



DATE: October 2024

REPORT OF: EHA Complaints Scrutiny Taskforce

INVESTIGATION TITLE: Scrutiny review of Formal Complaint Management at EHA

Investigation Summary

Our Complaints Taskforce has reviewed the Association's management of Formal Complaints.

The following areas were reviewed by the Taskforce:

- Information session around the changes within the Housing Ombudsman's new Complaints Handling Code which became effective as from 1 April 2024
- Review of tenants' own perception of formal complaints – the difference between a service request, a report about anti-social behaviour and a complaint, importance of raising complaints
- Review of tenants' experience of formal complaints at EHA

Document review:

- Standard Complaints correspondence pack – Stage 1 and 2 formal complaint acknowledgement and response letters reflecting the new Code
- Annual complaints performance and service improvement plan

Recommended procedure

It is recommended that relevant staff members and the Management Team consider the contents of this report.

Staff members are requested to respond to the report, ready for presentation to Board on the next opportunity the agenda allows.

Board members are requested to consider the contents of this report and provide responses to the recommendations and actions.

Background

In January 2024, our Scrutiny Audit Panel reviewed the following information to propose the topics for the Association's scrutiny review programme for 2024:

- Key Performance Indicator reports – for Q1 and Q2 2023/24
- Annual complaints data – 2022/3 report and 2023/4 to date
- Tenant Satisfaction Measures – perception survey - baseline survey report, and latest tracker report for Q3

Largely based upon our TSM results Q3 2023/24, future Scrutiny areas were selected as follows:

1. Communication – *general communication with tenants, and internal communication for more efficient service provision*
2. Complaints – *our handling of formal complaints*
3. Repairs service – *efficiency and quality of our repairs service to tenants*

Tenant Satisfaction data indicates a lower satisfaction with complaints handling than all other service areas. Although we acknowledge that those who have been through the Association's complaints process are likely to be more dissatisfied with the Association as a whole, a 60% satisfaction rate from our 2023 baseline survey* indicates room for improvement.

It was agreed to instruct a review of the Association's handling of formal complaints towards the end of 2024, to allow planned service changes to be embedded.

In April 2024, the Housing Ombudsman Service introduced their new Complaints Handling Code, which all members must comply with to represent best practice in complaint handling. As a result, the Association made a number of changes in managing formal complaints. Mark Barrow was appointed as Complaints Officer in November 2023 to lead on the management of stage 1 complaints.

Previously, managers would deal with all complaints about their department. Now our independent Complaints Officer deals with all complaints, working with managers and tenants to find solutions. Mark also worked to ensure our service meets with the expectations of the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code 2024, developing a new process and reviewing all information which is shared with tenants.

Although the service has undergone a transformation in line with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code, its important these changes are clear to our tenants. This review is to ensure that areas of our complaints service, whilst governed by the Housing Ombudsman, meet the needs of all of our tenants – working with our Taskforce to influence EHA's two stage complaints service.

** it should be noted that although a 60% satisfaction score for complaint handling is the*

lowest scoring metric within EHA's TSM report, according to Acuity, our independent data collector, "EHA compares well with other landlords and just one seventh of tenants stated that they had made a complaint in the last 12 months during 23/24". EHA has remained in the top quartile of Acuity's other Housing Association clients since our first baseline survey in 2023.

Acuity state, "The [TSM] complaints question does not measure how satisfied tenants are with a landlord's formal complaints handling process – the question measures how satisfied tenants who believe they have made a complaint to their landlord in the last 12 months view the handling of their "complaint".

The TSM Survey asks: "Have you made a complaint to Eden HA in the last 12 months? How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with Eden HA's approach to complaints handling?"

Acuity confirms, "The fact that a tenant believes they have made a complaint to their landlord is irrefutable. The debate is around the difference between a service request, a service request failure and a formal complaint. A high percentage of "complaints" are ASB reports."

It's therefore worth considering that some tenants who responded to the TSM survey, may not have accessed EHA's Formal Complaints process specifically.

Link to Corporate Plan

Under the 2024 – 2027 Corporate Strategy, this review falls within the 'Tenant Voice and Influence' and 'High Performing and Resilient Organisation' strategic priorities.

Link to EHA Values

This review covers Integrity, Customer Experience and Listen within EHA's Values.

Regulatory references

- Housing Ombudsman – Complaint Handling Code 2024
- Regulator of Social Housing – Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government – Social Housing White Paper: Chapter 3 To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly

Scope of review
The Scrutiny Taskforce considered the following matters in the course of the review; • Strengths • Weaknesses • Performance against regulatory and sector expectation/ recommendation
Summary of activities
Stage 1:
Initial satisfaction survey of experience of communication at EHA, and general expectations of good customer service and communication from service providers.
Stage 2:
1. Review of all survey results – <i>identifying key themes and issues</i> 2. Overview of Housing Ombudsman and Complaints Handling code – <i>why we need robust complaints process and how we apply learning, definitions, maladministration findings</i> 3. EHA's Formal Complaints Service – <i>overview of review of recent changes as a result of new regulation</i> 4. Document review – <i>standard correspondence and information for complainants</i> 5. Anonymised case study – <i>focus on customer journey, information provided and communication throughout process</i>

Engagement summary:		
	Possible participants	Actual participants and response rate
Stage 1:		
Initial satisfaction survey – <i>direct to tenants who raised formal complaints since new process introduced, which are now closed</i>	13	1 anonymous (7.7%)
Initial perception survey – <i>included in Viewpoint (August 2024)</i>	1,510 + 135 (MHA)	15 (0.8%)
Initial perception survey – <i>EHA Tenant Opinion Panel</i>	177 (included in above group)	

<i>Liaison with Assisted living scheme officers to ensure tenants who required support could contribute</i>		
Stage 2:		
Review of all survey results – <i>identifying key themes and issues</i>	12	6
Overview of Housing Ombudsman and Complaints Handling code – <i>why we need robust complaints process and how we apply learning, definitions, maladministration findings</i>	12	5
EHA's Formal Complaints Service – <i>overview of review of recent changes as a result of new regulation</i>	12	5
Document review – <i>standard correspondence and information for complainants</i>	12	5
Anonymised case study – <i>focus on customer journey, information provided and communication throughout process</i>	12	5

Initially we received responses from 16 of our tenants (representing 0.8% of our 1982 of our households). Of these responses, 14 indicated they were interested in joining the Taskforce; 12 of these were selected as a good cross section to represent our tenants. Ultimately, 6 tenants took part in our Taskforce, sharing their views in a number of different ways – an overall tenant representation of 0.15%.

Unfortunately, only one of our recent complainants responded to the survey, and none chose to join the Taskforce.

One participant was unable to take part in the first workshop, and another was unable to continue with the second workshop due to sudden ill health.

Complaints – Tenants' Workshop 10th September *(3 attendees in person, 2 online)*

Session overview:

- Review of all survey results – *identifying key themes and issues*
- Overview of Housing Ombudsman and Complaints Handling code – *why we need robust complaints process and how we apply learning, definitions, maladministration findings*

Complaints – Follow up Workshop 24th September 2024 *(4 attendees in person, 1 via telephone)*

Session overview:

- EHA's Formal Complaints Service – *overview of review of recent changes as a result of new regulation*

- Document review – *standard correspondence and information for complainants*
- Anonymised case study – *focus on customer journey, information provided and communication throughout process*

Case Study

Complaint ref: 888341 – Delays with heating repair and replacement heating system, covering three areas:

- Repair – no heating, awaiting replacement system
- Delay - time taken to resolve ongoing heating issue
- Communication – around repair, and around reimbursement required for use of alternative heating

The panel reviewed all of the relating correspondence independently. They agreed with the outcome of the complaint and the way the complaint was managed.

Additional strengths/ weaknesses are included in the summary of findings below.

Summary of findings

Strengths:

- The initial survey results indicate that tenant's service requests are usually resolved by working with EHA, without the need to make a Formal Complaint
- 100% of respondents believe it is important for tenants to raise their concerns with us, indicating that the 'message is getting through'
- All complaints are investigated by an independent officer to ensure partiality and improve consistency across all Formal Complaints
- Complaints communication is consistent and comprehensive with clear subheadings, timescales and planned outcomes
- Members felt it was positive that tenants' circumstances are considered when dealing with issues, and measures are in place to accommodate vulnerabilities – for example provision of fan heaters and ability to contribute to any additional costs incurred (regular top up payments for those on pre-payment meters) where required
- Focus of new complaints process is around learning from complaints and making relevant changes to ensure required changes are embedded, to avoid repeat complaints
- The majority of complaints documentation is shared via email to reduce postage cost and increase efficiencies, with letters posted where required

Weaknesses:

- The role 'Complaints Officer' seems to promote negativity (i.e. the association receives so many complaints, we've had to employ an officer to manage the issue)
- Although over 70% of respondents correctly identified the current definition of a formal complaint, there is still some confusion – some descriptions relate to service requests and anti-social behaviour
- Although 88% of respondents said that they had been unhappy with our services, only 44% of those had ever made a Formal Complaint. Of those, 40% stated they didn't feel it would make a difference (*others had resolved the issue before reaching the complaint stage*)
- Compensation figures in the case study reviewed, could be displayed more clearly around award, and sums already paid
- The Taskforce recognises that we aim to deliver tailored services to meet more vulnerable tenants' needs. However, in the case study reviewed, additional measures could have been taken to relieve potential financial hardship caused by provision of electric fan heaters though regular reimbursement. The Taskforce therefore felt it is important to further promote available measures with colleagues and customers, to improve consistency of service.

Focus on Repairs: although the focus of this report is our EHA's Formal Complaints Process, we acknowledge that the majority of complaints received relate to the repairs service – 64% of total complaints received from 1 April 24 to end September 24.

As well as in internal process review, we are working to form a 'Repairs Advisory Panel' as part of EHA's Tenant Engagement Strategy. Their aim will be to provide direct feedback and recommendation to our Repairs Manager, supported by the Engagement and Insight Officer. Recruitment to the panel will begin in November 2024 through consultation around the Association's Repairs and Maintenance Policy.

The next Scrutiny Taskforce area planned for early 2025 is set to cover EHA's repairs service – we anticipate that our newly formed Repairs Panel's work will begin by reviewing an identified area of our repairs service within our existing Scrutiny Taskforce processes.

Direct Customer feedback

"If you are unaware of any concerns, no matter how small or large, with the system in place, how can you make improvements."

"...people should be able to feel supported and not afraid that they will be penalised should they complain"

"We got in touch about damp in flat [...] and it was rectified fast, and very well and they gave us plenty of feedback and support, so a formal complaint wasn't necessary. When we flag up any issues they are rectified really well."

"If the management are not aware of a problem they will not be able to resolve it".

"often what's more important is how you deal with the complaint, rather than action which caused the complaint itself"

"... [it's also important to give] your staff the praise that people have said about them, when they do a brilliant job. Letting them know when positive praise has been said too."

Recommendations

1. **Review Complaints Officer job title** to reframe as a positive role, representing customer satisfaction – suggestion: 'Satisfaction Officer'
2. **Further clarification/ promotion of Housing Ombudsman definition of Formal Complaints** to ensure greater understanding around processes for resolution, differentiating between requests for service, follow up requests, anti-social behaviour complaints and customer feedback
3. **Establish complaint handling satisfaction survey** to ensure real-time satisfaction with EHA's complaints handling process, once all follow up actions are complete; allowing any issues with our process to be resolved in a timely manner
4. **Further promote value of tenants of providing feedback** showing positive service changes as a result, making improvements for all tenants
5. **Increased support for vulnerable tenants'** further consideration of tenants' needs throughout all service failures – for example flexible reimbursement, partnership work with other services. One suggestion – could tenants register as a 'Vulnerable Tenant' via MyAccount?
6. **Improve clarity around financial recompense** – review layout of compensation

figures, to clarify compensation already paid, compensation outstanding and total figure awarded

- 7. Promote positive feedback and provide support for staff and colleagues –**
share positive feedback and compliments with the same level of importance as complaints, and ensure staff wellbeing through provision of mental health training and support

Fairness and respect

To ensure fairness and respect for all task force participants, we established preferred communication methods, working with tenants to establish appointments for engagement which suited them.

At the end of the investigation, the Task Force were asked whether they would take part in the process again. All participants said that they would.

Equality Diversity and Inclusion

Throughout this process we have provided accessible support, to meet the diverse needs of our tenants, allowing a cross section of tenants to scrutinise this service. Opportunities to take part included:

- Online surveys
- Onsite interviews
- In person interviews
- Telephone interviews
- Online sessions / meetings
- Out of hours appointments

SAP review summary and signoff

On 16th October, the Scrutiny Audit Panel spent some time discussing the document and came to the following conclusion.

We found it very comprehensive and informative. We also feel it covers all aspects of what can be a sensitive subject.

It is an easy to understand document, which is essential if tenants and staff are to be aware of how complaints are progressed and concluded within the parameters of current legislation. It also demonstrates that EHA are continuing their policy of being open and honest when dealing with tenants.

Panel members reviewed the report against the Scrutiny Audit Checklist, and are satisfied that the methodology and final document meet all necessary requirements.

May we also say well to the team who produced the document!

,
Chair, EHA Scrutiny Audit Panel

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

Recommendation	Action Lead	Management response	Agreed timescale
1. Review Complaints Officer job title <i>to reframe as a positive role, representing customer satisfaction – suggestion: ‘Satisfaction Officer’</i>	CSM/ CO/ HR	Agreed - the current title can come across as negative opposed to encouraging feedback and developing positive relationships with our customers. CSM & CO to work with HR re potential role name change and consider suitable alternative titles.	31/01/2025
2. Further clarification/ promotion of Housing Ombudsman definition of Formal Complaints <i>to ensure greater understanding around processes for resolution, differentiating between requests for service, follow up requests, anti-social behaviour complaints and customer feedback</i>	CSM/ CO/ EIO	Customer Advisor team (who take the majority of initial calls/queries) to spend a little more time with the customer to ensure that they are aware of our process for dealing with: • New service requests • Dissatisfaction with a service already provided We also plan to: • Publicise via website/regular articles in Viewpoint – Already commenced • Dedicating time to raise awareness during the sign-up process – will be complete by Dec • Hold a Complaints CHAT session for all staff ensuring that they can all confidently deliver this message to our customers raising awareness	31/01/2025 Underway 31/12/2024 31/12/2024
3. Establish complaint handling satisfaction survey <i>to ensure real-time satisfaction with EHA’s complaints handling process, once all</i>	CSM/ CO/ EIO	Agreed. Currently in process of developing satisfaction Survey with Complaints Taskforce. Survey will be sent to all complainants once the	31/01/2025

<i>follow up actions are complete; allowing any issues with our process to be resolved in a timely manner</i>		complaint has been formally closed and the response letter sent.	
4. Further promote value of tenants of providing feedback <i>showing positive service changes as a result, making improvements for all tenants</i>	CSM/ CO/ EIO	Agreed. • EIO to develop 6-monthly 'Tenants Voice' document to showcase service improvements through engagement & Formal Complaints actions • Increase publicity via Viewpoint and Website – currently use Viewpoint to promote changes made by FC's • Use our FC response letters to demonstrate how we intend to implement changes following a formal complaint – this will commence with immediate effect	31/03/2025 Underway Underway
5. Increased support for vulnerable tenants' <i>further consideration of tenants' needs throughout all service failures – for example flexible reimbursement, partnership work with other services. One suggestion – could tenants register as a 'Vulnerable Tenant' via MyAccount?</i>	CSM/ CO/ EIO	Agreed. CHAT session with all staff/ internal intranet and team meetings to: • Raise awareness amongst staff of all the options available to meet the individual needs of our customers, in addition we need to encourage a culture or "don't just say no" but to say "let me discuss that with a colleague and get back to you" so we are doing all we can to (where possible) meet the needs of the tenant. • Encourage staff to update orchard with individual requests/requirements to meet individual needs as soon as they become aware of them • Ensure that this information is being shared appropriately with our contractors	31/01/2025 Underway Underway

6. Improve clarity around financial recompense – <i>review layout of compensation figures, to clarify compensation already paid, compensation outstanding and total figure awarded</i>	CSM/ CO	Agreed. We will amend our standard letter responses to improve clarity when compensation/service failure payments are being made. Ensuring that this information does not get lost in the text of a letter but also to provide a clear table setting out details clearly.	Immediate effect - 30/10/2024
7. Promote positive feedback and provide support for staff and colleagues – <i>share positive feedback and compliments with the same level of importance as complaints, and ensure staff wellbeing through provision of mental health training and support</i>	CSM/ HR	Agreed. Compliments are shared with recipients by managers – to increase awareness and consistency - item to be discussed at Management Team meeting 23/10/2024 A selection of compliments shared within Viewpoint, bi-monthly • We have three Mental Health First Aid champions at EHA. • As part of the People and Organisational Development Strategy, HR to improve mental health and wellbeing of staff - HR to carry review of staff who have taken part in Mental Health First Aid training and increase participation • HR to action quarterly promotion of Employee Assistance Programme	Ongoing 23/10/2025 31/03/2025 31/03/2025 31/03/2025