

# LONDON BOROUGH OF HAMMERSMITH AND FULHAM

**Report to:** Housing and Homelessness Policy and Accountability Committee

**Date:** 26 March 2024

**Subject:** Housing Ombudsman P49 Report on Hammersmith and Fulham

**Report Author:** Richard Shwe, Director of Housing

**Responsible Director:** Jon Pickstone, Strategic Director of Economy

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## Executive Summary

The Housing Ombudsman makes the final decision on disputes between residents and member landlords. The Housing Ombudsman carried out an investigation on the Council under paragraph 49 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme. The Housing Ombudsman publish their special report on 20 February 2024.

## Recommendations

1. For the Committee to note and comment on the report.
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**Wards Affected:** All

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## Background Papers Used in Preparing This Report

Housing Ombudsman Special Report on Hammersmith and Fulham Council  
February 2024

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## Detailed Analysis

1. On 2 May 2023, the Housing Ombudsman announces investigation into Housing Services.
2. The rationale for the investigation was that the Housing Ombudsman had 12 findings of severe maladministration between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, in cases involving repairs and/or complaint handling, which raised concerns over how the landlord operates and the services it provides.
3. The investigation ran from May 2023 to September 2023 considering 33 cases from 2019 to January 2023. They looked at the following factors to see if they were indicative of a wider systemic service failure in:
  - a policy weakness
  - repeated service failure,
  - service failures across multiple service areas,
  - service failures across multiple geographical locations,
  - failure to learn from complaints, or
  - lack of oversight and governance to identify and act on repeated issues.

## LONDON BOROUGH OF HAMMERSMITH AND FULHAM

4. The Housing Ombudsman examined 33 cases related to complaints received between April 2019 to May 2023. These cases were determined between 29 May 2023 to 29 September 2023.
5. Housing Ombudsman identified across the cases: -
  - Extensive delays on repairs due to poor knowledge, data management and holding contractors to account.
  - Poor quality repairs, lack of tracking and post work inspections.
  - Failure to consider the impact of extensive delays on vulnerable residents.
  - Complaint handling delays.
  - Repeated broken promises, at both repairs and complaints stage.
  - Inadequate complaint responses and inconsistent compensation offers.
  - A failure to learn from previous complaints.
6. The Housing Ombudsman investigation report is a 44-page report with 7 case studies out of 33 cases and informed the landlord (housing services) with 8 Key Orders and 10 Recommendations (see Appendix 1) to improve in repairs, complaints and compensation.
7. As part of the investigation requirements, the landlord (Housing Services) will provide the Housing Ombudsman with an action plan on the 8 Key Orders and 10 Recommendations (see Appendix 1) in improvements in repairs, complaints, and compensation in May 2024.
8. The table below highlights what the Housing Ombudsman ordered and recommended and the action the Housing Services have taken in response to key actions and outcomes for repairs that the Housing Services have done following what the Housing Ombudsman said: -

<b>Housing Ombudsman said....</b>	<b>We did</b>
Integrate systems across teams and contractors	Robust Management: Weekly meetings with contractors, financial penalties for poor performance and sharing of resident feedback.
Improve communications to residents for disrepair	Communications Enhancements: Addressed legal disrepair claims within 20 working days, provided detailed schedules of work, and ensured a single contact point during repairs and trained staff. In addition, we introduced a new stand alone repairs team that has an Assistant Director, Strategic Head of Repairs and Repairs Managers for Contractors and the DLO (Direct Labour Organisation for Repairs).
Manage delays when contractors are changed, or contracts expire	Contractor Transition: Established a new process for smoother transitions between contractors, ensuring better communication and service.
Ensure residents information is recorded correctly (especially vulnerabilities)	Understanding Residents: Launched a group to improve data on residents needs, ensuring services are tailored and accessible to all.
Improve record keeping and training	Training and Record Keeping: Enhanced record keeping and trained staff for improved complaints handling post – HUB set up.

## LONDON BOROUGH OF HAMMERSMITH AND FULHAM

9. The table below highlights the key actions and outcomes the Housing Services have taken to address the points the Housing Ombudsman raised in regards to complaints and compensation:-

<b>Housing Ombudsman said....</b>	<b>We did</b>
Comply with HO complaints handling code and compensation and share learning with HO	Policy Updates: Updated Complaints and Compensation policies for alignment with the HO complaint handling code.
Meet commitments on complaints and ensure Stage1 complaints are escalated when issues are not resolved.	Monitoring and Improvements: Leveraged the Housing Ombudsman's report to improve policies and ensure commitment adherence. Introduced a process to track complaints through completion.
Review legal claim process and train staff	Training and Legal Guidance: Conducted and planned further training to comply with complaints policy timescales and HO legal claims guidance.

10. The Housing Ombudsman has recognised that the Housing Services team is going through a transformational change and has a continued ambition to improve.
11. Housing Services have worked closely with the Housing Ombudsman to put things right and we have fully accepted the findings and will deliver its recommendations.
12. The Housing Ombudsman noted our leadership's positive approach to learning from this investigation, building on improvements we had already begun. Our commitment is underlined by establishing a Chief Executive led Taskforce to strengthen our housing services and leadership team.

### **Conclusion**

13. In conclusion, Hammersmith & Fulham values the thorough review conducted by the Housing Ombudsman. This has highlighted essential areas for enhancement, to which we are fully committed to making the respective improvements. As we progress, we look forward to showcasing our advancements in addressing the Key Orders and Recommendations, further demonstrating our commitment to providing the service our residents deserve.
14. While we have shown improvements, our journey of change still has far to go. We will continue to listen to residents, including our dedicated housing representative forums that guide our long-term plans. We will report progress to council scrutiny committees, ensure compliance with national legislation, and seek best practice from external bodies, as we strengthen our services to meet residents' needs.

### **LIST OF APPENDICES**

- Appendix 1 Housing Ombudsman recommendations  
Appendix 2 Housing Ombudsman Special Report on H&F Council

# LONDON BOROUGH OF HAMMERSMITH AND FULHAM

## APPENDIX 1

The Housing Ombudsman recommendations are:

1. Update the Repairs and Maintenance Handbook with step-by-step guidance so it is clear for the resident what happens at each stage of the repair, with a clear escalation pathway if repairs are delayed beyond agreed or expected dates.
2. Create a clear process within the repairs policy for how it will manage repair appointments, including.
  - booking the appointment,
  - effective communication with the resident as to the purpose of the appointment,
  - sending a reminder,
  - what happens when it misses an appointment and the next steps following the appointment.
3. Create a Knowledge and Information Management framework for all stages of the repairs process, both for the landlord and contractors, including access to inspection reports to ensure people have access to relevant information when needed.
4. Cross reference the Know our Residents project against the Housing Ombudsman's Spotlight report on Attitudes, Respect and Rights.
5. Review our Corporate Complaints policy against the new statutory Complaint Handling Code from the Housing Ombudsman (effective April 2024) completing a new self-assessment by June 2024.
6. Ensure we publish the annual report listed in our 'Complaints Monitoring' section on its website. Giving an overview of the complaints we have received, overall performance, lessons learned, and improvements made.
7. Update the policy to expressly state that any actions promised in complaint responses will be time tracked through to completion, with a clear escalation pathway if repairs are delayed beyond agreed or expected dates.
8. Create a process to monitor compensation payments to ensure consistency, accuracy and transparency in amounts offered.
9. Embed the recently produced Terms of Reference for Complaint Handlers with the entire staff to ensure access to appropriate and relevant records when responding to complaints.
10. Analyse and record complaint insight, monitoring to ensure the improvements have been embedded and are driving positive change.