

Annual complaints performance and service improvements

This report provides a detailed summary of Cobalt’s learning and performance in relation to complaints for 2023/24. We have worked with our customers to understand where services have failed, and to make improvements moving forward. A summary of customer spotlight activity, which has informed our complaints learning, can be found on page 4.

Complaints performance in 2023/24

Stage	Closed within target (including agreed extensions)	Number of formal complaints with an applied extension	Closed outside of target	Total investigations 2023-24	Total investigations 2022-23	Cobalt data per 1000 property	Housemark per 1000 property
1	237	35	91	363	223	7.52	4.62
2	28	6	31	65	42		
	265	42	121	428	265	7.52	4.62

Complaints have risen across the housing sector, with the Housing Ombudsman stating that 2023/24 has been a record year for complaints, with a 91% increase in cases in the first nine months of 2023/24 compared to last year.

Of the 363 complaints received by Cobalt in 2023/24, 67% related to our repairs services. An overview of the top five reasons for complaints can be found in the table below:

Area of dissatisfaction	Number	%
Outstanding/Incomplete Works	129	36%
Time taken for parts/components	46	13%
Missed/Incorrect Appointment	38	10%
Quality of Work	28	8%
Internal Customer Care/ Communications	21	6%

Service improvements

More than half of all complaints received in 2023/24 related to our repairs service. We listened to our customers and colleagues and made a decision to bring our repairs service in-house. This decision was approved by the Cobalt Board in early 2024.

Growing our in-house repairs team will be delivered in two phases:

- Phase 1 (1 August 2024 to summer 2025) – Our existing repairs contract will end and emergency and day-to-day repairs will be carried out by our current in-house team, Carroll Group and Penny Lane Builders

- Phase 2 (summer 2025 onwards) - Our in-house team will carry out all emergency and day-to-day-repairs.

We have written to all customers to update them on the changes we are making and have held Meet the Contractor events, so our customers can meet and talk to the new teams.

Stage 2 complaints

We have seen a 55% increase in complaints being escalated to stage 2 stage, indicating a failure to meet expected outcomes at stage 1. We are reviewing the reason for escalation to stage 2 to see where improvements can be made.

Complaints upheld

In 2023/24, 77% of complaints were upheld. Of these, 65% related to our repairs service, such as missed appointments or multiple unnecessary visits.

Complaints not upheld

In 2023/24, 23% of all complaints received were not upheld. These included:

- Service requests
- Reports of anti social behaviour
- Customer unhappy with prioritisation of repair

Housing Ombudsman’s investigations and findings

In the year 2023/24, Cobalt received three determinations and two orders for failure in complaint handling. There are currently three pending decisions awaiting submission of evidence. These are summarised in the table below:

Determination	Pending outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was service failure in the landlord’s handling of damp and mould. • There was maladministration in the landlord’s handling of the complaint 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The landlord to write to the resident within four weeks of the date of this report to apologise for the service failures identified in this report and to pay additional compensation in recognition of the distress and inconvenience caused. • Within eight weeks of this report, the landlord should review its handling of this complaint and provide this Service with an action plan on how it intends to improve its complaint handling in accordance with the Ombudsman’s Complaint Handling Code.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There has been a service failure by the landlord in its response to the complaint about its involvement in the resident’s housing application to the council. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orders In recognition of the finding of service failure, it is ordered that within four weeks of this determination, the landlord pay compensation to the resident
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A complaint was made to the Housing Ombudsman and the following feedback was 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cobalt was directed to issue a comprehensive apology and enhance our data security measures and record-keeping accuracy.

<p>received – ‘the Ombudsman may not consider complaints that fall properly within the jurisdiction of another Ombudsman, regulator or complaint-handling body’.</p> <p>Following this, the complaint was referred to the ICO.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There were two determinations relating to Complaint Handling Failure (CHFO) and the time taken to respond. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case 1: Cobalt was told to open a stage 1 complaint and to share it with the Housing Ombudsman. • Case 2: Cobalt was told to escalate the complaint to stage 2.

Pending cases where evidence has been submitted to the Housing Ombudsman

- Disrepair relating to fence and alleged discrimination complaint handling
- Repair service and associated behavioural warning
- Repair service

Discretionary compensation

An average of £58 compensation was issued per investigation, totalling £24,711 in 2023/24.

Complaints learning and service improvements

General communication feedback	Actions taken / planned
Lack of consistent CRM updates from officers / surveyors resulting in delays / progress of complaint. Lack of accessible information	<p>A dedicated member of staff monitors CRM updates.</p> <p>New processes have been designed into our new housing management system to provide greater consistency, accuracy and detail around complaint handling.</p> <p>CRM management will form part of staff appraisals.</p>
Lack of transparency of surveyor's appointments/ visits and outcome/ findings	Surveyor appointments will be managed as part of new our new system. New equipment, including handheld devices, will improve the handling of appointments when off-site.
Ad hoc cold calling with no follow on option for customer.	<p>New repairs offer will have an appointment for every customer interaction as a priority.</p> <p>For follow on calls, partial completion cards will be left with customers and a new appointment will be made from site.</p>
Lack of visibility of disrepair records to compare any further request of complaint.	Disrepair is managed more effectively via a team approach.
Inconsistent approach to receiving complaint referrals.	New inbox and internal process so these are now directed to one inbox for triage.
Time taken to close more simple complaints	Agreed a number of solutions for quicker resolution such as appointing dedicated duty surveyors who are patch based and undertaking daily inspections.
Lack of individual CRM logs to evidence formal complaint progress (staff request)	New CRM type added to existing housing management system to facilitate better record keeping. This will allow officers to better categorise the progress of conversations associated with formal complaints, and in turn will allow records to be sourced more easily by the complaint handler.
Customer feedback on repairs service	Actions taken
Poor communication from contractors regarding recalls and parts needed.	<p>Customer journey workshops resulted in a number of actions to improve communication and process.</p> <p>Co-location of schedulers and tenant liaison officers within Solutions is being explored as part of our 'go live' date for repairs to harmonise the service between Cobalt and new contractor staff.</p>
Poor access process – no text or card.	No access cards with relevant phone numbers and email addresses will be left at properties to allow customers to get in touch quickly.

