explain the Allocations Policy and Homechoice process within the current context may go some way to minimising to managing applicant's expectations and minimising this effect.
- 5.5 Analysis across all complaints closed in the year found that communication with customers continues to be a predominant underlying driver of complaints. That is, timely and effective communication with customers would have meant a better standard of service provided to the customer and in many instances have avoided the complaint. This is consistent with the trends seen in 2020/21, with a similar proportion of complaints being driven by standards of communication with customers. Given this, and that the HOS place much emphasis on the value of the good communication with customers, this must be an area of focus for improvement across the organisation. While the Phoenix Project offers a clear opportunity for some improvement in this regard, with this incorporating a focus on automated communications, and better visibility and quality of information across teams and service areas, there is also a need to continue to promote a culture of engagement and openness with customers.

### **Notable/High Level Insights**

- 5.6 While all customer feedback offers an opportunity for learning, some demonstrate a disproportionate level of impact upon customers and risk factor in terms of complaint management, or potential Public Liability or

Legal Disrepair claim. Cases handled within the year have led to the following key insights:

- **Managing complex repairs.** A complaint relating to water ingress to a tower block over an extended period demonstrates the need for improved oversight and management of complex repairs issues. Another complaint related to a failure to adequately resolve drainage issues which had a significant impact upon the customer. Although numerous individuals each took steps to progress remedial efforts, there was a lack of overall responsibility to ensure this took place. There was no overarching visibility or management of these issues, meaning that they 'dropped off radar'. In both cases customers were adversely impacted, with redress being made via monetary compensation. While it is essential to create a culture where individuals take ownership in instances such as these, improved processes supported by effective IT solutions would minimise such service failures.
- **Work-In-Progress (WIP).** In another case, a repair raised as per the Legal Disrepair protocol had been awaiting re-scheduling for approximately 15 months. The customer complained that the repair had worsened over time and posed an injury risk to the residents. The WIP report provides a list of repairs and other works to be delivered which are outstanding. There has been an evident increase in the number of jobs on the WIP since the beginning of the Covid pandemic. Efforts should be made to triage in terms of inherent impact upon residents and/or risk factors such as Public Liability claims, with priority being given where necessary to minimise this impact and risk. This is considered a major learning point and risk and a working group headed by the Executive Director of Operations will focus on resolution.
- **Management of sub-contractors.** There have been five complaints received in the fourth quarter, which have highlighted significant failings resulting in high level of impact upon customers in terms of delivery of major adaptation works (one) and kitchen improvements (four). In each of these cases sub-contractors had failed to work to the expected standard, with there being a lack of effective project management and oversight, leaving customers without use of bathroom or kitchen facilities for an extended period. Recognising the operational challenges owing to the pandemic, these cases highlight an evident risk factor when utilising sub-contractors to maintain or increase capacity in terms of carrying out improvement works. While steps have been taken within both service areas to ensure better performance and oversight going forwards, it is essential that colleagues at all levels remain mindful of this risk and potential significant impact upon customers. In each case, fair and reasonable remedy to affected customers has been agreed

in accordance with the Customer Feedback and Compensation policies.

- **Concierge service.** Several customers have raised dissatisfaction with regards to the standard of service being provided in relation to Concierge services in terms of door entry. Complaints identify an issue of a failure to control who can access communal areas, with residents feeling that Concierge are allowing access to buildings without carrying out proper checks and that this is contributing to anti-social behaviour, including vandalism. This may pose a further concern in terms of Building Safety responsibilities, in addition to creating broader dissatisfaction amongst customers with regards to where they live.

## **6 LEARNING AND IMPROVEMENTS**

- 6.1 At an overarching level and further to recent HOS judgements and an emphasis on ensuring a 'fair and reasonable' approach is taken when things go wrong, a review of the Compensation Policy is being undertaken. This will be consulted upon with customers, WLT, colleagues, etc and shared more widely within SHG in the coming months. In addition to this, The HOS have published a revised Complaint Handling Code which provides further clarity with regards to some elements of best practice around complaint handling, with a focus on further promoting a positive complaint handling culture. While this does not bring forth any major changes, there is some clarity provided around when complaints can be refused, and additional requirements around promoting the complaints process and role of the HOS. A review of the current Customer Feedback Policy and Procedure will be undertaken to ensure full compliance with the code and that any further elements of best practice are incorporated. Landlords are required to be compliant by October 2022, as determined by a self-assessment process.
- 6.2 Efforts are ongoing to promote and enhance a culture of awareness and ownership of customer feedback and a customer-centric approach, as the White Paper and increasingly assertive HOS re-orientate the sector towards this, seeking to raise standards across the sector. A workshop held with managers within the Operations Directorate discussed the implications of the White Paper and the current focus on Customer Feedback within the sector. This led to discussions on the theme of a changing customer service landscape and the approach needed to meet this challenge. Training around the importance of empathy in dealing with customers is being delivered across several teams in support of this. In addition, at the most recent round of Directorate Management Seminars there was an initial presentation covering customer service now and in the future. Promoting this culture remains an important area of focus, with further engagement with colleagues planned. This engagement and approach complement the policy reviews and aims to ensure Stockport Homes remains a sector-leader in the changing landscape.

- 6.3 Customer Feedback is being used to inform areas of focus for the Scrutiny Panel, most recently resulting in a review of the Homechoice application process.
- 6.4 A Customer Experience Manager and Customer Experience Officer to be recruited in the next quarter will work across the organisation to reinforce a culture of continuous improvement and seek to maximise the value of all forms of customer feedback, using this to drive better service provision and improve customer satisfaction.
- 6.5 All complaints and enquiries from MPs and Councillors are reviewed to identify trends and learning opportunities. Additionally, sometimes ad-hoc learning points and improvements are determined and implemented on the back of individual cases. Examples include:
- Following a complaint about lack of information about solar PV panels, the property sign-up checklist was improved to ensure customers are aware of responsibilities relating to solar PV panels where they are installed.
  - Further to an incident at a low-rise block, which resulted in residents being without access to mains water owing to a burst on a water pipe, a 'Major Incident' distribution list has been created to ensure information is shared quickly and accurately across the organisation. This also creates a central point of information should this subsequently escalate to 'Silver Command', ensuring a continuity of approach. This process has been utilised effectively in more recent incidents, resulting in fast engagement from the Neighbourhoods team, ensuring good communication with affected customers, and any customer needs were identified as soon as possible.
  - From a complaint in relation to delivery of adaptation works, a new working process was agreed to ensure that some priority Minor Adaptations can be processed via the Repairs and Maintenance Team where above the existing £500 threshold for such works. This has resulted in some customers benefitting from adaptations more quickly.

## **7 CONCLUSION**

- 7.1 During a year where the pandemic has continued to impact the delivery of services, the continued reduction in the number of complaints received is notable. The number of Enquiries received remained static against the previous year, and at levels significantly higher than were seen prior to the pandemic. In addition, there have been fewer compliments received. This means that it cannot simply be taken that the reduction in complaints alone indicates improvement. Whilst

satisfaction levels reported elsewhere would indicate that in the majority of instances services have been delivered to a high standard during a challenging time, it is recognised that some complaints result from longstanding or systemic issues that are no longer acceptable and need to be given extra weighting in terms of driving change and improvement with a view to further increasing customer service and experience. The changing customer feedback landscape and the further empowerment of customers poses a challenge in meeting rising customer expectations. The issues raised in this report, with the commensurate actions seek to deepen the culture of self-reflection, engagement with customers, and continuous improvement to ensure that Stockport Homes remains a sector leader in providing services to customers

## **8 RECOMMENDATIONS**

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