



The number of complaints that reached stage 2 was 85, providing an escalation rate of 23% across 2023/24

COMPLAINT VOLUME

During the period April 2023 – March 2024, a total of 367 stage 1 complaints were logged, providing Freebridge Community Housing with an average of 54 complaints received per 1,000 properties for the year.

Complaints is a fast-changing environment, and it is anticipated that the number of complaints received is likely to increase over the following 12 months. This increase includes many factors such as new regulatory requirements and interventions, significant media interest and advertisement, the rising cost of living and other challenges in maintaining and improving service delivery.

The number of complaints that was not accepted was 9 and this was due to the reasons which sits outside of our complaints policy and the Housing Ombudsman Code. 5 of the complaints not accepted was due to customers making initial requests for service or information, with 2 cases where legal action was already taking place and 2 complaints about Anti-social Behaviour (ASB) which was dealt with in line with our ASB policy.

The Customer Service Forum scrutinised 8 complaints in 2023 - 24 and provided feedback on how the complaints were handled whilst providing their views on improvements to be made. As a direct result of feedback from customers the complaints team have adapted their approach to ensure clearer recordings of vulnerabilities have been included within the complaint investigation forms at the earliest possible stage.



HOUSING OMBUDSMAN DETERMINATIONS

In 2023/24 the number of determinations from received by FCH from the Housing Ombudsman Service was 3.

Of the 3 cases reviewed by the Housing Ombudsman there were no determinations of severe maladministration, however there were 4 service failures idented in relation to the handling of the complaint. There was no findings of non-compliance with the ombudsman code in 2023/24.

In all determinations made by the Housing Ombudsman Service in 2023/24 it was reported that Freebridge had made an offer of reasonable redress.

The full ombudsman reports relating to all 3 determinations can be found in appendix 1.

HousingOmbudsman Service

66.2% 94%

In 23/24 the average stage 1 complaints responded to within Ombudsman timeframe is 66.2%. This average increases to 94% in 2024 following internal procedural changes.

50.6% 70%

In 23/24 the average stage 2 complaint responded to within Ombudsman code timeframe is 50.6%, increasing to 70% in 2024. Changes have been made to improve this rate in April 24 by incorporating Heads of Service to respond to stage 2 complaints.

REASON FOR COMPLAINTS

The largest volume of complaints received in 23/24 by customers was due to:











This highest area of complaints received around condition of property and repair service is consistent with our recent TSM performance with customers feeling that FCH provides a home which is well maintained at 58.8%.





COMPLAINT DEMOGRAPHICS

Age	Complaints by Age Group	Customer Base
18-29	9%	7 %
30-39	23%	16%
40-49	18%	15%
50-59	18%	18%
60-69	15%	17%
70+	17%	27%

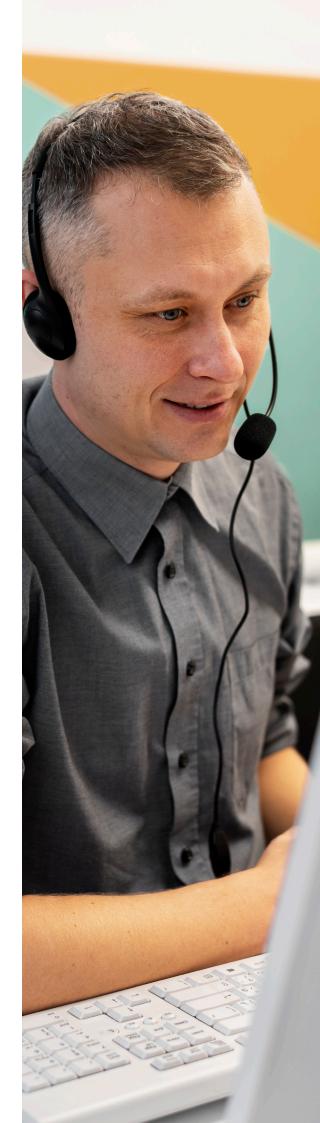
In 23/24, the average age of customers reporting complaints was 50 years old.

In 2016, a large study of more than 300,000 adults by the ONS found people in the 40-59 age brackets have the lowest levels of life satisfaction and the highest levels of anxiety. Customers in this bracket are likely to be time stretched and potentially feel financially vulnerable. The impact of missed appointments on caring responsibilities for example, could be exacerbating personal situations that are already challenging.

Gender

In 23/24 complaints received were predominantly from Women at 71% compared to 29% of Men.

The proportion of customer complaints being from Women is consistent with the Freebridge customer base with a higher percentage of Woman tenants (62%) compared to (38%) Men.



VULNERABILITY

38% of customers making a complaint in 23/24 considered themselves to have one or more of the below vulnerabilities:

- Deaf
- Blind
- Learning Disability
- Memory Problems
- Mental Health Condition
- Limited Mobility
- Problems with reading and writing
- Speech problems
- Partially sighted
- Wheelchair or mobility scooter user

Freebridge Customer Segmentation data shows that 77% of customers have at least one condition that affects them on a daily basis with the customer experiencing physical, mental or cognitive conditions. 30% of our customer base are users of mobility aids.

First Language:

95% of complaints received in 23/24 were received from customers who's first language was English.

Currently 84% of the Freebridge customer base has selected English as their default Language.



COMPENSATION

Compensation is a key part of how we make 'reasonable redress'. We offer compensation in line with our compensation policy. In 23/24 a total of £49,251.39 was issued to customers in direct relation to stage 1 or 2 complaints.

The average compensation award over the 231 complains in which compensation was awarded was £213.21 with the highest individual award at £2,913.33.

The most common reason for award of compensation was link to damp and mould cases with replacement of damaged household items and the running costs of dehumidifiers being the most common reasons for compensation award.





CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Our latest TSM reports shows customer satisfaction with our complaints handling being only 26.6%.

To understand customer satisfaction with our repairs, service a transactional survey has been introduced in 2024 to capture customer feedback directly following a repair. This insight will provide us with data to greater understand and act upon customer feedback and differences between DLO and contractor satisfaction.

Feedback from our engaged customers and complaints data suggests that the low satisfaction with complaint handling is due to the time taken for the completion of repairs.



LEARNINGS

Our complaints and TSM data are clearly suggesting a focus is required on the following areas:

- Repairs Service & Property Condition The focus must be on the condition of customers homes, ensuring that they are well maintained and that repairs are completed within a timely manner. Satisfaction with the overall repairs services is at 62.3%.
- ✓ The Handling of Complaints Ensuring that complaints are handled well and consistently within the Housing Ombudsman Code. Satisfaction with the complaints handling process (26.6%) shows a clear need for change.
- Approach to the handling of ASB linking into the management of our estates, a focus is required on the handling of ASB and promotion of healthier neighbourhoods.

The ombudsman findings within the 3 determinations for 23/24 provides the following learnings:

- Improvement required to communications with customers making complaints to ensure promised actions are carried out.
- Further assurance that customer complaints are responded to within the timeframes accessed within the ombudsman code.

As a result of our determination, the following improvements to our process has been made:

- The way in which complaint cases are recorded and managed has been significantly overhauled, including the adoption of new software, the recruitment of a new manager and the expansion of the team.
- A review and further guidance around the role of individuals within the complaints team and their expectations was completed in August 2023. These presentations included that any expression of dissatisfactions should be considered as a complaint.
- Re-defined when a claim is to be considered under our complaints or compensation policy, establishing the differences between the policies to clarify the required process.



ACTIONS

The below strategic plans have been set in 2024 – 25 to improve our overall customer satisfaction and therefore our satisfaction with complaint handling:

- Our Customer Charter aims to redefine the service offering to our customers, ensuring a responsive approach that aligns with their needs and feedback on service improvements. This will involve a full analysis of our customer segmentation and data from the TSM (Tenant Satisfaction Measurement) system. The outcome will be a revised customer service offer and improvement plan.
- ✓ The Asset Management Strategy focuses on enhancing the planning, management, and delivery of asset investment to maximise value for money and improve the quality of homes. This project will include a redesign of the void (empty property) processes, the implementation of the Wave 2 program, and a thorough appraisal of the organisation's assets. These actions will lead to the development of a strategic investment program and a revised asset management strategy.

By implementing these initiatives, Freebridge will gain a deeper understanding of our customer needs and build a well-planned program for investment to further improve home conditions and the overall repair service, which are currently the primary drivers of customer complaints.

By redefining the customer service offering and enhancing the asset management strategy it enables us to better address the evolving needs of our customers and deliver a higher-quality living experience for the community we serve.





APPENDICES

- Ombudsman Report 1
- Ombudsman Report 2
- Ombudsman Report 3
- Freebridge Community Housing -Self Assessment 24/25

COMMENTS FROM THE BOARD

The Director of Operations presented the Annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report 2023-24. This was the first year that this report was required by the Housing Ombudsman.

Key points of the discussion were as follows:

- The Director of Operations highlighted that appended to the report was the self-assessment document; this would be presented to the Customer Voice Panel's next meeting for challenge.
- The Director of Operations referred to the three Housing Ombudsman determinations which were attached to the report. These had provided mixed feedback to Freebridge. They had been the only Housing Ombudsman investigations during 2023/24; there had already been four enquiries from the Ombudsman in 2024/25. This reflected the increased activity of the Ombudsman and this was likely to be maintained. A Board Member suggested that there needed to be some investigation as to whether there were any other reasons for increased Ombudsman activity around Freebridge.
- The Chair requested that both the increased number of Housing Ombudsman complaints and of complaints about colleague behaviour (as discussed in the previous item) be featured on the risk map.
- A Board Member welcomed the improvements in the time being taken to respond to Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints.
- A Board Member said that it was important to seek to address remedial issues relating to complaints before they reached the Ombudsman. The Director of Operations confirmed that this was typically done.
- A Board Member stressed that it was helpful to monitor trends arising from complaints.

RESOLVED: That the Annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report 2023-24 be approved for submission to the Housing Ombudsman and to customers via the Freebridge website.

