



Housing Complaints

Annual Report

April 2024 to March 2025

Table of Contents

Introduction

Complaints performance

Complaints by service area

How are we doing

Stage one demographics

Housing Ombudsman cases

Challenges

Improvements

Policies

Get involved

3

4 - 7

8 - 9

10

11

12 - 13

14

15 - 16

17

18

See how we are performing and how many complaints are upheld

We look at the complaint by service area, type of complaints and demographics

See how we are doing compared to other organisations

We can see what complaints have been logged with the housing ombudsman and the outcomes

See some of the challenges faced with complaint handling

We explore how we take on board complaints and the actions we take to improve our service

Details of policies created or reviewed as a result of complaints received

To ensure that high standards are reached and maintained, we need you to have your say



Introduction










We have seen a large increase in the number of complaints we receive in the past year.. This is true for almost all landlords across the country. In Sandwell, our backlog of outstanding repairs is one of the key reasons for this increase. We are confident that tenants will start to see the results of our plans to fix this over the next 12 months.

The Housing Ombudsman Service also recognises that higher complaint numbers are a sign of a complaint process that is accessible, and that tenants have trust in. However, having higher numbers of complaints is only a good thing if we are learning from the complaints that we receive and changing the way services are delivered.

The increase in complaints has meant that our response times have not been good enough. We have changed our Customer Feedback Guide to reflect the timescales set out by the Housing Ombudsman Service as well as increasing the number of officers who respond to complaints.

We are positive that these changes will see performance increase in the next 12 months.

When dealing with your complaints we aim to:

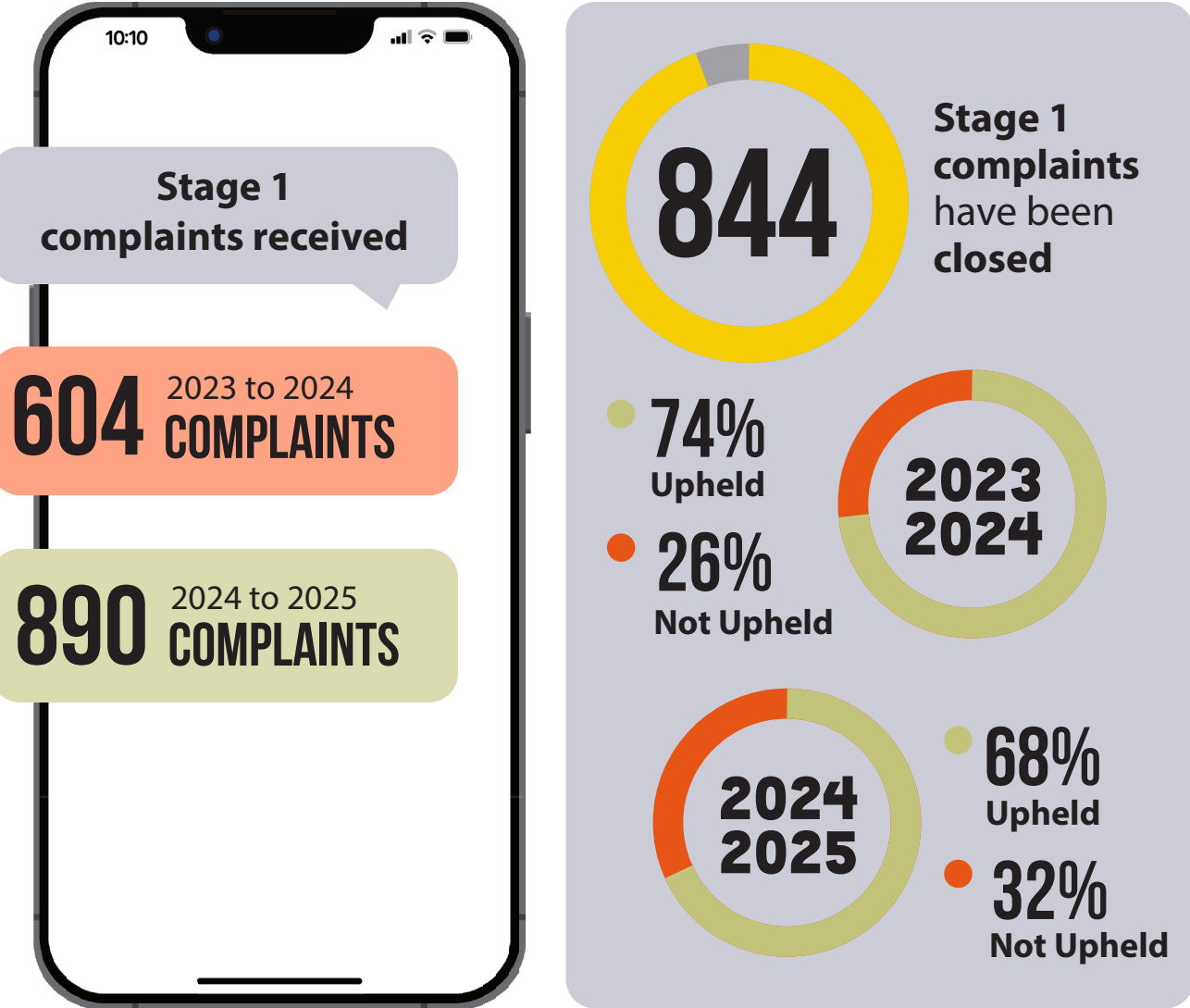
-  Provide excellent customer service
-  Provide quality communication with you
-  Advocate for you when you are unhappy with the service you have received
-  Provide responses that address all aspects of your complaints
-  Promote honest, open, communication
-  Investigate and respond to complaints on a case-by-case basis, putting you at the forefront
-  Provide you with a named, dedicated investigator and single point of contact
-  Find resolutions to your concerns
-  Take responsibility for our mistakes
-  Learn from every expression of dissatisfaction
-  Promote change and best practice, with your journey as our focus
-  Be guided by the Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code, learn from their determinations and ensure accountability when things have gone wrong
-  Approach complaints in a non-judgemental, empathetic and fair manner
-  Focus on putting things right when they have gone wrong



Complaints performance

Stage 1 complaints

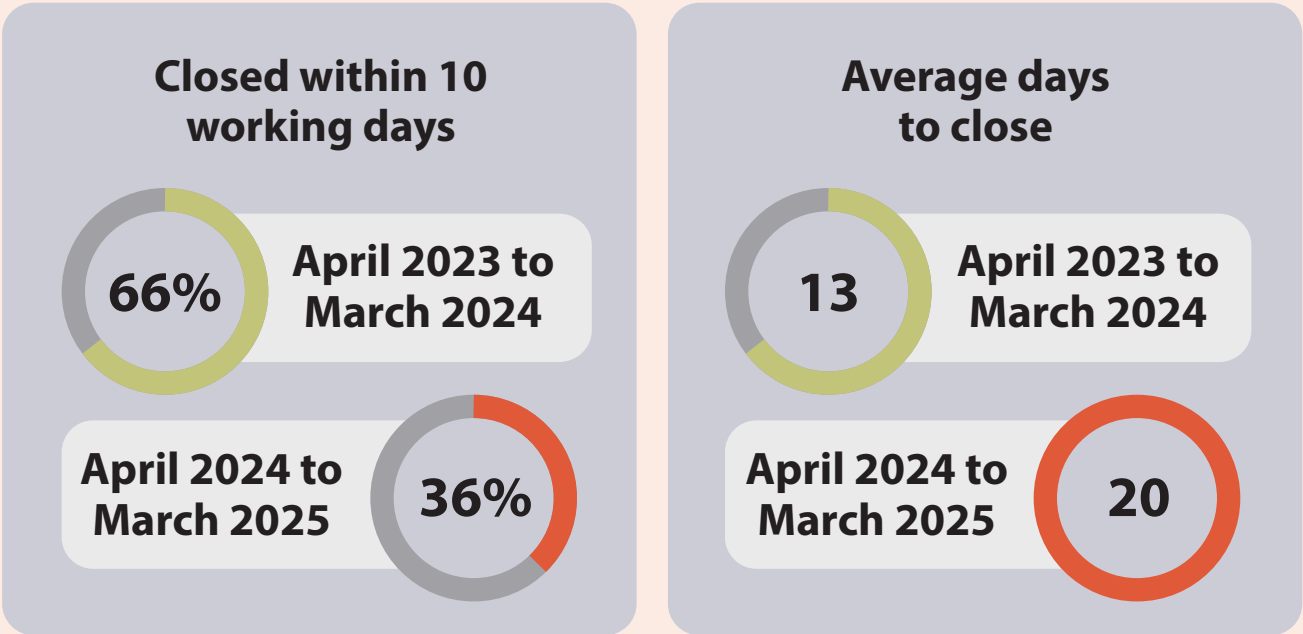
Stage 1 is the investigation stage. We will try to resolve your complaint straight away but when we can't, we will investigate and provide you with a formal response.



There are some complaints that we do not investigate, these are set out in the Housing Ombudsman Service's Complaint Handling Code.

Examples of when we would not investigate your complaint are:

- 🏠 Your complaint is about an ongoing insurance claim.
- 🏠 The issue happened more than 12 months ago.
- 🏠 There is another process for you to appeal a decision, e.g. appeals process, review or tribunal.
- 🏠 Changes to our reporting means we will be able to include details of these in our reports next year.
- 🏠 We will always explain the reasons that we are unable to investigate your complaint.



We have closed fewer complaints within 10 working days than last year, and the average days to close is much higher, this is due to the increasing number of complaints being received. Changing the guidance and increasing the number of officers who respond to your complaints means we will respond to your complaint faster and within the set timescales.

Case study

Leaking balconies

Complaint summary

A series of complaints about water leaking from balconies and flooding at a block of flats was picked up by our Housing Resolutions Team. We reviewed these cases thoroughly, and spotted that these weren't isolated incidents, but signs of a bigger issue affecting the block as a whole.

Improvements made

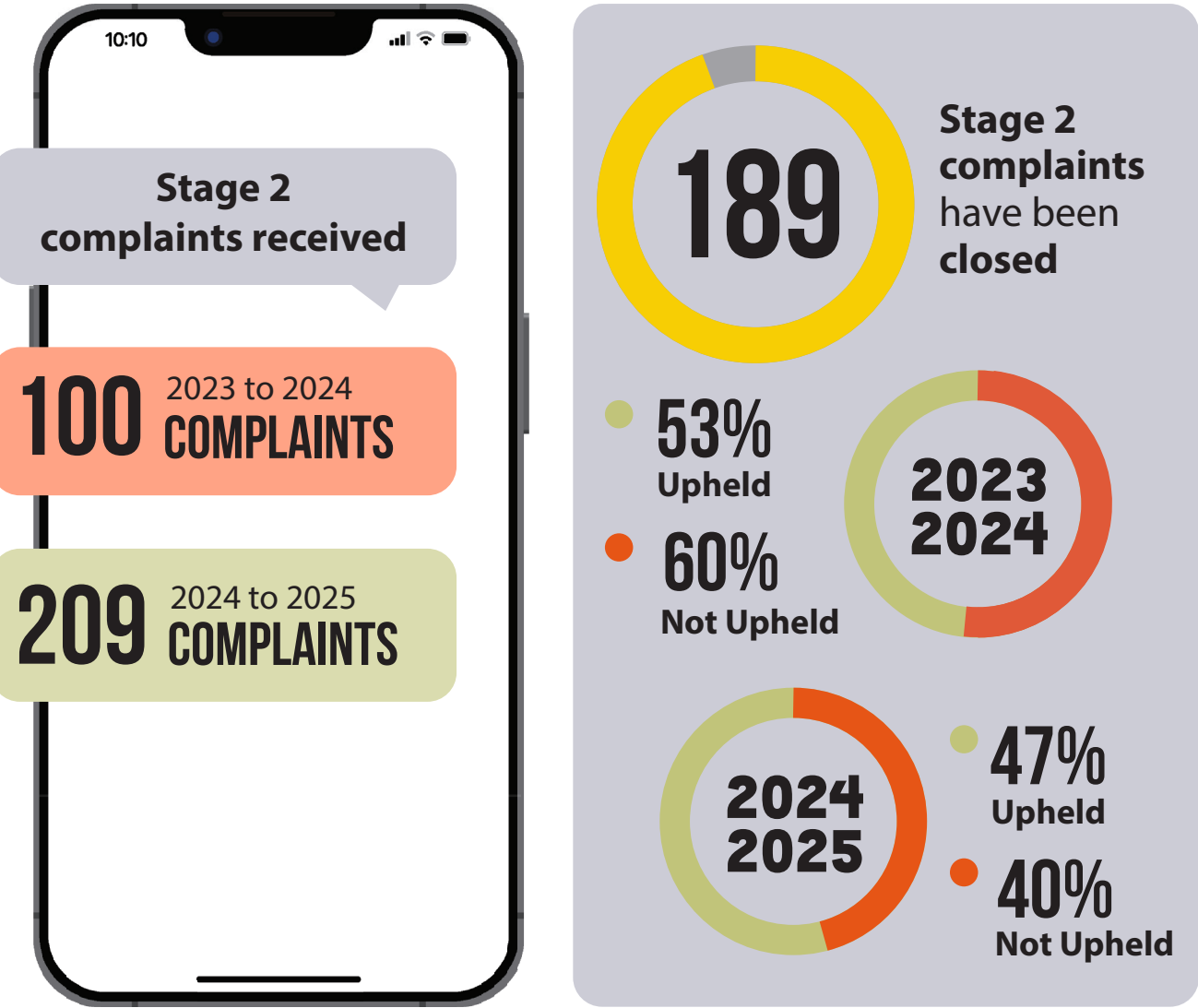
As a result of these complaints, we set up a dedicated working group to explore short-term solutions and have begun working towards a large-scale repair programme for the building. This would not have been possible if we had rushed through each complaint as a one-off and not taken the time to join the dots and start to fix the problem properly.



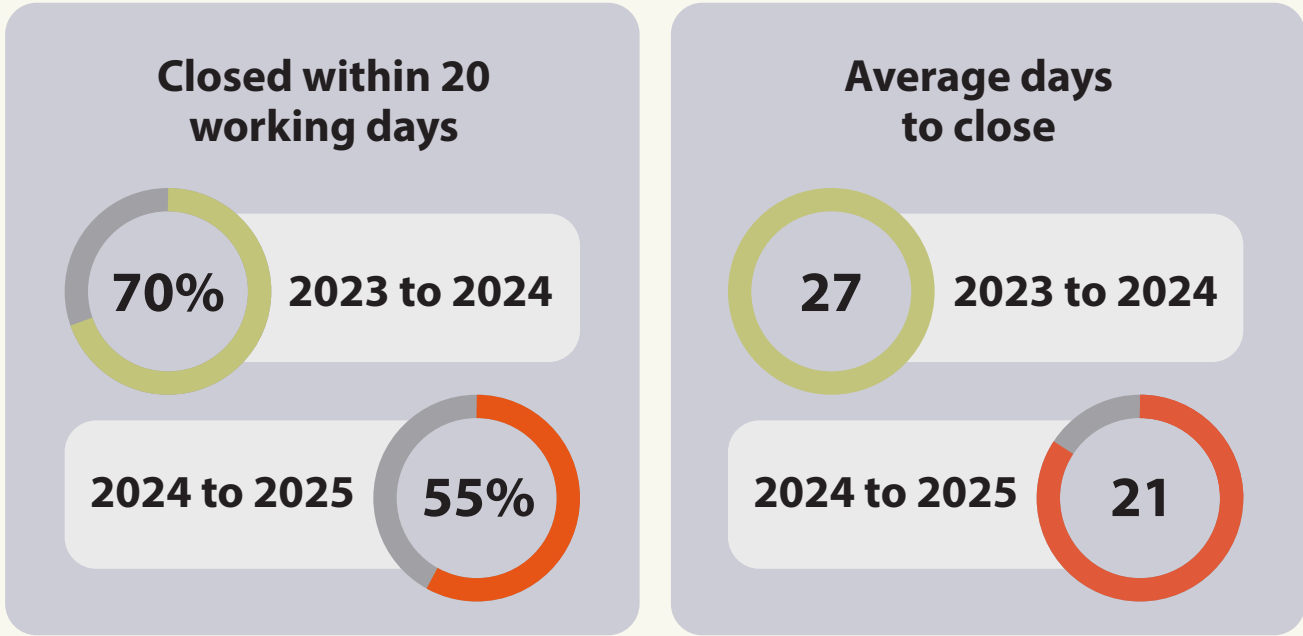
Complaints performance

Stage 2 complaints

Stage 2 is the review stage - if you are not happy with the outcome of your stage 1 complaint, you can ask that the outcome be reviewed. You will need to tell us why you were unhappy with the stage 1 response that you received and a different officer will review your stage 2 complaint.



This year, more complaints are being upheld at stage 2 compared to the previous year. Residents taking their complaint to stage 2 tells us that there were still issues with our communication or the resolution to the complaint at stage 1. The resolutions to some of the stage 1 complaints have been impacted by the repairs backlog. This is something that we are already aware of, and we will continue to monitor to identify further improvements needed with our service, beyond just the repairs issues.



Our average response time is still above the 20 working days set by the Housing Ombudsman, meaning the time it takes for you to receive a response is longer than it should be. The below example details some of the things we are already doing to address the timing and quality of responses that you receive.

Case study

Inconsistent complaint responses

Complaint summary

Our responses to complaints have been inconsistent depending on who provided the response.

Improvements made

To address this, a Complaints Handling Guide has been created and shared with all teams who investigate and respond to your complaint. The guide details best practice that should be used, which will help ensure you always receive a quality service and resolution to your concerns. These teams have also received training on the handling of complaints. We are also increasing the capacity of our Housing Resolutions Team to ensure more consistent responses, the team will be increasing from five officers to ten.



Complaints by service area

Stage 1 complaints

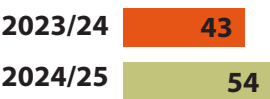
Asset Management and Improvement



Tenancy and Estate Management



Other



There has been a significant increase in stage 1 complaints for Asset Management and Improvement (repairs). This increase is due to the backlog of repairs and dissatisfaction with repairs timescales.

Stage 2 complaints

Asset Management and Improvement



Tenancy and Estate Management



Other

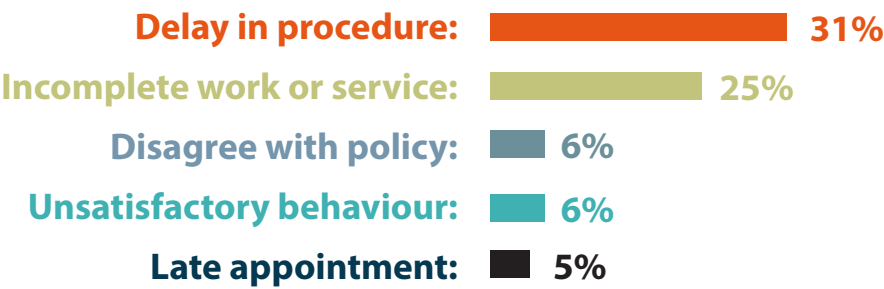


The repairs backlog is also increasing the number of stage 2 complaints received for Asset Management and Improvement (repairs). We are confident that the contractor being appointed to carry out the back log in your repairs will help us to improve the quality of the service, leading to a better experience for you.

Stage 1 complaints - Top 5 reasons

Asset Management and Improvement

Repairs and maintenance is carried out by our Asset Management and Improvement service. They ensure your safety, security and comfort by providing well-maintained and high-quality homes and communal areas. Here are the top five reasons people complaints about Asset Management and Improvement:



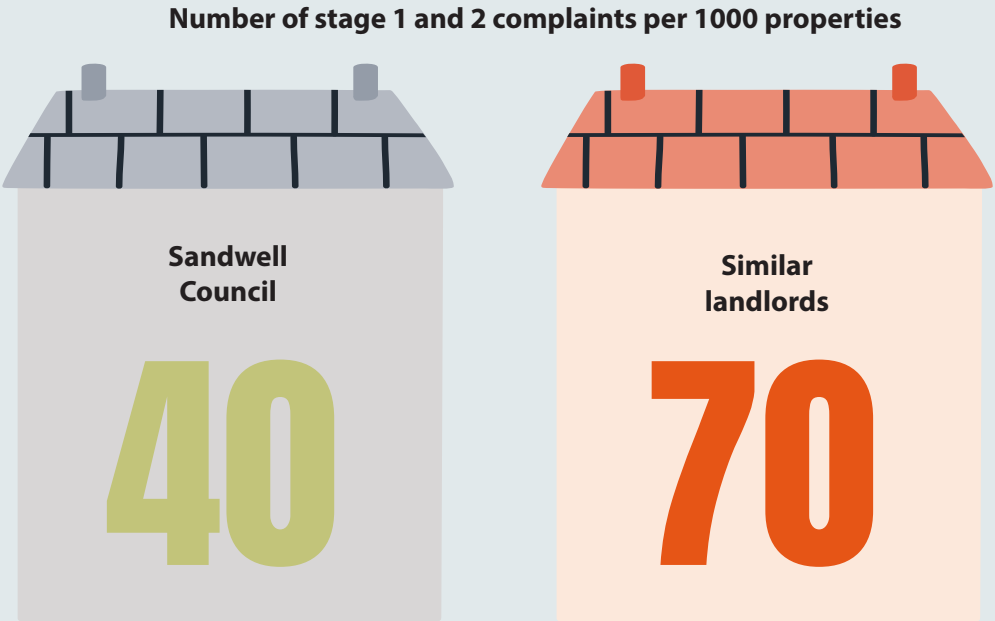
Stage 2 complaints - Top 5 reasons Tenancy and Estate Management

Tenancy and Estate Management services help you live in your home and community, and manage surrounding housing areas. This service includes housing officers, caretakers and cleaners. Here are the top five reasons people complaints about Asset Management and Improvement:

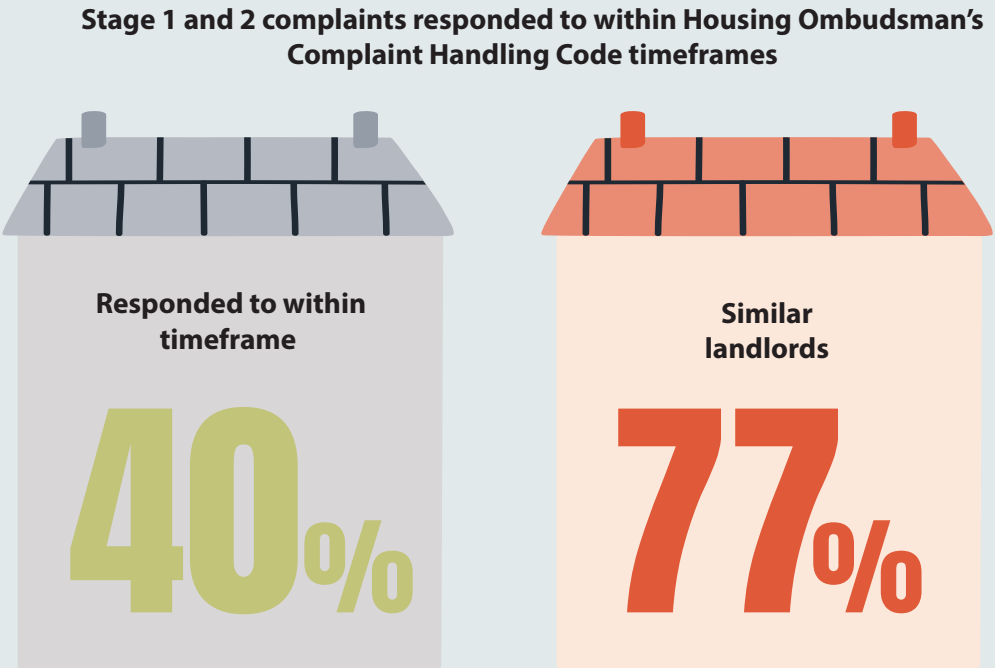


How are we doing?

It's helpful for us to see how we are doing compared with similar organisations.

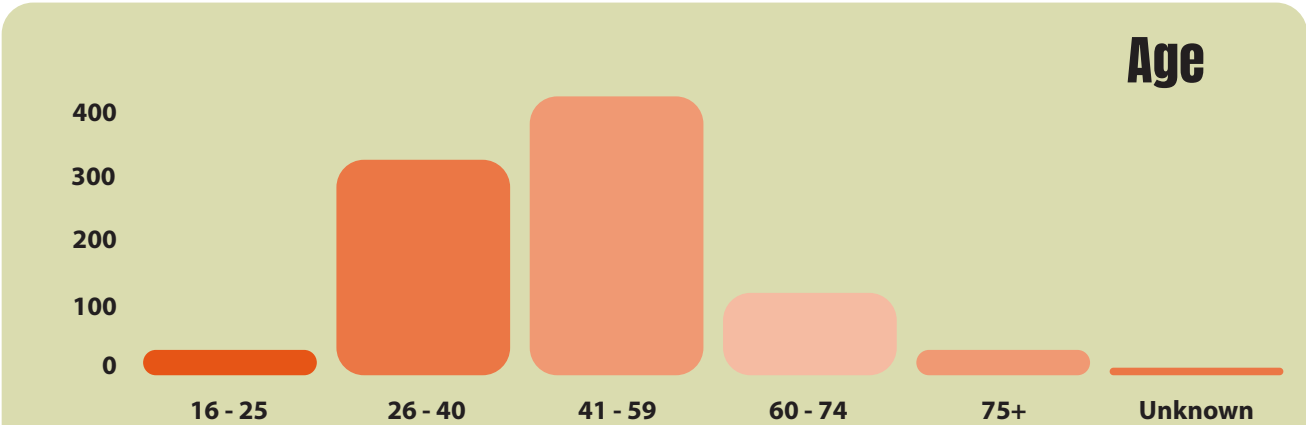
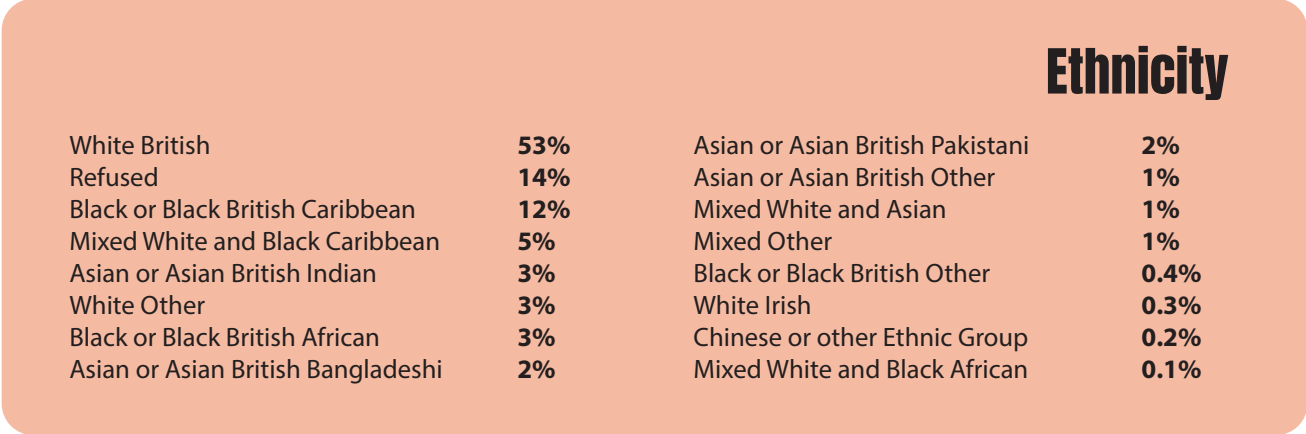


This shows that we received fewer complaints than similar landlords. The most likely reason for this is that we are not always logging a formal complaint when we should be doing so.



Changes to the way we handle complaints means that we expect our performance to increase next year.

Stage 1 demographics



Housing Ombudsman cases

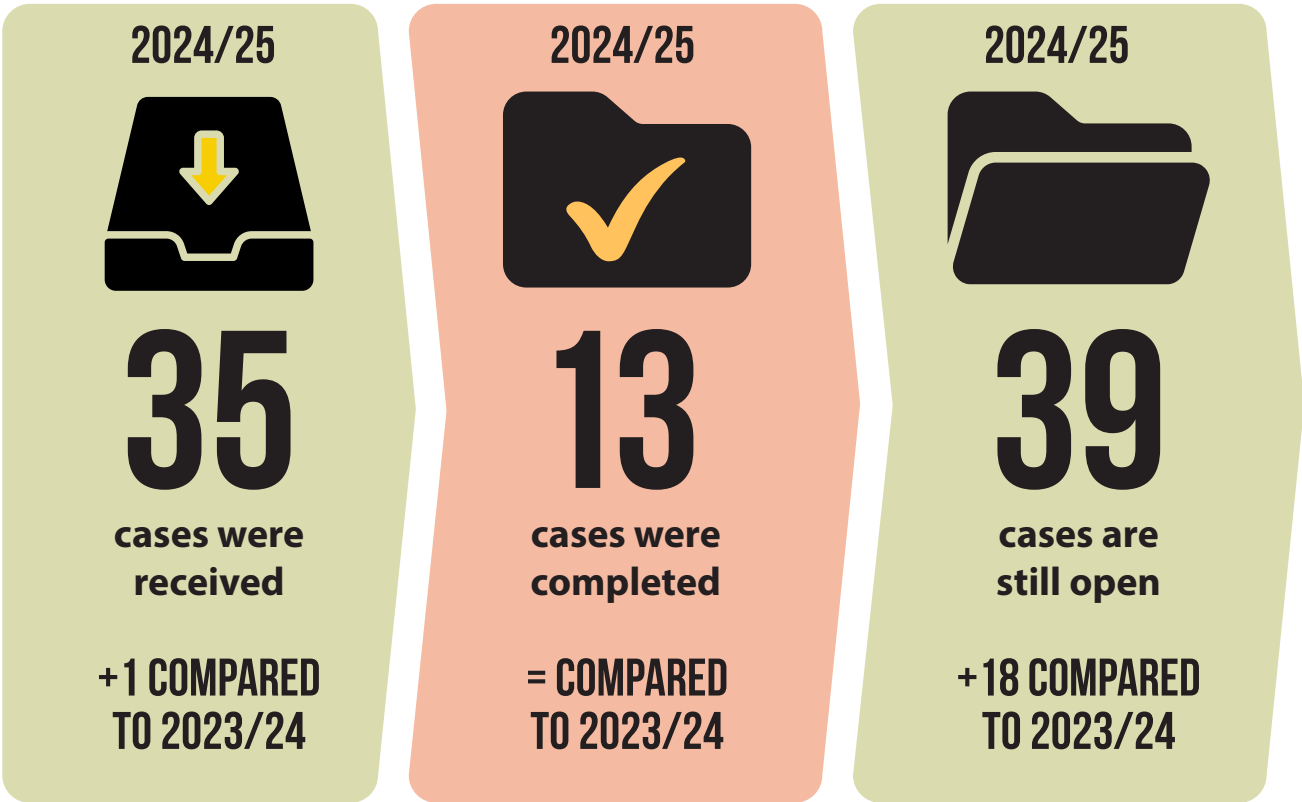
The Housing Ombudsman Service is an independent, impartial, and free service for social housing residents.

They make the final decision on disputes between residents and landlords that are registered members of its scheme - including tenants and leaseholders of social landlords.

The Ombudsman can only consider a complaint for investigation where they are satisfied that the complaint issues have been raised and investigated

by a landlord through its dedicated complaint procedure and provided a final response.

They will also consider a complaint where they are satisfied that the resident has raised the issues and there has been failure by the landlord in its complaint handling.



*The length of time it takes the Ombudsman to investigate cases means they may not always be received and closed within the same financial year.



Outcomes

The Ombudsman can issue determinations and / or actions following their investigations.

Determinations

Following investigations, the Ombudsman can find that there has been maladministration. This means the landlord has failed to do something, done something it shouldn't have or has delayed unreasonably.

A total of 14 maladministration determinations were received for closed cases. Up two on previous year.

4	Maladministration for complaint handling
4	Maladministration for handling of repairs
2	Maladministration for handling of damp and mould
1	Maladministration for handling of ASB
1	Maladministration for record keeping
1	Maladministration for handling of boundary issue
1	Maladministration for information provided on sound proofing

Service failure

A total of five service failure determinations were received for closed cases.

2	Service failure for complaint handling
1	Service failure for record keeping
1	Service failure for damage caused by contractor
1	Service failure for handling of noise nuisance

Actions

The Ombudsman can also issue actions that the landlord must complete to prevent similar future failings.

A total of 18 actions were given, including eight compensation awards for closed cases.

1	Provide advice
3	Inspection/survey
3	Review process
1	Share findings
2	Apology
Total compensation paid - £7498	

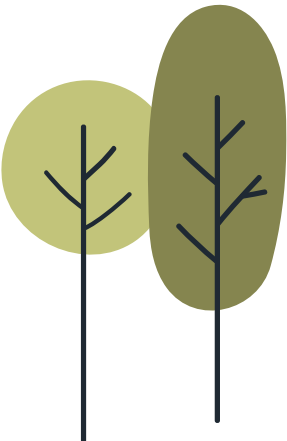


Challenges

We are committed to being open and honest about the challenges we face that impact on the service we provide to you and the information that we share.

Below are some of the issues and how we are working to improve on them.

Challenge	What we're doing
Complaints are seen as a negative rather than an opportunity to improve which results in fewer complaints being logged.	We are encouraging a change in culture among officers, promoting the view that complaints are a valuable insight for improvement by delivering training and sharing good practice guidance. As a result, we expect to see complaint numbers increase further.
Responses have been inconsistent dependent on the service area investigating your complaint.	Training and guidance has been provided to all officers who handle complaints. We are increasing the capacity of the Housing Resolution Team to pick up more complaints across the service. The team will have an additional five officers.
Our housing system does not allow accurate recording and reporting of complaint details.	The system has been improved to capture more detail and the reporting is being improved to show this detail.
Our housing system does not allow recording of your dissatisfaction when you do not wish to make a formal complaint.	It is important for us to know when you are not happy with a service you have received, if you do not want to make a formal complaint. We are working on ways that we can record this on our housing system.
How to manage the increasing number of complaints being logged.	The Housing Resolution Team is being increased to cover the growing demand for complaints.

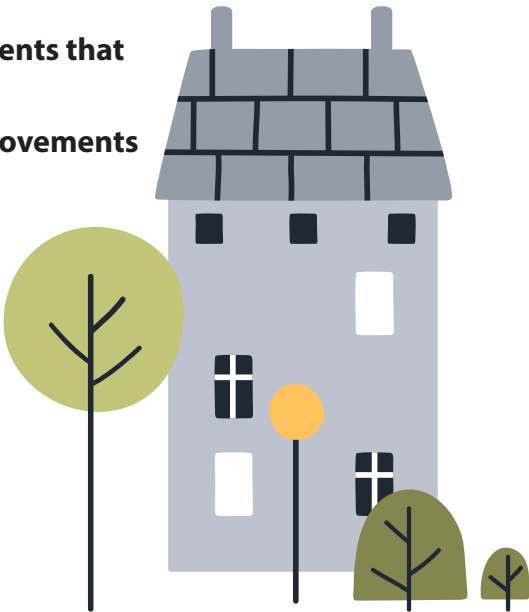


Improvements

We see complaints as an opportunity to learn lessons and drive continuous improvement. We will acknowledge faults when they occur and take responsibility for putting things right and avoiding recurrence.

Improvement	Benefit
We aim to provide digital receipts to residents following visits to specify agreed repair works.	Providing you with a digital receipt of all repair works agreed, will ensure that there is a clear understanding of what was agreed during a visit, taking away the need for clarification later.
We will provide complaint handling training for all officers that have involvement with complaints.	Training will ensure improved investigations, responses and resolutions for residents.
We have improved how we assess and record the needs of vulnerable residents.	Holding the correct information will allow us to assess the impact on individuals and provide a more personal service.
We will provide clear and accurate repairs scheduling information on our website. A new Repairs Policy is now in place. Training will be organised for all affected staff including complaint handlers and the policy will be available for tenants.	You will have a clearer understanding of the different timescales for each type of repair.
Staff taking your calls will check your contact information each time you contact us.	Having the correct contact details for you will ensure we are able to contact you to provide updates on your enquiries.

To keep a track of our progress on the improvements that have been identified visit www.sandwell.gov.uk/housing-complaints-improvements



8. Improvements

We have a Tenant Audit Group who test different services and provide us with an independent tenant perspective.

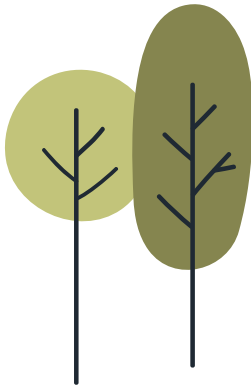
The Tenant Audit Group carried out an audit of the complaints process in 2024. The audit included:

- Reviewing information available on the Sandwell Council website
- Reviewing how complaints are handled when received
- Surveying residents who have been through the complaints process
- Meeting with a residents focus group
- Reviewing self-assessment and performance information

The group made a number of recommendations that have contributed to the ongoing improvements of how we handle your complaints. Below are some of the recommendations made.

Recommendation	Update
Include a tab for Housing/repair complaint on the "please select your reason for contacting us".	Complete.
If the tenant decides to use a Councillor on their behalf it should be recorded as a complaint not an enquiry.	Work has started to log and track dissatisfaction reported via elected members.
Work needs to be done to increase the ease of using both the telephone and MySandwell portal to report complaints thereby increasing the levels of satisfaction.	Training has been rolled out regarding recording dissatisfaction which makes it easier for residents to submit a complaint.
All tenants should be treated in a fair and respectful way, identify if there is a training need.	Training has been delivered to call handlers and plans are underway to deliver this to other frontline officers.

If you would like more detail on this audit or any others that the group have completed, please call Sandwell Council on 0121 569 2537



Policies

One of the possible outcomes of a complaint is the creation or reviewing of a policy. Below are details of two new policies that were put in place in financial year 2024 to 2025.

Complaints Compensation Policy

Historically we have not given enough consideration to compensation as a way of putting things right for our residents, particularly when we have caused delays and frustrations by not resolving concerns quickly.

As detailed in the policy, in most cases it is reasonable to resolve your complaint service failures by:

- Making a sincere and appropriate apology
- Arranging the appropriate services to rectify problems
- Sharing lessons learned and any changes made to procedures as a result of concerns raised with the resident.

Where it is considered that this is not enough, we will consider two types of compensation payments.

- Discretionary Payments - financial payments made as redress for service failures.
- Quantitative Payments - may be made where financial loss has been incurred by tenants and residents as the result of a service failure or delay.

For the full Housing Complaints Compensation Policy visit www.sandwell.gov.uk/complaints-compensation-policy

Housing Repairs and Maintenance Policy

A high percentage of complaints that we receive relate to repairs and maintenance, this highlights a possible issue with how we tell you about the different repairs services and the quality of the service that we provide.

The new policy details how we will deal with your responsive repairs. Including how we will:

- Keep your home safe by ensuring it is compliant with regulatory and legal requirements
- Provide you with a timely, high-quality service working towards a right-first-time approach to keep your home in good repair
- Maximise efficiency and show value for money through effective decision making and procurement practices
- Use your satisfaction and feedback to continually improve the service we provide





For the full Repairs and Maintenance Policy visit: <https://www.sandwell.gov.uk/housing-repairs-and-maintenance-policy>



10. Get involved

As a council tenant, or leaseholder, you have the right to be consulted on matters affecting your tenancy and the housing services you receive.

There are a number of methods available for you to have your say.

-  Volunteer as part of a regularly meeting group
-  Get involved with specific subjects and tasks for a short term
-  Attend work shops for group discussions
-  Complete surveys and feedback requests

If you would like to get involved and would like more information on what is available, please call us on 0121 569 2537.

You can also complete a short survey to express your interest.

www.sandwell.gov.uk/housingsurvey



