

Complaints and service improvement: Annual report 2024



Foreword

By Andrew Hall, Cottsway Board Chair

Customer satisfaction is vital to everyone at Cottsway. Services are constantly reviewed, and customers are asked for feedback to help us improve.

While we want to get things right first time, sometimes the service we provide falls below the standard our customers expect, and we encourage customers to tell us if this happens.

We take all complaints and feedback very seriously and we fully support the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, which became statutory on 1 April 2024 and sets out good practice in responding to complaints effectively and fairly.

We have been working hard to ensure we have followed the Code since it was first introduced in 2020 and continually assess ourselves against it. This first Complaints and service improvement: Annual report details our latest self-assessment as well as insight and analysis of our performance during 2023-24.

The Report has been fully discussed and endorsed by Cottsway's Board, as well as by our internal Customer Committee consisting of three Non-Executive Board Members and Cottsway's Deputy Chief Executive (who has responsibility for operations) and our Customer Scrutiny Group (made up of customers who scrutinise our work and make recommendations for improvement).



We are pleased to see that the target for the timescale for complaint responses was exceeded, with 100% of complaints responded to within time each month apart from one month.

For an organisation of Cottsway's size – with more than 12,500 customers – and when considering the active promotion to customers about how to complain (including a wide variety of contact methods), it is encouraging to see that the total number of complaints escalated to the Housing Ombudsman stands at five. However, we are not complacent, and the examples shown in the report of changes made in response to complaints and feedback show the commitment to continually listening, learning, and improving.

We are pleased to publish this report so that our customers and stakeholders can be fully informed of the work we do to address complaints in line with the Code.

1. Introduction

The Complaint Handling Code became statutory on 1 April 2024. As part of the legislated changes, landlords are required to produce an annual complaints performance and service improvement report for scrutiny and challenge to their governing body. This report provides the Committee with analysis of performance over the last year including improvements made as a result of feedback. This report also includes the separate annual self-assessment against the Code to ensure the complaint handling policy remains in line with its requirements.

2. Complaint handling performance

Complaint volumes

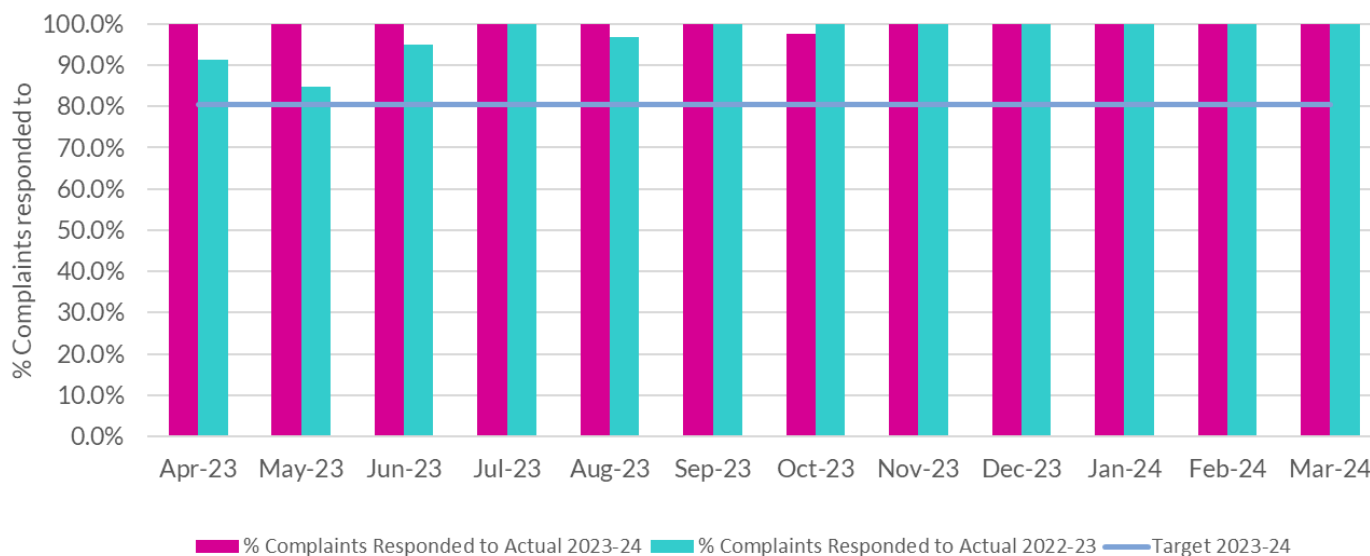
Our customer service team understand the need to proactively put things right at the earliest opportunity and will look to resolve matters in the most appropriate and efficient way for our customers. We monitor the numbers of complaints through our key performance indicator (KPI) reporting mechanisms relative to the size of the organisation including timeliness of responses.

Month	Feedback only	Feedback with investigation	Stage 1	Stage 2
April 2023	10	10	4	0
May 2023	7	19	6	2
June 2023	7	18	3	2
July 2023	9	6	4	0
August 2023	5	11	7	0
September 2023	5	13	2	2
October 2023	6	13	3	2
November 2023	4	12	2	0
December 2023	4	6	0	0
January 2024	6	16	1	0
February 2024	15	28	3	1
March 2024	6	13	7	0
Totals	84	165	42	9

Complaint handling performance

We measure our response times for complaints, and as can be seen below, other than in October, 100% of all complaints were responded to in the timescales, an improvement on last year's performance. In the case where we did not reach 100%, communication with the customer was maintained.

% complaints responded to within timescale



Customer satisfaction (transactional)

We receive regular performance comparison analysis from Housemark our benchmarking partner. Customer satisfaction with the complaints service has largely tracked in line with the rest of the sector, as organisations like Cottsway have adapted to changes introduced by the Complaint Handling Code in 2020. Performance is monitored closely through our KPI reporting mechanisms, and exceptions reporting highlighted where corrective action is needed.

Year	Complaint overall	Easy to deal with	Outcome of complaint	Response rate
2019-20	50%	43%	43%	44
2020-21	44%	53%	44%	61
2021-22	58%	67%	60%	81
2022-23	47%	51%	36%	81
2023-24	38%	54%	35%	59

3. Housing Ombudsman determinations

From time-to-time our customers remain dissatisfied with the outcome to their complaint investigation and are provided with information to take the matter forward to the Housing Ombudsman service should they wish. In the last 12 months, we have received five determinations made by the Housing Ombudsman. Where recommendations or orders are made, these are initiated by the Customer Service Manager for completion.

Period 2023-24	Case ref:	Housing Ombudsman determination	Action
Apr – June	Housing Ombudsman case ID: 202211638	No maladministration was found against Cottsway, and no recommendations.	Not applicable.
July – Sept	Housing Ombudsman case ID: 202219718	No maladministration was found against Cottsway. Recommendation for better record keeping, particularly when face-to-face contact is made with customers	Complete. Process for capturing case notes within Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system is available. Reminder sent to Housing Teams to ensure clear records are made of all communications with customers.
Oct – Dec	Housing Ombudsman case ID: 202209115	No maladministration was found against Cottsway, recommendations that Cottsway revisit the Spotlight on noise report to ensure that our current policy complies with the Housing Ombudsman recommendations which has been amended since this complaint was first reviewed.	Complete. The anti-social behaviour (ASB) policy was updated to reflect current practices and recommendations shared with the Neighbourhood Housing Manager and customer service team.
	Housing Ombudsman case ID: 202123463	No maladministration was found against Cottsway. However, a service failure was identified when the customer reported water quality concerns and the Housing Ombudsman requested that Cottsway apologise to the customer for this and pay £100 compensation to the customer.	Complete. Compensation paid immediately to the customer and apology given. Report shared with the Assets Team. Customer Services Manager contacted the Housing Ombudsman to request a review of the determination specifically the following recommendations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review its policy position in respect of reports of water quality concerns to effectively investigate reports and/or signpost residents to relevant services. Review its policy position in respect of cyclical maintenance works to the water pipes. Review upheld their original determination.

Period 2023-24	Case ref:	Housing Ombudsman determination	Action
Jan – Mar	Housing Ombudsman case ID: 202315431	<p>Complaint failure order issued. Failure to communicate with the customer and explain why a complaint was not accepted under our complaints policy. Failure to provide information in the timescales the Housing Ombudsman set out.</p> <p>Order:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue a stage 1 complaint to the customer in line with the complaint handling code either accepting or declining the complaint. • Provide a copy of the response to the Housing Ombudsman. 	<p>Cottsway requested a review of the decision on the basis there were ongoing legal proceedings which would result in this case falling outside of policy. In addition, our solicitor had written to the customer regarding the same matter.</p> <p>Outcome to review: Not upheld.</p> <p>Stage 1 case opened and closed. Apology offered and explanation given as to why this case was not considered under the complaints policy and access to the Housing ombudsman service offered.</p>

Alix Green, Board Member and Customer Committee Member

Our Board introduced a Customer Committee in June 2023 to help ensure that Cottsway was ready to embrace the changes that came into place with the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 and still emerging Regulator of Social Housing Consumer Standards that are part of this.

Working alongside Cottsway's Deputy Chief Executive, we monitor everything customer related, including customer satisfaction and all complaints received each quarter. Having this committee in place guarantees the Board has oversight and assurance on the service we deliver to our

customers and demonstrates how seriously we take these matters.

Satisfaction results are published quarterly by Cottsway and can be viewed at: www.cottsway.co.uk/TSM

We welcome this new annual Report – in addition to the satisfaction measures that are regularly reported - as it clearly sets out the complaints and customer feedback that Cottsway has received in the past year and, importantly, the action that has been taken to bring about improvement.

While largely positive, there were two reoccurring themes



that our customers raised with us over the last 12 months – damp and mould and our grounds maintenance service. Action has been taken to make improvements in these areas (see Trend analysis, page 7-8) and we will continue to work to maintain and improve satisfaction where possible.

3. Compensation

We provide compensation to customers in some instances and as part of the outcome of complaint cases or in response to feedback where something may have gone wrong. These can be awarded because of a service failure and reflect any detriment caused to the customer or simply as a goodwill gesture. Our staff exercise their discretion when considering what the most appropriate remedies in a case should be, giving careful consideration to the individual circumstances of the case before awarding compensation.

In addition, the Ombudsman may ask landlords to offer redress and award compensation to the complainant which, in the Ombudsman's opinion, resolves the complaint satisfactorily. Appropriate budgets are set each year and are regularly reviewed by the Customer Service Manager.

During 2023/24 we awarded over £7k for a variety of situations in recognition of loss or inconvenience to customers, see Appendix 2.

4. Policy exclusions and escalations

Our complaints policy sets out the circumstances in which a matter will not be considered as a complaint or escalated through our complaints service. For example, a first-time request for a service; a request to open a previously concluded complaint; where legal proceedings have begun or are in place; or where the customer is raising a matter which occurred over 12 months ago.

During the last 12 months, two cases were declined for escalation. As detailed in the table on page 5-6, one case (ID: 202315431) was already subject to legal proceedings. Following the Ombudsman's review, a response was sent to the customer in line with the order explaining the reasons for exclusion.

In the second instance, the customer requested their case was escalated from a case dating back to 2021, regarding recharges of works which was responded to, and an outcome given to the customer. The case was reviewed by the Customer Service Manager and was rejected for escalation to our formal stages of complaints. We provided the customer with details of the Housing Ombudsman service for further advice.

5. Trend analysis

We capture and closely monitor what our customers are telling us about our services through the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) and transactional surveys, as well as capturing feedback from case management to understand what we could do better and importantly understand how this is impacting on our customers.

The two standout issues during last year related to reports of damp and mould during the winter period and feedback on the quality and delivery of our grounds maintenance services during the summer period.

During last winter damp and mould continued to be an ongoing concern for some customers and this in turn resulted in an uptick in the number of complaints received by the team. As previously reported, this is as a result of Cottsway communicating with our customers and encouraging households to report any concerns and generally more awareness of this topic.

Complaints were mainly centred around dissatisfaction in how long it was taking for specialised extractor fans to be installed in customers' homes and in some cases lack of follow up contact from Cottsway and a general lack of understanding of next actions.

We listened to this feedback and action has been taken including the instruction of a new supplier of extractor fans being established. In addition, a new damp and mould procedure was created and launched at the start of the year, clearly setting out what customers can expect from us and in what timeframe.

Further training for frontline staff on damp and mould was delivered during April 2024. In addition, the Assets team have provided a new set of questions to the Customer Services team to assist with the initial assessment of the enquiry. Therefore, assisting the team with obtaining more detailed information from the customer to better manage outcomes.

We also received an increase in the number of customers who expressed dissatisfaction with the service they were receiving from our grounds maintenance supplier. In view of this, several changes have been implemented by the contractors including taking on additional staff to resource up their teams, and extra quality assurance inspections. In addition, the Head of Housing and the Neighbourhood Housing Team have moved the contract review meetings to a monthly cycle to ensure matters are raised and dealt with more timely manner and complaints are responded to effectively. The Housing Team also undertake quality checks as part of their estate inspection programme to ensure compliance with standards.

Vanda White, Customer Scrutiny Group Chair

I have lived in a Cottsway home for over 10 years and I currently Chair the Scrutiny Group. We're a small group of customers who use our experiences to help Cottsway improve their services by giving residents a voice.

The Scrutiny Group fully support the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code and it is reassuring to see that Cottsway has adapted the way it works to ensure it is fully complying with the Code. My experience is that Cottsway has been very welcoming of the changes and has worked hard to ensure that customers have their voices heard.

This Report is a good summary of the year in picture when it comes to complaints and feedback, but it goes beyond this at Cottsway. As well as the new Customer Committee and our Scrutiny Group, Cottsway has a Customer Insight Group. I am part of this along with key operational managers and staff and together we regularly review the complaints and feedback received. Collectively, the Group delves into and identifies the cause of customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction and helps to ensure Cottsway learns from all experiences.

This illustrates the huge amount of effort put into complaints and feedback and



customer satisfaction, with involvement from everyone from Board level through to staff and customer volunteer level and I think this is why the level of complaints received – and particularly the number escalated – are relatively low. I welcome the transparency and honesty that this Report brings.

6. Learning outcomes during 2023-24

The Housing Ombudsman places a strong emphasis on organisations demonstrating improvements in their service delivery as a result of learning from complaints. Every quarter we publish learning on our website www.cottsway.co.uk/performance as well as providing updates in Homepage, our customer ezine. Through a lesson learnt approach, we are able to provide our customers with assurance that we listen and act on their feedback.

In addition to these learning points, the team take 'on the call' feedback from customers which is regularly communicated back to service managers to support a continuous learning culture from complaints.

Below is a selection of improvements as a result of feedback from our customers:



Following customer feedback, the termination letter sent to those who wish to end their tenancy has been amended to clearly request that the home and garden needs to be cleared of any personal belongings and rubbish before the keys are returned to Cottsway.



Follow learning from recent complaints, the electrical testing letter has been updated to include advice to customers that following the completion of an electrical test at their home, we recommend that customers should check that their electrical appliances fridge/freezer etc have been switched back on.



A customer contacted us, frustrated that the information on our website about ending a tenancy did not make it clear that any written notice sent to Cottsway must be signed by the tenant. As a result of that feedback, our website has now been updated to include this requirement.



A leaseholder was unhappy that they were unaware of the automated payment line that Cottsway offers to make payments through. All Cottsway invoices sent to leaseholders now include details about our 24/7 automated payment line and the customers personal reference number (PRN), so they no longer need to contact Customer Services to obtain their number.

7. Self-assessment 2024

The last self-assessment against the Code was undertaken in October 2023 as part of our annual review and which gained approval from this Committee. Due to the legislated changes from the 1 April 2024 all landlords are required to self-assess against the Code to ensure the policy remains in line with its requirements. The self-assessment must be returned to the Housing Ombudsman by 30 June 2024, in tandem with the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) return.

The main changes identified in this period include:

- The removal of the 'feedback with investigation stage' within our policy and procedure. This originally formed part of the investigation process effectively allowing for a 48 hour resolution period without compromising the 10-day timescale within the stage one investigation. The Code is explicit in its requirements to not allow for any other 'named' stages which may lead to confusion for customers. Our policy is now aligned with this change.
- The introduction of the word 'Service Enquiry' and a clear definition between that and a complaint has been included in our policy revision. We will continue to capture intelligence through this mechanism as feedback to enable the service to identify recurring issues and implement systemic improvements.
- We previously offered a 5-day investigation and outcome at stage 2 of our complaint service. We have adopted the 20-day resolution timeframe to bring our process in line with the Code.

Other changes include the introduction of providing an annual complaint and service improvement report to the Customer Committee, along with providing the self-assessment to the Housing Ombudsman.

In addition, we have refreshed and revised our policy and service literature in line with these changes.

Appendix 1: Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code Self-Assessment

Our latest self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code, can be read on our website at: www.cottsway.co.uk/complaints

Appendix 2: Compensation payments 2023-24

Case no.	Value	Description
CX15511	£50.00	Goodwill gesture due to delays in work being completed.
CX 15583	£121.70	Goodwill gesture due to delays with heating repair/installation.
CX 15773	£350.00	Goodwill gesture given after customer reported missing items when a third-party contractor was working at one of our homes. Matter referred to police, but no police action taken.
CX 13893	£350.00	For damaged property caused by damp and mould.
CX 13265	£749.48	Ongoing issues with the garden due to flooding and waterlogged.
CX 15783	£50.00	Contractor mistakenly cleared property from customers shed and disposed of it.
CX 14866	£30.00	Replacement water filter that was damaged by contractor.
CX 16464	£50.00	Reimbursement for oil customer had already paid for when oil heating system was removed and replaced with air source heating.
CX 15836	£100.00	Damage to flooring when assisted decorating was being completed.
CX 16102	£208.05	Operative accidentally damaged air fryer during works at customers home.
CX 16154	£100.00	To cover costs of temporary heaters.
CX 16046	£372.38	Goodwill gesture due to standard of empty property which resulted in delay of customer moving between properties.
CX 15619	£199.99	Cost of running dehumidifiers provided by Cottsway.
CX 14380	£150.00	Fridge damaged during kitchen refurbishment.
CX 16560	£165.00	Lack of communication and missed appointments.
CX 13265	£90.52	Ongoing issues with the garden due to flooding and waterlogged.
CX 17444	£579.50	Ongoing issues with the garden due to flooding and waterlogged.
CX 17115	£748.50	Delays in customers heating system being fixed have resulted in high energy costs.
CX 17136	£50.00	Empty property not clean, goodwill gesture towards the cleaning costs as property did not meet our empty homes standards.
CX 19539	£116.32	Poor communications from customer services regarding handing back the keys.
CX 15619	£95.00	Cost towards utilities while dehumidifiers were in use.
CX 19750	£100.00	Goodwill gesture due to delays in work being completed.

Case no.	Value	Description
CX 20004	£50.00	Poor communication from the contractors leading to customer becoming frustrated.
CX 20195	£5.00	Jet Rod used customer's metered water.
CX 19594	£50.00	For the delay in the developers' contractors attending in relation to fire alarm.
CX 20385	£70.00	Roof leak took 9 months to resolve, and left bedroom walls and ceiling stained.
CX 20166	£150.00	Delay in boiler repairs.
CX 20217	£100.00	Right first-time failures - work order no: 183790, 184007, 184341, 184347, 184483.
CX 20917	£116.27	Customer unhappy with various issues at the start of her tenancy.
CX 19425	£550.00	Failure to identify source of damp and mould at empty property.
CX 21143	£50.00	Goodwill gesture for inconvenience of numerous repairs and fuel costs to use a shower.
CX 20919	£250.00	Delay in repairs being completed, customer left without hot running water for a number of weeks.
CX 21744	£150.00	To cover the cost of electrical heaters while boiler was not working.
CX 21700	£200.00	Goodwill gesture for replacement of food spoiled by no electrics following electrical works.
CX 23187	£50.00	Delay in repairs being completed.
CX 23045	£50.00	Delay in response to customer.
CX 22983	£50.00	Due to fridge freezer not being switched on by Cottsway operatives after electrical testing.
Missed appointments	£360.00	This is the total compensated to customers who have raised informal feedbacks regarding missed appointments.
Total	£7113.71	

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