

## London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

**Report to:** Audit Committee

**Date:** 27 November 2023

**Subject:** Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code Self Assessment

**Report Author:** Kate Robertson, Interim Director of Resident Services, Corporate Services

**Responsible Director:** Nicola Ellis, Strategic Director, Chief Operating Officer, Corporate Services

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### 1. Recommendation

1. That the Audit Committee consider the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code Self-Assessment as set out in Appendix A

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**Wards Affected:** All

### 2. H&F Priorities

<b>Our Priorities</b>	<b>Summary of how this report aligns to the H&amp;F Priorities</b>
Building shared prosperity	Having effective systems in place to monitor feedback from residents enables opportunities to improve services for our residents' benefit.
Creating a compassionate council	Understanding difficulties our residents face in dealing with our services where residents are experiencing their most difficult circumstances or have complex needs
Doing things with residents, not to them	Learning from our residents' feedback enables us to ensure that we are delivering services that meet their needs.
Being ruthlessly financially efficient	Providing a service that meets residents needs provides value for money. Ensuring we learn from our mistakes and improve services accordingly is financially efficient.

Taking pride in H&F	Providing accessible and effective services to our residents and businesses makes Hammersmith and Fulham an attractive place to live work and do business in
Rising to the challenge of the climate and ecological emergency	A more efficient service increases the opportunity for digital delivery and better facilitates sustainable service delivery.

### **3. Summary**

Each year the Council is required to publish a self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and take it for discussion and approval at an appropriate governance board annually.

The Council's self-assessment was updated in September 2023 and is now coming to the Audit Committee for approval.

### **4. The Complaint Handling Code**

The Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code was introduced as part of the Ombudsman's new powers in the revised Housing Ombudsman Scheme with taking effect from 1 April 2022. It sets out good practice to ensure social landlords respond to complaints effectively and fairly and to use the learning from complaints to make service improvements.

Key areas of the Code include:

- definition of a complaint
- providing easy access to the complaints procedure and ensuring residents are aware of it, including their right to access the Housing Ombudsman Service
- the structure of the complaint's procedure - only 2 stages necessary and clear times set out for responses
- ensuring fairness in complaint handling with a resident-focused process
- taking action to put things right and appropriate remedies
- creating a positive complaint handling culture through continuous learning and improvement
- demonstrating learning in annual reports
- annual self-assessment against the Code

Social landlords must carry out an annual assessment against the Code to ensure their complaint handling remains in line with its requirements and publish the results. Non-compliance could result in the Ombudsman issuing complaint handling failure orders. Guidance on these orders has also been reviewed and updated.

## **5. Hammersmith and Fulham's Self-Assessment**

Hammersmith and Fulham has prioritised and focused considerable resources on improving complaint handling, especially around Housing Services.

The latest version is attached as Appendix A and sets out a positive picture of compliance with the code with some actions for further improvement. This reflects the changes and investment that have been made this year in improving complaint handling and resolution.

Over the past year, the Council's Corporate Complaints Policy has been reviewed and updated to ensure compliance with best practice and whole organisational focus has gone into performance monitoring and management of all stages of complaints with improvements in timeliness and compliance.

The central complaints function (Resident Experience Team) has strengthened operational grip, improved systems, processes and record keeping and a new dedicated Dispute Resolution Team has been established to co-ordinate all stage 2 and Ombudsman complaints relating to repairs, covering both the investigation and overseeing the full resolution of outstanding works/orders. This team is now beginning to take responsibility for stage 2 and Ombudsman complaints for wider housing services.

Training has been rolled out across Housing Services on both effective complaint handling, wider customer service skills and the importance of understanding and recording additional needs or vulnerabilities. External training for Complaint Handling will take place in the fourth quarter and will deliver a bespoke training course for all directorates linking to the new Joint Complaint Handling Code when it is published (expected early 2024).

The Council has also now launched feedback surveys linked to complaint responses and the Resident Experience Team is beginning to explore root cause analysis and organisational learning themes.

Work continues to improve core operational performance issues in Housing that are driving the volumes of complaints, in particular around repairs and the performance of contractors.

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and the Housing Ombudsman have also launched a consultation on a new Joint Complaint Handling Code. Whilst this does not fundamentally change the expectations on Housing Ombudsman cases, it would, if implemented, lead to significant changes to the wider Corporate Complaints Policy for those complaints under the LGSCO remit. The Council is currently reviewing the proposed changes and drafting its response to the consultation.

The annual performance report for Housing Ombudsman complaints will be going to Cabinet in early 2024 for discussion.

The Audit Committee is asked to consider the Council's Self-Assessment attached as Appendix A.

**Appendices:**

Appendix A – Hammersmith and Fulham Complaint Handling Code Self-Assessment