



South Tyneside Council's  
Housing Company

# **Annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report 2023/2024**

## Foreword

*“The Board acknowledge the report and the self-assessment and the improvements that will continue to enhance complaint handling for our customers. The report provides assurance that we are listening, care, take accountability and act. The report reflects strong compliance with the Complaint Handling Code and how the learning throughout the year has been used to improve complaint handling and greater collaboration across the organisation.*

*We note the areas and numbers of complaints which we are seeking to reduce. However, we also encourage and support customers to complain so that they are heard, and we can take action. The areas for learning are noted and we have seen significant efforts in developing complaint handling and how the lessons learned are being used as improvement actions. We are proud that our involved customers have worked with us to look at complaints, the self-assessment, the learning, risks, and opportunities.*

*On behalf of South Tyneside Homes Board, we are assured by the plan and note that the self-assessment represents the progress made throughout the year and the transparency in the issues, improvements, and risks. The Board of South Tyneside Homes look forward to the continued focus and discussion and to see the improvements made for our customers.”*



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R Porthouse'.

**Councillor Richard Porthouse**

**Chair of South Tyneside Homes Board**

## **Introduction**

South Tyneside Homes aims to provide excellent services to all our customers, but it is acknowledged that on occasion the service delivered may fall short of excellence resulting in customers being dissatisfied. Where problems do occur, South Tyneside Homes is committed to investigating and resolving incidents of dissatisfaction and learning from them.

This report provides an update on South Tyneside Homes' complaint handling performance over the last financial year and highlights the changes and service improvements implemented as a result of learnings from customer feedback.

This report will cover:

- Annual Self-Assessment 2024/2025
- Complaints Performance 2023/2024
- Refused Complaints
- Housing Ombudsman Determinations 2023/2024
- Learnings and Service Improvements from Customer Feedback
- Learnings and Service Improvements from Tenant Involvement and Engagement
- Compliments

## **Self-Assessment 2024/2025**

The Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code sets out requirements for member landlords. The purpose of the Code is to enable landlords to resolve complaints raised by residents quickly and use the data and learning from complaints to drive service improvements.

From 1 April 2024, the Code became statutory meaning that member landlords are obliged by law to follow its requirements.

South Tyneside Homes have completed the Housing Ombudsman's Annual Self-Assessment to measure ourselves against this code to see if we are compliant and where we can improve.

South Tyneside Homes are fully compliant with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code and there are no areas of non-compliance.

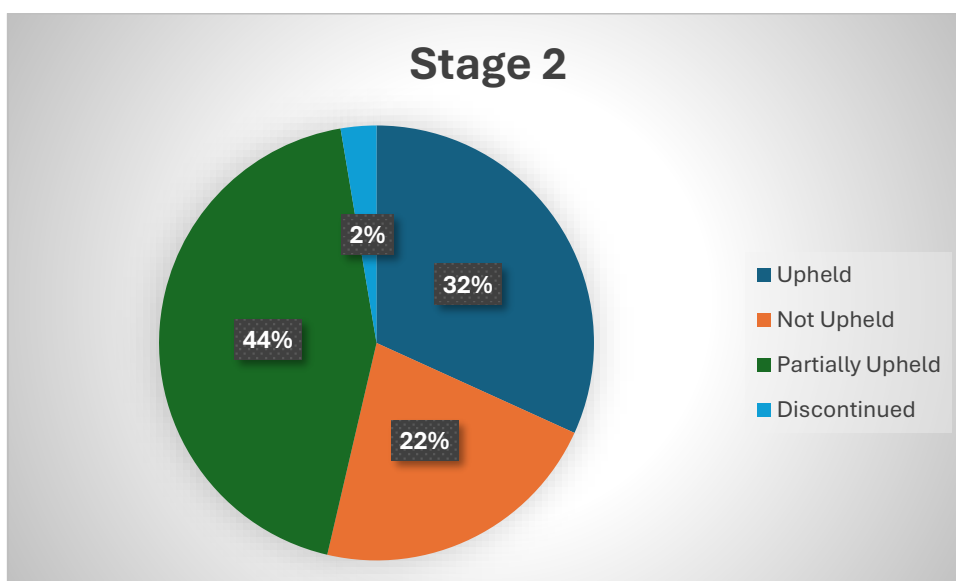
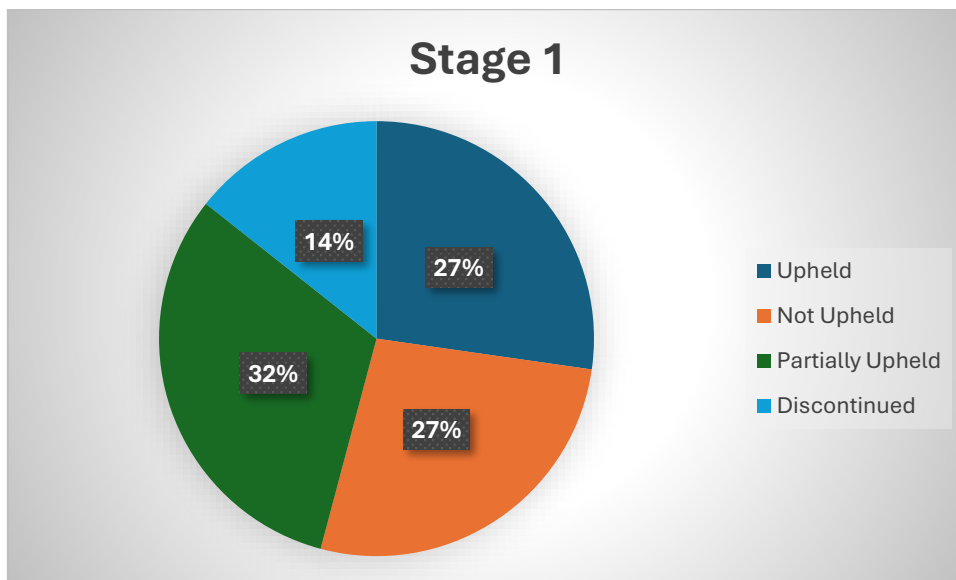
The completed Self-Assessment for 2024/2025 can be found on our website's complaints page to view along side our updated Complaints and Compliments Policy.

## Complaints Performance 2023/2024

South Tyneside Homes received **1038 Stage 1** complaints and **151 Stage 2** complaints during the 2023/2024 financial year. Whilst our complaint volumes may seem high, we consider this indicative of a well-publicised, accessible service, and demonstrates our commitment and culture to be transparent and accountable in handling and learning from complaints.

The charts below show the breakdown of complaints which were upheld, not upheld, partially upheld or discontinued at stage 1 and stage 2.

*(Discontinued complaints are defined as complaints which have been logged and an investigation has commenced, however, have then been discontinued at the customer's request).*



Of the complaints investigated, 89.13% of complaints were completed within timescale at stage 1 and 95.36% of complaints were completed within timescale at stage 2.

When complaints are received into South Tyneside Homes, they are logged onto our central Corporate Feedback System and are categorised by reason. There are 9 complaint categories and the chart below breaks down complaints by category.



The chart shows the top 3 reasons for complaints in 2023/2024 were; quality of service, service agreed but not delivered and delays in providing a service. Having this knowledge and information allows us to target our resources effectively for service improvements to decrease future dissatisfaction in these areas and is evidenced within the 'Learnings and Service Improvements from Customer Feedback' section further in this report.

## Refused Complaints

South Tyneside Homes' Complaints and Compliments Policy sets out the criteria for complaints which may be refused. If a complaint is not accepted, the customer will be informed of the reasons why and provided with the contact details for the Housing Ombudsman Service should they wish to seek their advice and guidance.

In 2023/2024, the most common reasons for refusing a complaint were as follows:

- The complaint had exhausted our two stage complaints process
- The complaint was in relation to a service provided by South Tyneside Council
- An alternative policy or process was required to resolve the issue, for example an appeal or review
- a first time request for service
- reports of anti-social behaviour

## Housing Ombudsman Determinations 2023/2024

South Tyneside Homes received 13 Housing Ombudsman Service determinations in 2023/2024.

The table below shows the findings of these determinations:

Maladministration	2
Partial Maladministration	5
No Maladministration	1
Redress	2
Outside Jurisdiction	3

The Housing Ombudsman Service define their findings as follows:

- **Maladministration** – where the landlord, for example, has failed to comply with its legal obligations, its policies and procedures or unreasonably delayed in dealing with the matter.
- **Partial Maladministration** – where there are multiple findings following investigation within one determination and at least one, but not all, of these is maladministration
- **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
- **Outside Jurisdiction** – where the Ombudsman did not 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 our Scheme; or the matter was more appropriately dealt with by the courts, a tribunal, another complaint handling body or regulator.

South Tyneside Homes complied with all evidence requests and submitted relevant information to the Housing Ombudsman Service to help with their investigations. All orders and recommendations have been actioned.

The Housing Ombudsman Service also issued South Tyneside Homes with a ‘Landlord Performance Report 2022/2023’. Within this report, South Tyneside Homes had a maladministration rate of 28% - which was below the national maladministration rate of 55%. The Housing Ombudsman Service commented *‘The landlord performed very well when compared to similar landlords by size and type.’*

# Learnings and Service Improvements from Customer Feedback

South Tyneside Homes is dedicated to listening to and learning from customer feedback. We value feedback from all our customers as it helps us to identify areas where our services can be improved. As a result, service improvements were implemented across all service areas in 2023/2024 to enhance the customer experience provided to our customers.

- Created a new sign-up checklist & Income Information Disclaimer to ensure all relevant information is provided at the sign up stage and agreed to
- The allocations team took on 1 month Tenant Support Visits to be able to provide a more fluid and personable service to new tenants and ensure what was agreed at sign up was followed through
- Extended the amount of Homeless Units within South Tyneside and also worked with 2 hoteliers in the borough to develop a pathway into their accommodation and set up an invoicing payment program
- Due to increasing the amount of temporary accommodation available, we have employed a Temporary Accommodation Co-ordinator to ensure the welfare of the customers and the integrity of the properties
- To ensure the customers can access the correct information / advice and be given access to the Homeless service, a Housing Options Officer is situated and available at our office at the Town Hall daily
- Due to increase in demand for accommodation for care experience young people, we have developed a bespoke program to run alongside the 'Stay Close' programme and to further develop and improve the Corporate Parenting approach with South Tyneside Council
- Our Health and Housing Team reviewed their assessment process and reduced the waiting times by over 20 days on average
- Developed a Quality of Life Assessment to measure customer impact
- Commenced training with all teams members trained to become Trusted Assessors
- Reviewed arrangements with Adult Social Care to improve partnership with Occupational Therapy and implement new Assistance Policy

- Continue to focus on reducing wait times for assessment and modernise the pre-tenancy support service documentation and delivery of home visiting
- Continue to embed new ways of working with Adult Social Care and solidify a more streamlined service with potential dual home visits on complex cases and shared access to information reduce spend on adaptations which can be solved with rehousing to an existing adapted property
- Our Repairs service created centralised records in Microsoft Teams for interdepartmental working, to improve cross team communication and communication with customers in relation to timescales for the completion of work, and information about the team undertaking the work
- Implementation of work record sheet for all operatives working from run-sheets and working out of hours, this ensures that the Mobile Working Planner is provided with all job completion detail, and follow-on work required, to improve the timeliness of actioning of follow-on work and improved communication with our customers
- Insurance claims were taking too long to be resolved, and an escalation process has been implemented for 'at fault' instances where damages occur to customers possessions and property, prior to directing customers to the insurance claim route. This will ensure the right route is taken and reduce the time customers wait for resolution, where we acknowledge damage was caused by us
- Centralised records created in Microsoft Teams for the management of scaffold within the Repairs service, this process improves record keeping and assists in identifying scaffold responsibility promptly when dealing with customer queries and complaints
- Our Housing Service Centre implemented a new contact request and escalation process which means more customers are receiving calls backs within timescales and we have a better way of tracking and monitoring the requests that are falling outside of the timescales which can then be performance managed internally
- Our Housing Service Centre have developed a centralised 'Knowledge Base' – they use Microsoft One Note to store and update relevant information and processes to ensure the advisor can resolve more calls at first point of contact by providing accurate information to customers
- We have changed the way we operate the Live Chat service to ensure more customers can access our services via this method, the new way of working increased the number of live chats answered in one month by 100%



- Our Housing Service Centre use Microsoft Forms when sending requests for contact to other services which means the management team can track and analyse the types of enquiries we need to refer and see if there are any knowledge gaps within the team and provide training
- The 'hold message' when contacting our Housing Service Centre has been updated to include the option to request translation services, creating awareness of a more inclusive service for our customers
- We increased the quality monitoring within the Housing Service Centre to ensure customers are receiving the standard of service expected from the company's core values and objectives, in line with our behaviour framework
- A telephone advice 'triage' system was introduced within our Welfare Support Team whereby customers could be contacted by phone quicker than previously waiting for an appointment with a welfare support advisor, reducing waiting times and contributing to over £112,000 in financial outcomes for customers
- Our Empty Homes team work closely with new customers by identifying and undertaking redecoration for customers who may have vulnerabilities, limited or no support to help with their transition into their new home helping to support tenancy sustainment
- Implementation of a partnership approach alongside Utilita (energy supplier) switching all void utilities within the void period so new customers have one point of contact when setting up their new supplies with dedicated points of contact from Utilita at the start of a new tenancy to support customers and families with an easy transition with their utilities
- Signposting customers and families to external support initiatives to aid in the removal and collection of recycled furniture and goods from properties to be upcycled and used to support vulnerable customers of South Tyneside via the groundwork shop at the recycling village, aiding in the reduction of waste charges and supporting recycling across our process
- We have mapped out areas of High and Low/ No Use of the Repairs Service, and subsequently working with our Housing teams to ensure our homes and tenants are further investigated and support given
- Additional insight and information is also being used to target capital replacement programmes, for example boiler replacements, where we aim to replace boilers based on the highest numbers of repairs they have had carried out

- We have realigned external programmes of Capital investment to ensure we reduce multiple visits to a customer's home, reducing the disruption, for example when we carry out repointing, roof renewal, window replacement schemes and the likes
- Our Housing Plus teams were delivered bespoke training around the difficult subject of bereavement with an external provider and have produced a set of paperwork for all staff to use – this can now be used to provide to the next of kin after a loved one has passed away
- Training/awareness sessions are being delivered internally to our Housing Management teams on the ASB process and reporting ASB
- In depth case reviews are carried out on all ASB cases which have been open longer than 6 months
- Housing Management and Tenancy Sustainment services changed significantly on 1st October 2023. Two specialist teams, Income and Housing and Area Management, were brought together to create a holistic service with customers at the heart of the new way of working
- Officers patch sizes have reduced significantly, giving Officers more autonomy regarding their patch and workload and giving them the opportunity to build relationships with our customers and provide individual tailored support based on the customers' needs and requirements

# Learnings and Service Improvements from Tenant Involvement and Engagement

South Tyneside Homes is committed to listening to the tenant voice and ensuring that it influences service delivery and decision making.

Tenant involvement is delivered in various ways across the organisation reflecting our aim to have a broad 'menu of engagement' that helps to both increase the number of customers who are involved and to be more representative of communities within the Borough. These mechanisms are:

- Formal customer panels that review and investigate where improvements could be made (Scrutiny Panel and Check and Challenge)
- Targeted customer experience projects to capture customers' experiences of accessing our services using Customer Journey Mapping
- Digital engagement – online via Tenant Talk our 'closed' Facebook group
- Local involvement and outreach activity including with resident groups and third sector organisations across the Borough and community events
- Surveys including YourView online surveys

Our Involvement and Engagement team have worked along-side our dedicated involved tenants, the Scrutiny Panel and Check and Challenge group, to carry out reviews and activities in 2023/2024 which have resulted in recommendations and service improvements to be implemented.

## **Scrutiny Panel**

The Scrutiny Panel completed the Green Homes Grant review which made 15 recommendations for improvement that are due to be delivered during 2024-25 and where similar projects are to be delivered in future. The recommendations focus mainly on how to improve customer communications and enhance the customer experience.

## **Check and Challenge**

Complaints Handling Review - The review focused on the customer experience of the Stage 1 not upheld response letter by carrying out Customer Journey Mapping with a sample of customers. A Mystery Shopping exercise also explored the advice/support provided by the Housing Service Centre.

- Complaint letter templates have been updated with suggestions made by the tenants including adding a link to the complaints policy on the website within the acknowledgement letters so customers can view the full complaints policy and understand the process/timescales
- Refresher training is being provided to Housing Service Centre staff on logging and escalating complaints; and customer care training is to be rolled out to staff including operatives to ensure they are treating customer's homes with respect when visiting

Complaints Policy - The revised policy was reviewed to comply with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code.

- The section in the complaints policy in relation to 'Unreasonable and/or Persistent complainants' has been updated to reflect and coincide with the updated 'Managing Unacceptable Behaviour Policy'
- This was discussed and reviewed by involved tenants who provided invaluable insight from a customer perspective and were positive about the policies and the need to manage unacceptable behaviour

Tenant's Handbook - The full Tenants Handbook and 'easy-read' versions were reviewed.

- Improvements were identified by the group to the content for inclusion and how it is to be presented to customers and changes have been made as a result

Damp and Mould Leaflet Review - The revised Damp and Mould leaflet used by the newly established Healthy Homes team was reviewed.

- Changes have been made to the website and leaflet to ensure clearer information and consistency e.g. in relation to cleaning of condensation and mould

Customer Service Strategy – the strategy and its contents were reviewed.

- Improvements were identified by the group for the strategy - these related to ways that customer communication could be enhanced, including in relation to customer profile information and accessibility requirements

## Compliments

South Tyneside Homes received **822** compliments from customers in 2023/2024. We appreciate and celebrate all positive feedback received from our customers.

There are two main criteria which are used for customers to provide compliments:

- The quality of service they receive
- The attitude of our employees

Within these criteria, we received a range of feedback about the supportive, helpful and friendly nature of staff and the quality of work done by operatives in customer's homes. Below is a snapshot of some of the wonderful compliments that we have received from customers.

*"Would like to say the service has been really good, starting from logging the repair via the Housing Service Centre to the service from the plumber today. I am suffering from stage 4 cancer with no strength and he helped moved the bed and put it back so repair could be completed and he wore a mask. I am in tears at how good the service has been."*

*"I would like to raise a compliment for the heating engineer that attended my property. He did a stunning job and his communication was exemplary."*

*"Tenant would like to thank the electricians as she was very appreciative with how patient and understanding they were with her Autistic son during the Electrical Safety Check."*

*"I would like to thank the team at South Tyneside Homes for their support in addressing my tenancy issues, in particular the Electrical manager, and want to thank him for his support patience and understanding."*

*"Spoke with customer following joinery works to her kitchen. Customer stated she was absolutely over the moon with the operatives who attended yesterday. The work they have done and their attitude was great. They left no mess."*

*"Would like to commend the operative who attended the repair for the work carried out. What a lovely man he was and very polite and talking to the tenants. He fitted all the windows himself. Nothing was a bother. Would like this passing to his manager as very happy with the work."*

*"I just wanted to take this opportunity to thank you for all your support and help with my relocation from London to the North-East. You have been amazing and always been so happy to help regardless of how silly the question. You made me aware of all the support available to myself and my family from the Armed Forces. I feel I am part of something and this in turn gives me a feeling of community. Your hard work has made this transition so much easier. You should be immensely proud of the work and support you offer, as without you many families would struggle."*