

2023/2024 Annual complaints report

This report provides an overview of our resident feedback and sets out future plans to address this during 2024/25, also highlighting some of the changes that have already been made.

Why complaints reporting is so important to us

Complaints give us insight into how we need to improve the experience that residents have with the Councils. They highlight where things have not gone well, and how we can improve our services to prevent similar complaints in the future. As part of our Mid Suffolk and Babergh plans, we have committed to:

Mid Suffolk Plan:

Providing high quality council services that are easy to access when needed and that can be relied on.

Babergh Plan:

Delivering good quality core council services

We are committed to developing and improving our services with the voice of our residents at the core, and therefore our approach to learning lessons from our resident feedback is vital to taking a resident-centred approach to delivering services.

Complaints overview

Our complaints process is in line with the Housing Ombudsman (HO) code and follows the best practice guidance set out by the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). To summarise, we have two internal stages to our complaints process, and a final stage to take the complaint to the relevant ombudsman.

The stages are:

Stage 1: This is the first stage in the complaints process and the initial contact is responded to by the Head of Service or deputy for the service it relates to. Complaints at stage one should be responded to within 10 working days, but can be extended by a further 10 days, if more time is required to investigate the complaint.

Stage 2: These complaints are the final internal stage of our complaints process. At stage two, the complaint is investigated by our Customer Liaison Officer, who reviews the investigation at stage 1, the concerns of the resident and aims to review, impartially, the findings. This stage should not take longer than 20 working days but can again be extended by a further 10 days, for more serious or complex cases, where additional time is required to review the information.

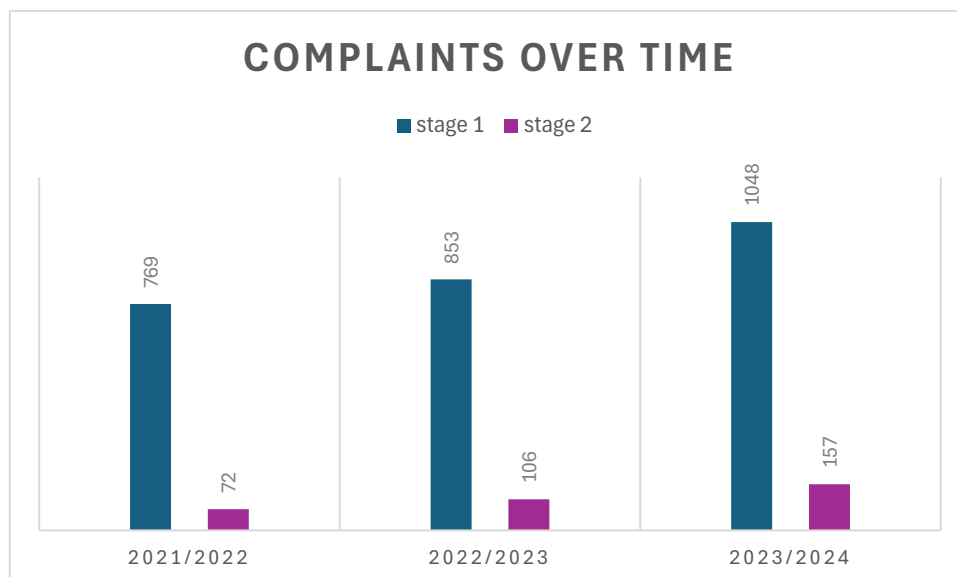
Stage 3: If the resident continues to be dissatisfied, they can escalate their complaint to either the HO if they are a tenant, or the LGO for all other matters. The ombudsman provides a vital role in externally reviewing our complaint responses, evidence and providing their findings.

It is important to note that since the introduction of the Housing Ombudsman code, a tenant can escalate their complaint at any stage of the complaints process.

Complaints received by the Councils over time:

	Stage 1	Stage 2
2021/2022	769	72
2022/2023	853	106
2023/2024	1048	157

Figure 1: Complaints over time bar chart:



Narrative:

From 2021/22 to 2022/23 we saw an 11% increase in stage 1 complaints. From 2022/2023 to 2023/2024 we have seen a considerable increase of stage 1 complaints, up by 23% from the previous year.

Stage 2's have also seen a year-on-year increase and in 2021/22 9% of stage 1 complaints resulted in a stage 2 escalation, 12% in 2022/23 and 15% in 2023/24.

For context, our increase in complaints has been broadly driven by several key areas.

1) Our desire to make it easier for residents to log complaints through the implementation of a complaints handling system.

We wanted to make it easier for people to log complaints, so launched our first digital complaints system in 2020. This, as expected, has led to an increase in reports – and reflects the experience of other councils who have implemented a digital system. For example, Camden reported that complaints doubled after introducing a new online complaints system.

2) The introduction of the Housing Ombudsman code

The Housing Ombudsman code was introduced in 2022 and became statutory in 2024. This code sets out several requirements for landlords and ensures that residents have easy access to both registering a complaint as well as early Housing Ombudsman support, where needed. More information regarding the code is described on page 4.

3) Housing complaints and our transformation work

We have seen an increase in the volume of housing complaints, which now make up 72% of all Council complaints received. This is, in part, driven by the work to make it easier to make a complaint online, and reflects the significant changes we are making to meet the housing regulator's standards and ensure we are delivering good quality housing for our tenants.

For context, we have around 6,800 council properties across both Babergh and Mid Suffolk.

Across our Housing departments, we have proactively been promoting the "Make Things Right" campaign launched by the Government in October 2023. The Councils have distributed this via our My Home Bulletin newsletters sent directly to our tenants. More information on the Make Things Right campaign can be found below:

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/social-housing-tenants-encouraged-to-make-things-right>
- <https://socialhousingcomplaints.campaign.gov.uk/>

Fig 3: Breakdown of complaints by service:

Service	2023/24	2022/23	Difference
Building Services/DLO	443	338	+105
Asset Compliance	193	138	+55
Tenancy Services	67	44	+23
Waste and Recycling	58	53	+5
Housing Solutions	39	31	+8
Council Tax	38	38	0
Public Realm	37	31	+6
Planning	34	34	0
Customer Services	30	23	+7
Planning Enforcement	20	22	-2
Asset Management	13	52	-39
Benefits	12	7	+5
Data protection	9	0	8
Car Park	8	3	5
Democratic Services	8	5	3
Strategic Assets	8	2	6

Environmental Protection	5	4	1
Communities	4	4	0

All other service areas that are not listed above, received 2 or less complaints between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024. These other areas complaints volumes are considered low and proves more challenging to provide much detail on specific trends.

From the table above you can see that most areas experienced an increase in complaints over 2024, predominately, these were small increases, however the highest was seen in housing.

What are the trends?

Housing

Housing repairs saw the highest volume of complaints across the Councils and the main themes are:

- Delayed work, particularly driven by changes in several contractors and therefore experiencing higher than usual backlogs of work.
- Cases of failing to communicate if work is no longer taking place, or additional work needs to be carried out.

In housing repairs, there has been a significant period of transformation - with changes of contractors, new staffing structures and implementation of a case management function within the housing system which effectively records communication with tenants.

These will all deliver significant, long-term improvements for our tenants, and an anticipated reduction in complaints. However, the changes required under the transformation programme have had a short-term impact on the service.

Complaints relating to tenancy management (excluding repairs) have risen from 44 in 2022/23 to 67 in 2023/24. The main themes of tenancy management complaints centre around anti-social behaviour and maintenance (grounds and cleaning) at schemes.

Lastly, within the housing complaints we have seen a small increase in the number of complaints that relate to homelessness services and registering for a Council home.

These complaint themes have increased to 39 from 31 in the previous year and often relate to residents who are dissatisfied with their priority status (banding) for them to bid on Council homes. Whilst banding appeals are not covered under the complaints policy as there is an appeals process, often residents chose to log a complaint due to the level of dissatisfaction they have experienced.

In line with Housing Ombudsman reporting, the Councils are required to report how many complaints were responded to out of time. The data from our previous system does not account for where the response deadline may have been extended - however, in future this will be achievable under the new complaints system. Under Housing Ombudsman guidance, the Councils can extend a stage one complaint by a further 10 working days, as long as the extension is reasonable.

We are able to review complaints responded to between the 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024 that breached their 10-working day deadline and this is broken down by our teams within housing:

- Housing Repairs – 224 responses breached the deadline out of 351 complaints responded to (63.8%)
- Asset Compliance – 128 responses breached the deadline out of 156 complaints responded to (82.1%)
- Asset Management - 7 responses breached of 8 complaints responded to (87.5%)
- Tenancy Management - 14 responses breached out of 61 complaints responded to (23.0%)
- Housing Solutions - 6 responses breached out of 36 responded to (16.7%)

Whilst this shows complaints have taken longer to respond to, work has taken place to reduce the level of time taken to respond, such as additional time provided and officers to respond to complaints, as well as ensuring officers are extending complaints, when they are more complex to ensure tenants are informed if additional time is needed. This is inline with the Housing Ombudsman code, to ensure that high quality investigations take place.

As a social housing provider, we must now collect data on tenant satisfaction measures (TSMs), which are part of a system developed by the Regulator of Social Housing. The measures are aimed at helping improve standards for people living in social housing, by:

- Providing visibility, letting tenants see how well their landlord is doing, and enabling tenants to hold their landlords to account.
- Giving the Regulator insight into which landlords might need to improve things for their tenants.

The TSMs are designed to see how well landlords are doing at keeping properties in good repair, maintaining building safety, respectful and helpful engagement, effective handling of complaints and responsible neighbourhood management. There are 22 tenant satisfaction measures, including 12 tenant perception measures and 10 management information measures. You can find our full results for each district here:

- [Tenant satisfaction measures - Babergh District Council - baberghmidsuffolk.com](https://www.baberghmidsuffolk.com/tenant-satisfaction-measures-babergh-district-council)
- [Tenant Satisfaction Measures - Mid Suffolk District Council - baberghmidsuffolk.com](https://www.baberghmidsuffolk.com/tenant-satisfaction-measures-mid-suffolk-district-council)

Our complaints performance can be found under the section ‘Customer Service’ in the links above and this compares Babergh and Mid Suffolk to the sector average. We have also included a table with the relevant complaint handling performance TSMs here.

2023/24	Babergh	Mid Suffolk	Average
CH01 (1) - Number of stage one complaints received per 1,000 homes	92.2	106.1	37.74
CH02 (1) - Proportion of stage one complaints responded to within the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code timescales	13.5%	24.1%	70.3%
CH01 (2) - Number of stage two complaints received per 1,000 homes	12.4	11.0	5.20

CH02 (2) - Proportion of stage two complaints responded to within the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code timescales	35.7%	25.6%	79.2%
TP09 - Proportion of respondents who report making a complaint in the last 12 months who are satisfied with their landlord's approach to complaints handling.	26%	26.4%	29.1%

The above data demonstrates that both Councils receive a high level of stage one complaints relating to our tenants and our duties as a social housing landlord compared to the sector average. Babergh receives 54.46 complaints per 1000 homes more than average, whilst Mid Suffolk receives 68.36 complaints per 1000 homes more.

The high level of stage one complaints received has a knock-on effect through the rest of the complaints process and our score against the rest of the satisfaction measures. Further down in this report, the positive changes that our housing department are making will hopefully lead to a reduction in stage one complaints received and improved satisfaction measures moving forward.

Waste and Recycling:

In 2023/24, the Waste Services team received 58 stage one complaints, compared to 53 the previous year. However, this is still significantly lower than the peak for Waste Services, where 109 were received in 2020/21.

The waste and recycling team also responded to 58 complaints during 2023/24 and only 1 of these 58 complaints breached the response deadline of 10 working days.

Of the complaints made regarding our waste and recycling service, only eight were upheld. The main themes for our waste complaints are:

- Missed collections
- Contractor behaviour
- Bins being left in the wrong place and assisted collections not taking place.

For wider context, it's important to note that collection data shows that across Babergh and Mid Suffolk over 99% of bins are collected, therefore the complaints represent a small percentage of when things may go wrong. These issues are managed swiftly, and remedial actions put in place.

Council Tax and Benefits:

As both services are delivered by our Shared Revenues Partnership team, the performance has been combined to reflect a total complaint level of 50.

Many of the complaints received for Council Tax and Benefits are regarding delays in applications, if there is a higher than usual wait time for processing claims, outstanding bills or disputes regarding enforcement action for non-payment of Council Tax.

Of the complaints received by our Council Tax and Benefits service, only 3 were upheld.

The Shared Revenues Partnership responded to 46 complaints between the 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024, and none of their complaints responded to breached the 10 working day deadline.

Public Realm

There has been a slight increase in complaints made to Countryside and Public Realm, these are up six on the previous year to 37. Of these 37 complaints received 13 were upheld.

Public Realm responded to 34 complaints the previous year with only four responses breaching the ten working day deadline.

Most complaints received by Public Realm relate to grass cutting. We have received complaints that the grass is being cut too regularly which in turn does not allow wildlife to flourish and conversely, we received complaints that grass is not cut regularly enough. It was identified that several of the reports could have come through as service requests, as they were the first time of letting us know about the issue.

Planning

Our planning complaints are primarily split between three areas:

- Planning – Babergh
- Planning – Mid Suffolk
- Planning Enforcement

Across the two districts we saw 34 complaints in relation to planning applications, this is the same amount as 2022/23. Within planning enforcement, they received 20 stage one complaints regarding enforcement cases.

The Planning teams of Babergh & Mid Suffolk responded to a total of 25 complaints, with 12 (48%) of these responses breaching the 10 working day deadline. Whilst Planning Enforcement responded to 14 complaints, with 11 (79%) of those breaching the 10 working day deadline. Over the next year we will be working with our planning colleagues to reduce the occasions we require additional time to respond to complaints.

Both planning teams continued to receive complaints regarding the following::

- Neighbours planning application
- Complaint about how their planning application was handled
- Complaint about the outcome – these are not considered to be a complaint and appeals should be made to the Planning Inspectorate.

Planning Enforcement receive complaints primarily regarding planning applications near the complainant's home, whether this be a complaint about how a neighbour has contracted a development in accordance with the approved planning or regarding the completions of conditions on larger scale applications. Planning Enforcement upheld only two (10%) of their complaints received.

Ombudsman performance

At Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils there are 2 different routes for residents/tenants to take a complaint depending on the nature of their concerns.

If you are a tenant and therefore, we have a responsibility as a landlord, the Housing Ombudsman is the appropriate ombudsman. For all other services we administer, the Local Government Ombudsman is the correct route for escalation after a stage 2 complaint response. The performance for both can be seen below.

The Housing ombudsman:

The Housing Ombudsman's role has been expanded under the new Social Housing Regulation Act, with new expectations to issue guidance and measure landlords against it, alongside powers to order landlords to review their policies and practices as well as the ability to issue complaint failure orders. A new Memorandum of Understanding between the Regulator of Social Housing and the Housing Ombudsman Service was updated on the 10th July 2024 with the new memorandum setting out a new framework of communication, cooperation, and exchange of information between the Regulator and the Housing Ombudsman. More information can be found here: [Memorandum of Understanding | Housing Ombudsman \(housing-ombudsman.org.uk\)](#)

These orders may be issued in relation to failings in an individual case where the Ombudsman has taken reasonable steps to seek engagement from a landlord, but the resident remains unable to progress a complaint. They may also be issued where there is evidence of a systemic issue within a landlord's complaint handling. Complaint orders are published and shared with the Regulator of Social Housing. The orders fall into three categories, which are:

Type 1: Issued due to the landlord's unreasonable delays in accepting or progressing a complaint through its process.

Type 2: Issued due to unreasonable delays in providing information requested by the Ombudsman.

Type 3: Issued where a landlord fails to comply with its membership obligations.

The Housing Ombudsman have also introduced several key areas as part of their refreshed complaints handling code.

- Universal definition of a complaint (please find this definition in our complaints policy [here](#))
- Providing easy access to the complaints procedure and ensuring residents are aware of it, including their right to access the Housing Ombudsman Service
- The need for only two internal complaint stages and clear timeframes 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 (please find our last self-assessment [here](#))
- Memorandum of Understanding between the HOS and Regulator is [here](#)

Whilst we comply with the areas of the code and work closely with the Housing Ombudsman to seek advice and guidance to continuously improve our approach to complaints handling, this is our first annual complaints report of this format, and we will be keen to seek feedback from our Senior Leadership team, elected members and our residents, on the helpfulness of this report.

Given the significant changes to the Ombudsman powers over the last few years, the Housing Ombudsman has reported a significant increase in complaints nationwide, with their latest report showing:

- a 91% increase in cases coming to them in the first 9 months of 2023-24 (compared to the same period last year)
- a maladministration rate of 72% (it was 59% in 2022-23) by Q3
- compensation of £3.7m (compared to £1.1m for the whole of 2022-23) by Q3
- more than 14,000 remedies following our investigations (compared to 6,500 in the prior year) by Q3.

In the last year we have not received any complaints failure orders as listed above. However, we have had 5 complaints investigated by the Housing Ombudsman and the details regarding the lessons learnt from these complaints can be found under the section below.

Compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code

Following changes to the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and Self-Assessment the Councils annual report now has statutory requirements to meet the code. Below this report will state how we meet the code and where you can find the relevant information in relation to these points:

Under section 8.1, the Councils must produce an annual complaints performance report for scrutiny and challenge, which must include:

- a. the annual self-assessment against this Code to ensure their complaint handling policy remains in line with its requirements
- b. a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the landlord's complaint handling performance - this must also include a summary of the types of complaints the landlord has refused to accept
- c. any findings of non-compliance with this Code by the Ombudsman
- d. the service improvements made as a result of the learning from complaints
- e. any annual report about the landlord's performance from the Ombudsman
- f. any other relevant reports or publications produced by the Ombudsman in relation to the work of the landlord

(A) Annual Self-Assessment

The annual self-assessment is included as an appendix to this report, it is titled "Appendix 1 – Annual Self-assessment". You can also find a copy of our self-assessment on our website here:

<https://www.babergh.gov.uk/compliments-comments-and-complaints>

<https://www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/compliments-comments-and-complaints>

(B) Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis

This report provides our analysis of our complaint handling performance across Babergh District Council and Mid Suffolk District Council.

The Councils do not refuse to add or escalate complaints within our complaints process. If a customer, resident, or tenant wishes to raise a complaint, then this will be added to the complaints system on their behalf, or they are provided with information on how to raise the complaint.

The Councils will then review the information and close the complaint in the appropriate manner, whether this be: Upheld, Not Upheld, or Not Considered to be a Complaint.

In the Councils' Complaints Policy there are several items that are not considered to be a complaint and when it falls into one of these categories, the customer will be provided with the relevant information prior to raising a complaint.

(C) Any findings of non-compliance with this code

Since the new Complaint Handling Code was launched in 2024, the Councils have not received any findings of non-compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's complaint handling code. In April 2023 the Housing Ombudsman contacted the Councils to ensure that we were complying with the Complaint Handling Code. Between June and September in 2023 the Councils met with and worked with the Housing Ombudsman compliance team to ensure that our policy and templates used were in line with their previous code. All changes were signed off and approved by the Housing Ombudsman in December 2023.

(D) Service Improvements

The Housing Ombudsman upheld 5 complaints in total for Babergh and Mid Suffolk in 2023/24. 4 for Babergh and 1 for Mid Suffolk and these included recommendations to improve our service.

Babergh

202207448 – Recommendation B was that the Councils reviews how it records and monitors jobs, including how we update residents. Work is ongoing to implement a new job management/scheduling system to help ensure that jobs are logged and scheduled efficiently. The Housing Team have also implemented a new CRM (Customer Relationship Management) module to help improve communication with tenants. Across building services, tenancy management, customers and housing transformation we are also working on a project to refresh and check tenant contact details, to ensure we can more successfully contact tenants at the first point of contact.

202300493 – There were no service recommendations, just recommendations on how to remedy the complaint.

202208598 – The first recommendation was for the Councils to review its complaints procedure (this was signed off by the Ombudsman in December 2023) and considers retraining all relevant staff members on adherence with the code requirements. We carried out training as part of the launch of the new complaints system, where we provided information on the complaint handling processes. Complaint handling staff were also attended a complaint handling training session provided by the Local Government Ombudsman.

The second recommendation was for the Councils to strongly consider reviewing record keeping practices to ensure that we adequately retain records and logs. As mentioned above, there are several changes in the works with a new job management system, CRM and new complaints system.

202214564 – The first recommendation was for the Councils to review its record keeping process in relation to anti-social behaviour complaints, to ensure that all ASB related correspondence is accurate and up to date. The Head of Tenancy Services acknowledged the complaint recommendations and said that this complaint highlighted a staff training issue, and a management plan was put in place. The ASB Policy is being refreshed and ASB case management training was provided to staff. Officers involved would also be subject to case management audits.

And the second recommendation is for the Councils to arrange refresher staff training on the compensation policy, and the Ombudsman's complaint handling code. The Customer Liaison Officer and the Housing Transformation manager are taking this forward over the coming months to arrange training.

Mid Suffolk

202127679 – The Ombudsman ordered that the Councils review its record keeping processes with regard to telephone and in-person resident communications across all teams and provide an action plan of its intentions to make improvements within eight weeks of the date of the report.

Other areas of housing service improvements and lessons learned

Throughout the year we have highlighted several areas of improvement that are required as a result of complaints received.

Lack of Communication – One of the main themes of the complaints that the Councils receive are in relation to a lack of communication regarding the repairs that they have raised. To help mitigate these issues there are a number of projects that are ongoing within housing which include:

- The implementation of a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) module to better log contact received from our tenants
- The implementation of a new scheduling system that better interfaces with our contractors and provides updates to our tenants

Speed of Boiler Repairs – Following a complaint that escalated to stage two it was identified that repairs to or replacement of boilers were not being carried out in a timely manner. The Councils worked with the contractor to change their process to ensure that there was always a supply of parts, so our tenants did not need to wait longer than needed for a boiler repair.

Stock Condition Surveys

In January 2024 the Councils started undertaking stock condition surveys on all our properties, this is the first time that the Councils have undertaken a stock condition survey on 100% of our properties, providing us with up to date and accurate information regarding the condition of them. With the data gathered from these surveys this will allow for the Councils to better design and prepare programmes of work for upgrading our properties and keeping them up to date and address any health and safety issues identified.

The Councils have around 7,000 properties to survey and following the survey the Councils are provided information highlighting if there are any severe or moderate issues that need urgently rectifying.

At the time of writing this report (end of August 2024), the Councils had surveyed over 81% of our properties and is on course to be completed before the end of the 2024 calendar year.

Outside of having a better understanding of the condition of our properties, it is hoped that this project improves other areas of our service:

- Offers an opportunity to touch base with tenants and understand any safeguarding issues or vulnerabilities we need to consider.
- Planning work could lead to a reduction of complaints longer term, as planned projects are put in place prior to complaints being received.

Stigma Project

In April 2023 a working group was created to discuss conducting some research into the potential stigma tenants faced, including from Council officers. Evidence had been heard of occasions where the way tenants were spoken about was derogatory and it was felt council tenants had been stereotyped.

We used the results from the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) to identify a group of tenants who had stated they felt that we didn't treat them fairly or with respect and a survey was created to further explore this with that group. The survey was shared with 108 tenants, and we had a response of 28 which represents a 26% return.

The responses from the survey sent to our tenants told us that our tenants felt there needed to be improved communication, especially surrounding visits to properties and operatives were tuning up without pre-scheduling. Some feedback demonstrated that some of our tenants felt as though the Council and our contractors assumed that they did not work.

Following the results of the survey, this led to a small project which was led by the tenant engagement team to discuss the results and decide the next steps. The result of this original working group has now led to:

- New starter materials being created regarding tenant stigma that will be handed out to all new starters within Housing
- Training materials to be distributed to housing staff, councillors and displayed on our intranet in the form of a presentation. This presentation features our tenants experience, myth busting, as well as facts and figures

- The Councils joining the Stop Social Housing Stigma campaign, this was set up by tenants and the Councils are going to be one of their pioneer groups. You can find more information here: <https://stopsocialhousingstigma.org/>

Every six months the Housing Teams come together for a housing improvement session, a half a day to full day event which has a theme. The next housing improvement session will cover Social Housing Stigma and how we can continue to reduce this and have a positive impact.

Housing Solutions/Tenancy Services improvements

Housing solutions:

Shelter has been conducting an independent review of processes within our housing solutions over the last year, to understand more about the improvements that can be made from a resident perspective. Following this review and feedback from residents informally and formally, the team have changed the triage process for residents reporting homelessness advice via the telephone.

Previously, this would be handled by a customer services team member and then the information collected would then be triaged by a 'triage officer' within the housing solutions team. Often this meant that residents felt they were having to repeat information. This year, the team have removed this second triage function and now referrals are made straight to a housing officer who will ensure that appropriate next steps are identified and carried out accordingly.

There has also been an improvement in the assessment of housing register applications which has seen reduction from 15 weeks to 2 weeks (10 working days) since 2023/2024, driven by feedback from complaints where residents were experiencing long waiting times. This was improved by increasing the number officers available to assess applicants.

Tenancy Services

Anti-social behaviour (9 complaints) and delays in responding or making a decision (10 complaints) are the most common causes of complaint, learning from these we have:

- Responded to each case individually, tackling any staff performance issues and seeking to continually improve expectation management
- Developed a new ASB policy and procedures, influenced by tenant feedback, with colleagues in Communities and Environmental Health, to be approved by Cabinet in November 2024. This aims to improve service standards, set clear timescales and performance metrics to ensure tenants get a timely and consistent service appropriate to their needs and vulnerabilities. Decisions will be better backed up by policy
- Organised 3 ASB training days for all Housing Officers to upskill them on legal and non-legal measures
- Made use of the CRM module in the housing system to record response times so that we can monitor and manage delivery and ensure tenants are not left waiting
- Implemented a routine ASB case audit as part of 1-2-1s with Housing Officers
- Work has begun with Housing management and Customer Services colleagues to improve our tenant data collection so that vulnerabilities can be recorded and services tailored to individual needs.

- We are undertaking a review of the housing management service, with the intention of moving from a reactive to a proactive service. A key element of our success will be to achieve smaller patch sizes for Housing Officers to enable them to be more in-tune with their tenants and neighbourhoods.

Rent refunds – in response to complaints about delays in refunding rent account credits, a new process was implemented to ensure that refunds of credits were managed consistently. This has prevented delays and enabled front-facing staff to communicate timelines to customers, which has managed customer expectations and prevented any further complaints.

(E) any annual report about performance

Babergh District Council were included in the annual landlord reports produced by the Housing Ombudsman. This year the Housing Ombudsman are publishing individual reports for landlords with five or more findings on cases determined between the 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024.

A copy of this report is included as “Appendix 2: Landlord Report – Babergh District Council”

The landlord report shows the following information:

- Performance at a glance
- Maladministration Rate Comparison
- Findings Comparison
- Landlord Findings by Category
- Findings by Category Comparison
- Findings by Sub-Category
- Top Sub-Categories
- Orders Made by Type
- Order Compliance
- Compensation Ordered

This is the first time that one of our Councils have been included in the annual reports.

Mid Suffolk District Council were not included in the annual landlord reports as there were less than five findings made.

(F) Any other relevant reports or publications produced by the Ombudsman

Neither Babergh District Council nor Mid Suffolk District Council have been included in any other report produced by the Housing Ombudsman. You can find our complaint outcome reports listed above.

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGO)

Babergh District Council (BDC)

The LGO did not investigate a complaint against BDC for complaints escalated to them between the 1st March 2023 and 31st April 2024 and therefore no fault was found with any BDC complaints escalated.

The LGO received 22 complaints regarding BDC and decided on 18. The 4 complaints that do not have a decision in the LGO's annual report will be on the 2024/2025 report as they were post April 2023.

In total the LGO reviewed complaints regarding BDC on 18 occasions and the outcomes were as follows:

- 8 closed after initial enquiries
- 5 referred back to the Councils as it had been escalated too soon as should have been through our internal complaints procedure first.
- 3 were provided with advice
- 2 were incomplete

The LGO have also provided a breakdown of the service area in which these complaints relate to. Please note that these areas are categorised by the LGO's definition and not ours. Of the 18 complaints decided upon these were the areas:

- 5 Planning and Development
- 5 Housing
- 3 Benefits and Tax
- 2 Environmental Services and Public Protection
- 2 Corporate and other services
- 1 Highways and Transport

Mid Suffolk District Council (MSDC)

Between the 1st of April 2023 and the 31st March 2024, the LGO received a total of 6 complaints for MSDC and decided upon 7.

The LGO investigated two complaints, both relating to Environmental Services and Public Protection that were escalated to them in 2023/24 which had the following outcomes:

- 1 upheld (Waste Services)
- 1 not upheld

The other 5 outcomes were as follows and all related to Planning and Development:

- 4 closed after initial enquiries
- 1 referred back for local resolution

23005903 – Complaint Regarding Communal Waste Collection

The resident complained that his household communal waste bin was not being collected on a regular basis at his block of flats. The Councils provided assurances previously that this would not happen again and that the issue had been rectified however, the resident used our complaints process and the LGO to complain that the issue was ongoing.

The Councils have a duty under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to collect household waste and recycling from properties in our area, these collections do not have to be weekly however, they should be regular.

From the complaint we can see the resident made an initial complaint in April 2023, to state their bin had not been collected on several occasions over the previous 6 months. Each time the collection was missed the waste services team had been notified via a phone call or through the online reporting form.

In our stage one response, the Waste Services team apologised the frequent missed collections and that we were working with our contractor, to resolve the matter. This involved a site visit, speaking to the crew and their supervisor, and adding a reminder to the device the waste crew used on their rounds.

In July, the customer escalated his complaint due to further missed collections. The Council upheld his complaint at stage two, and it was established that the continued problems was due to a communication breakdown between a supervisor and crew member. Following the complaint response at stage two, the customer escalated his complaint to the LGO and following the complaint being raised, the customer informed the LGO that there were further missed collections. The customer later informed the LGO that issues had stopped by the time the investigation had started.

The LGO found that the Councils' records showed 10 reported missed collections between September 2022 and August 2023, with its contractor returning generally within two days of each report. The contractor did not record the reasons for each missed collection. The Council accepted this was due to poor performance from its contractor. The Council logged several phone calls from the customer and said he also had many calls with an individual Waste Officer about the matters.

The Councils said it had multiple conversations with, and emails sent to, its contractors to ensure it collected this customers bins since September 2022. Since October 2023, the Council said it had allocated a different crew to this round.

The agreed action and to remedy the personal injustice was within one month of the final decision to:

- Provide a fresh apology to the customer
- Pay a symbolic payment of £150. To recognise the uncertainty, frustration, and inconvenience with the matters complained about.

The full LGO report can be found here: <https://www.lgo.org.uk/decisions/environment-and-regulation/refuse-and-recycling/23-005-903>

Since the complaint was actioned by the Councils the members of staff at Serco (our waste collection contractor) who were involved with this matter have since left their positions. The Councils have not had any additional complaints raised to them regarding the lack of collections at the address in question.

Comparison to other Suffolk Local Authorities

Below is a table comparing Babergh and Mid Suffolk to the other three local authorities in Suffolk. The LGO group together their data in the following ways:

- **Upheld** – A complaint that they have investigated, and fault has been found with the Councils
- **Not upheld** – No fault of the Councils was found during their investigation
- **Closed after initial enquiries** – this is where the LGO have assessed a complaint, however, have concluded that no investigation is necessary, and the Councils will not be at fault.
- **Not ready / not for the LGO** – the LGO have concluded that the complaint is either:
 - Invalid or incomplete
 - Referred back to the customer
 - Advice has been provided

This year the LGO now report how many complaints are upheld per 100,000 residents as part of the Office for Local Government (Oflog) performance metrics recommendations.

There was a total of 83 local authorities nationwide that did not have a complaint upheld during 2023/24 of which Babergh is one of them.

There were 279 local authorities which had at least one complaint upheld. Out of this 279, Mid Suffolk joined 59 other authorities in only having one complaint upheld.

The performance can be accessed publicly here: [Your council's performance \(lgo.org.uk\)](https://lgo.org.uk)

Fig 4: Suffolk Authorities LGO performance table:

	Upheld total (& upheld per 100,000 residents)	Not upheld	Not for / not ready for the LGO to investigate	Closed after initial enquiries	Total
Babergh	23/24: 0 (0.0)	23/24: 0	23/24: 10	23/24: 8	23/24: 18
	22/23: 2	22/23: 1	22/23: 5	22/23: 4	22/23: 12
Mid Suffolk	23/24: 1 (0.9)	23/24: 1	23/24: 1	23/24: 4	23/24: 6
	22/23: 2	22/23: 0	22/23: 9	22/23: 4	22/23: 15
Ipswich	23/24: 0 (0.0)	23/24: 0	23/24: 5	23/24: 4	23/24: 9
	22/23: 2	22/23: 2	22/23: 7	22/23: 5	22/23: 16
East Suffolk	23/24: 2 (0.8)	23/24: 1	23/24: 4	23/24: 14	23/24: 21
	22/23: 4	22/23: 3	22/23: 7	22/23: 18	22/23: 33
West Suffolk	23/24: 2 (1.1)	23/24: 0	23/24: 5	23/24: 8	23/24: 15
	22/23: 1	22/23: 1	22/23: 3	22/23: 9	22/23: 14

Compliments

There were 208 compliments logged between the 1st April 2023 and the 31st March 2024. This was an increase of 19 compliments or 10% from the 189 logged last year.

Reviewing the compliments that have been received we have continued to see the highest level of compliments for the following teams:

- Housing
- Customer Services
- Planning

“May I thank the operative who was efficient, pleasant and polite and considerate. A credit to Babergh and Mid Suffolk DC’s” – Repairs operative

“I just want to say how David is such a credit to your team. He has been amazing and I feel always goes above and beyond. He helped us in a way that was super friendly kind caring and considerate. Nothing was ever too much trouble, and I think he should be recognised for his friendly kind and caring approach.” –Housing Solutions Officer

“I called on Monday and spoke to Anna in the customer service team she went above and beyond any officer I have spoken to and within 24hours I could access and view my accounts. She was so helpful and listened to my problem including the frustration it had caused.” Customer Support Officer

What changes have been made across the organisation using this feedback:

We have framed these around the housing ombudsman’s key strategic themes, to highlight how we are using our feedback to drive improvements, alongside Ombudsman best practice.

- Extending fairness
- Increasing openness
- Encouraging learning
- Achieving excellence

Increasing openness:

New Complaints System

In June 2024 we implemented our new digital complaints system, this was an opportunity for us to improve both the resident experience and our ability to gain higher quality data to help provide greater insights to improve our ability to use data and insight to improve our resident experience.

The changes will allow us to more effectively:

- Understand if complaints relate to Babergh or Mid Suffolk and use this to identify common trends at a more hyperlocal level to drive improvements.
- Identify more easily what reasonable adjustments may need to be made for our residents by asking at the first point of contact.

- More easily identify where complaints have been extended to comply with the HO code and LGO best practice.
- Record lessons learnt and actions taken, to provide more robust lessons learnt performance.

The new system has been received positively so far and has been considered by our users as an improvement on the previous system. We have also implemented a satisfaction survey to gain better insight as to how residents feel about their complaints handling experience with us.

CRM module within our housing management system:

A new module was implemented within our housing system to allow for contact from tenants to be more easily captured and actions assigned to the right team or department.

Annual scrutiny and reporting:

This year we are introducing our first public annual complaints report for Overview and Scrutiny to review and provide comment on. This comment will be displayed on our website alongside this report to comply with the Housing Ombudsman complaint handling code.

Housing complaints task force

Every quarter the Housing Complaints Taskforce meet to discuss complaints data, feedback and lessons learned. This meeting also shares information and highlight reports produced by the Housing Ombudsman and other organisations.

The taskforce is run by the Councils Customer Liaison Officer and Head of Housing Transformation and Regulation and includes the following invitees:

- Member of the tenant board
- Housing Portfolio Holders
- Managers/Team Leads from Housing Repairs, Asset Compliance, Housing Solutions, Tenancy Management, and Tenant Engagement

More information on our Complaint Taskforce can be found on our website here: [Housing Complaint Taskforce](#) and this also includes the presentation and minutes from the previous meetings.

Extending fairness:

Vulnerability project:

We have started a project to review the ways we record vulnerability information for residents. The initial phase reviews opportunities to ensure we are capturing and sharing information between our Council Tax team and housing rents team, alongside staff training to improve understanding and identification of vulnerabilities. This will improve oversight of vulnerable customers across these services, enabling support and considerations for those at risk of falling into arrears to be made at an earlier stage.

The next phase of the project will seek to expand this approach with other council services to ensure staff feel confident in identifying vulnerable residents and providing support where needed.

Additional complaints handling roles in housing

Due to the increase in complaints and the difficulty in responding within the deadline, housing have recruited additional complaints handling roles to ensure a positive complaints handling culture is created, as well as considered this within their structures moving forwards to ensure our compliance against the deadlines can be achieved.

Encouraging learning

Local Government Ombudsman complaints training:

70 officers were provided with complaints refresher training as part of our ongoing commitment and drive to embed a positive complaint handling culture. The session was positively received, and we will be monitoring the quality of responses over the next year to ensure this has an impact on the quality of our complaints handling.

Complaint lessons learnt groups

During 2025 we will be reinstating our complaint working groups to focus on areas with higher volumes of complaints received. We will be working with our continuous improvement officers within these groups to ensure that we are using the insights to instigate improvement projects to more robustly measure the impact of our changes and ensure these can benefit the whole organisation. Often complaint improvements appear limited to alleviating the individual complaints for example changing a bin round, updating policy or guidance note, reminding people of best practice in a team meeting, therefore, working with our continuous improvement leads will help to draw out more root cause issues, to implement wider reaching improvements.

Achieving excellence:

With the implementation of the new system, we will be more closely managing our compliance against our timescales and completing dip checks across services to ensure we are able to drive the best possible resident experience.

Alongside this we have introduced a satisfaction survey within our complaint system, to allow residents to provide us with feedback on how they felt about the experience of providing us feedback to continue to make improvements.

We are also shortly undertaking an institute of customer service benchmarking survey, which will allow us to understand more about our resident experiences across our different contact channels to ensure we can develop a plan to drive resident focused improvements at the first point of contact with the Councils. This is expected to take place over Q4, and improvement plans will then be developed and implemented thereafter.

Overall, we continue to work across the organisation to embed a positive complaint handling culture and ensure we continuously learn from feedback both compliments and complaints.