Leeds Tenant Scrutiny Board

Findings of a review into complaints performance and how well Housing Leeds learns from complaints.

December 2024

Introduction

This report describes the work of the Tenant Scrutiny Board (TSB) and its review into how Housing Leeds manages and learns from complaints.

This review took place between May and November 2024 and includes recommendations for improvement from the TSB for Housing Leeds to make.

The topic of complaints and specifically, how well Housing Leeds learns from complaints was selected following the board's review of a range of performance and management information. This included the board reviewing the most recent 'Tenant Satisfaction Measures' and hearing from senior officers and the Executive Member for Housing, Councillor Jess Lennox about areas for improvement that could benefit from the board's work.

The board at this time was given assurance from Housing Leeds on their compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, however, there were areas of compliance that could be strengthened, and it is these areas that the board wish to focus on.

The scope of the board's review was to therefore to:

- Assist Housing Leeds and make recommendations for improvement to help them achieve 100% of customer complaints within timescales
- Assess how well Housing Leeds learns from complaints to improve overall satisfaction with services
- Assess how learning from complaints is shared back to residents to build confidence and trust in the complaints process.

The Board also selected complaints as a topic to review as from April 2024 Housing Leeds had a statutory obligation to respond to complaints within timescale and in line with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.

The board also view complaints as important sources of feedback from customers that should be managed in line with the Code and every opportunity taken to learn from them to improve services. The board noted that whilst complaints performance in terms of responses in timescale was improving, there was still room for improvement so that 100% of customers received a response in timescale.

The TSB are a group of volunteer tenants who are supported to review any aspect of the service given by Housing Leeds. For this review, they were joined by members of the Tenant Voice Panel, strengthening the membership and tenant input into the review and allowing more tenants to take part in the process.

By undertaking this review, the Board have worked collaboratively with Housing Leeds to seek to achieve:

- More tenants having their complaint responded to within timescale – above the current 88% (at the time of the review commencing)
- Higher levels of satisfaction with the complaints process
- Better customer satisfaction for services overall
- More resident awareness about how we learn from complaints
- Support for Housing Leeds to ensure compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's complaint handling code

This report is focussed on the experience and services to Housing Leeds tenants, however, there is the potential to share the learning in this report with other council teams or services.

What the Board did and what we learnt:

The board began their review by receiving an overview of the complaints process from managers who have complaints management as part of their day-to-day role. This helped the board gain a better understanding of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and what some of the complaints management challenges currently are.

The board asked complaint handling managers what some of the areas for improvement could be. From this discussion the board observed that there could be greater use of the existing management information, for example, from the 'complaints dashboard' to help managers know the number and status of complaints for their service area. This would help encourage all managers or 'Investigating Officers' who led on complaints responses to have greater visibility of the complaints for their service and the complaint status to assist them in ensuring all complaints are responded to in Code timescales. To ensure that the 'dashboard' is fit for purpose the board also feel that key staff should be given the opportunity to feedback on any suggested improvements or amendments to the dashboard that will help them manage complaints for their service.

The board acknowledge from the overview of the complaints process and from speaking with officers that there was a strong culture of wanting to manage complaints in terms of responding to complaints in timescale and give positive outcomes for customers.

The board learnt of the support put in place for Investigating Officers who lead on the responses to complaints, and the training offered. Whilst the training and support seemed thorough, the board would like Housing Leeds to consider if all Investigating Officers have undertaken this training and to remind all Investigating Officers that help and support is available, especially for those newer in post.

In learning about the requirements of the Complaint Handling Code and the timescales for responses that are required, the board learnt how landlords are able to apply an extension to the deadline for a response if needed, for example, in instances of more complex complaints. From the feedback received and the data reviewed by the board, it's clear that some complaints have been responded to outside of timescales because an extension was not applied. In line with the Complaint Handling Code, the board accepts that extensions can and should be used when needed to give the customer clarity on timescales and to allow Housing Leeds to meet the requirements of the Code i.e. *'Where a response to a complaint will fall outside the timescales set out in this Code the landlord must agree with the resident suitable intervals for keeping them informed about their complaint.'*

The board discussed with officers the opportunity to provide more updates to complainants, for example, by giving an automated update to inform of who their complaint had been referred to. The board are aware of the council's intention to improve the management of all its customer contact and would like to see more complaints updates being shared with residents on the status of their complaint if this was technically possible.

Similarly, the board noted that to help ensure all complaints were responded to within timescales, the service would ideally send automated reminders to Investigating Officers to let them know the complaint they were managing was due shortly. i.e. '*the response to complaint x is due in x days'*.

The board are aware that these points require potential changes or investment into IT systems and this may not be actionable immediately, but wish the service to consider the above, and if not feasible at this

point in time, give an explanation as to what IT related innovation is possible to help improve the customer complaints experience for customers and staff and their teams.

In the course of the review the board met with Investigating Officers from Housing Management and from Property Management. This helped the board gain an understanding of the current working practices in terms of responding to complaints in timescales. The board learnt there is occasionally an incorrect allocation of a complaint to a wrong team or service, and that this can impact on the time available to respond in timescales. The board are not clear or aware of the likelihood or frequency of this, or if this has a significant impact, but is something Housing Leeds should try and minimise. The board also learnt how in more complex complaint cases, a multi-agency meeting is sometimes held to help resolve the complaint and make sure all the issues within the complaint are addressed. The board welcome this approach and are keen for staff to continue to work in this way.

The board noted that some teams in Housing Leeds had discussed learning from complaints in team meetings. Whilst this must be done in a way that does not unnecessarily share personal data, it was something that staff reporting to the board felt was a useful tool to raise awareness of an issue and learn from complaints unique to the particular team or service. The board therefore welcome this approach and ask for all teams who manage any customer complaint to devote time in their team meetings to share and learn together. Where appropriate this learning can then be used as content to feedback to residents more widely.

The board looked at the learning from complaints content from a number of other landlords, including councils and housing associations, and also met with Gateway Housing Association whose own tenant scrutiny panel had looked into the same topic. They also met with an officer who undertakes the satisfaction surveys of those residents who have gone through the complaints process as a way to help monitor what tenants think about how Housing Leeds manages complaints.

The board noted the relatively low responses from customers to the customer satisfaction survey and explored ways this could be improved so Housing Leeds had a more accurate picture of residents experiences. It was suggested that a standard sentence be added to complaint responses to make residents aware that they will be asked for feedback when the complaint is closed. The board also discussed trialling a prize draw or incentive to help increase the number of completed surveys.

In terms of learning from complaints and how this learning from complaints could be better shared back with residents, the board would like Housing Leeds to more proactively share learning with residents, for example by routinely including content on their social media and hard copy/online newsletters.

When reviewing website content from Sanctuary Housing, Together Housing and Karbon homes the board identified aspects of all three of these websites that it would like Housing Leeds to implement. The content was easy to read and engaging and was open about how they were performing, what they had learnt from complaints and what they had done to improve services as a result, along with useful signposting and support.

Liverpool Council's website has a web page with a form that allows residents to upload an attachment. The board feel this could be useful for residents in Leeds and would like this to be made available. Liverpool Council also provides a template for residents about how to construct a complaint, with a model complaint broken down into clear sections that help the customer to clearly explain what the complaint is about, which could help Housing Leeds improve the quality of its complaint responses.

As a general observation, the service were unable to evidence a strong proactive learning from complaints being shared back with residents. The Annual Report for Tenants includes some learning from complaints feedback, as have some occasional email updates to residents, but this is not a regular or well-embedded approach and the board would like to see more examples of this.

In hearing from Gateway Housing Association, the board reflected on the importance of making sure our complaints responses and feedback to residents about how we learn from complaints should be written as clearly as possible, be jargon free, use plain English and use language that encourages building a positive relationship with tenants. It was noted that a theme of the success at Gateway Housing Association was to apply the 'human touch' to everything they did. This would be the expectation of the board for all Housing Leeds complaints responses and learning in the future.

Acknowledgements

The Tenant Scrutiny Board would like to thank:

- Roisin Donnelly – Housing Manager, Customer Care and Inclusion
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- Catherine Ellis – Neighbourhood Services Officer – Customer Insight
- Lenoard Wright – Repairs and Maintenance Contract Officer
- Charlotte Crispin – Housing Team Leader (Tenancy)
- David Lansdown and Katy Marx from Gateway Housing Association
- Residents who gave feedback through the customer satisfaction survey, used by the board to help them with their review.
- Councillor Jessica Lennox, Executive Member for Housing
- Akbar Khan, Ian Montgomery and Trish Parker from the Tenant Engagement Team who supported the review.

Recommendations

Tenant Scrutiny Board Recommendation	Response from Housing Leeds	'Accepted', 'Partially Accepted', 'Rejected' or 'Further Information requested'.
1. To seek assurance that all managers responsible for complaints regularly access the 'complaints dashboard' In doing so, to also seek feedback on the dashboard and if any improvements can be made to help staff manage complaints more effectively.	Key message to all managers (Sent by Gerard Tinsdale, Chief Officer, by end of January 25): The service propose writing to all managers, to make them aware of this recommendation, and to ask them to confirm they regularly (weekly) receive and access the dashboard. To include ask for feedback for review by the Customer Relations Team (CRT) on the dashboard and to make aware that support to use the dashboard is available from the CRT. Summarise feedback on dashboard usage and include in complaints management update report to the Leeds Housing Board.	Accepted
2. To ensure all Investigating Officers have undertaken Investigating Officer training and to remind all Investigating Officers that help and support is available, especially for those newer in post.	Within the same key message, share this recommendation and remind of help and support available. Review attendance of Investigating Officers at IO training, and book onto training any IO that has not taken part in the last 18 months. Summarise training position in complaint management update report to the Leeds Housing Board.	Accepted
3. That Housing Leeds promote the option to extend deadline for responses (in line with the Complaint Handling Code where this is appropriate). This should help Housing Leeds achieve improved complaint	Within the same key message include this recommendation, adding where advice and support is available on this point, a reminder of the requirements of the Code and provide regular updates on application of the extension in the Senior Management Team,	Accepted

responses in timescale and give more clarity to the customer.	Leeds Housing Board and learning from complaints items in Housing Leeds Matters (the staff bulletin). Provide information about using extensions in complaint management update report to the Leeds Housing Board.	
4. To explore the opportunity to provide more automated updates to complainants informing them of the status or progress of their complaint. For example, by giving an automated update to inform of who their complaint has been referred to and their contact details. The board asks Housing Leeds to also consider how those with translation needs can be supported to access these messages.	We are currently undertaking a project in LCC to assess the viability of adopting Microsoft Dynamics. Proof of concept testing demonstrated the ability to provide customers automatic acknowledgement of complaints, share updates on the progress of their complaint and request further information from customers where required. Further exploration is ongoing, and updates are expected in 2025. Initial proof of concept work did not demonstrate the ability to communicate with customers in different languages, however this can be explored as part of Co-Pilot AI integration.	Accepted
5. The service would like Housing Leeds to issue automated reminders to Investigating Officers to let them know the complaint they were managing was due shortly. i.e. 'the response to complaint x is due in x days'	Similar to above, this is also dependent on the successful delivery of Microsoft Dynamics and would fall into the same timetable of a further update in 2025.	Accepted
6. That Housing Leeds and the LCC Customer Relations team put in place actions to help minimise the potential for a complaint to be allocated to the wrong service (and therefore increase the time taken to respond to the customer).	Housing Leeds suggest the following actions in response to this recommendation: a) To attend CRT training sessions on a monthly basis to share updates on any changes to the service and to allow the CRT to ask any questions related to complaint allocation. b) To share the fortnightly 'Housing Leeds Matters' with CRT staff – where changes are highlighted that may be useful for CRT staff.	Accepted
7. The board noted that some teams in Housing Leeds had discussed the learning from complaints in their team meetings. Whilst this must be done in a way that does not	In the key message above, the service will share this recommendation and instruct managers to include a monthly learning from complaints discussion within	Accepted

share personal data the board ask this be done periodically within all teams (at a frequency Housing Leeds can determine) and that example of learning be included in the communications back to residents.	their team meetings. Some teams may regularly respond to complaints, others less so, so the expectation is that teams themselves share and discuss the information that is relevant to them. If there are improvement actions identified as a result, that these be shared with the Information Team for inclusion in resident comms.	
8. To seek to increase the number of responses to complaint satisfaction surveys, Housing Leeds: a. Add a standard sentence to the template response letters to make residents aware that they will be asked for feedback when the complaint is closed. b. Trial the use of an incentive, with a financial or suitable prize draw, for example a hamper, for those completing the surveys.	a) This has been actioned and is now in place, a note was shared with all staff to make aware in the December issue of Housing Leeds Matters and will be included as part of the specific message to Investigating Officers by the end of January 2025. We have also taken the opportunity to signpost the Tenant Voice Panel and the new Housing Leeds Feedback website at the same time. b) We currently receive around 16 survey responses from an average of 160 issued per month. From February 2025, we will give details about the trial of a prize draw to increase responses and seek residents consent to be included. For ease of administration, propose Love 2 Shop vouchers (which can be posted to the resident's address). Any uptake in participation will be reported to the Leeds Housing Board during 2025. The suggested prize is £50 for a winner selected for each month.	Accepted
9. To make better use of existing communication channels – the Housing Leeds social media and email bulletins to give more regular examples of how learning from complaints.	Alongside these recommendations the service are currently self-assessing ourselves against a new Communication and Engagement Policy. This requires teams to identify where they have learned from complaints on an annual basis – with the current self-assessments due for completion by the end of February 2025. We will use the examples given from this and other sources to keep updated a new learning	Accepted

	from complaints web page (see below) and to commit to including 'you said we did's' in the monthly tenant email (sent to 43,000 tenants) and with regular posts on our social media.	
10. Using a combination of the website content from Sanctuary Housing, Together Housing and Karbon homes as a guide, create an accessible and easy to read web page describing how Housing Leeds has learned from complaints and to share this widely with residents.	The service can commit to launching a new learning from complaints web page by the end of February 2025. This will be promoted on social media and in our tenant emails throughout 2025. We are able to share with the board a draft of this new page for their comment ahead of this going live.	Accepted
11. Add guidance to the existing LCC complaints page about how to construct a complaint, with a model complaint broken down into clear sections (see Liverpool Council).	We accept the value of the recommendation as adopted by Liverpool Council. We have noted as 'partially' accepted as further enquiries are being made with our web team to understand if this can be added using the current website platform and for all services. We will clarify if this can be practically delivered as soon as possible and update the board further at this time.	Partially accepted – whilst await IDS feedback
12. To enhance the current complaints web page to allow residents to upload an attachment to their complaint when submitted online.	We accept the value of the recommendation. We have noted as 'partially' accepted as further enquiries are required with our web team to understand if this can be added using the current website platform. We will clarify if this can be practically delivered as soon as possible and update the board further at this time.	Partially accepted - whilst await IDS feedback
13. That Housing Leeds commits to using clear and concise language in both its complaints responses and its communications about learning from complaints. Be jargon free and apply the 'human touch' to everything you do to help build respect and trust with residents and respond to individual tenants needs.	We fully support this recommendation. We will keep developing our approach by: a) Implementing a 'responding to individual needs' policy – giving practical advice to staff about how to put in place reasonable adjustments. b) Completing our annual self-assessments against a new Communications and Engagement Policy which describes how we make our services as accessible and inclusive as possible.	Accepted

	c) Continuing to undertake and publish the outcomes from our annual self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code d) Continuing to share regular 'learning from complaints' advice and support for staff in our internal staff bulletin e) Encouraging compliments about our service to highlight good practice and thank/recognise the staff and teams who are providing high quality responses. f) Undertake quarterly Quality Assurance exercises – selecting a sample of complaints responses to highlight where could improve and to recognise high quality responses. A summary of this information is reported to the Leeds Housing Board g) Move complaint handling from Leeds Building Services into Housing Leeds's Intervention Team who's focus is on high levels of customer care and seeking swift responses to put things right.	