



Connexus Homes Limited

Complaint Handling & Service Improvement Report 2023/24

Issued: June 2024

Foreword

Michelle Ibbs, Chair of Connexus Homes Ltd

The Board of Connexus are pleased that the organisation is able to confirm compliance with the Housing Ombudsman self-assessment for the year 2023/24. The Board recognises the challenges faced by the business to deliver compliance against the code and the challenges within the sector that has led to an exponential rise in the volume and complexity of individual cases.

The Board are reassured that there are robust plans in place to maintain our compliant position during 2024/25 and beyond and thank all colleagues who have supported our customers during the year.

Sara Woodall, Director of Customer Experience

Connexus wants to ensure we deliver good quality, customer-influenced services and that we are accessible, accountable and transparent when things go wrong and / or our services do not meet expected standards. Our complaint-handling process is a key part of this accountability and although we have assessed ourselves as compliant with the Ombudsman's code, we know that we have areas where we need to improve. We have therefore developed a service improvement plan, the oversight of which will rest with our Voice of the Customer forum. Additionally, we will provide progress reports against our plan via our Customer Experience Committee and up to our board.

Introduction

This report aims to share information with you, our customers about:

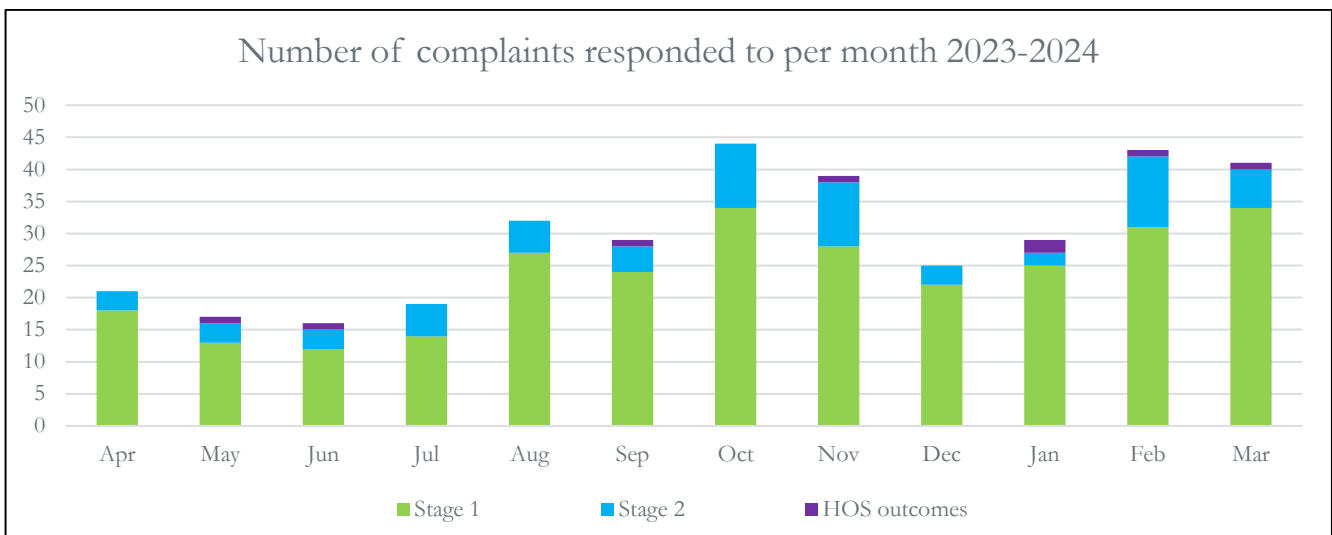
- The complaints we received:
 - How many and at what stage did they conclude?
 - Which service area did the complaint relate to?
 - What our response times were?
 - How many cases did we use an extension to the response deadline?
 - What were the outcomes of the complaints received?
 - Why did complaints escalate through the process?
 - What are our complaints about?
 - What complaints have been refused?
- Reviews concluded by the Housing Ombudsman
- Our Self-Assessment against the Housing Ombudsman complaint handling code
- What improvements we have made
- The challenges we face when delivering services to our customers

The complaints we received

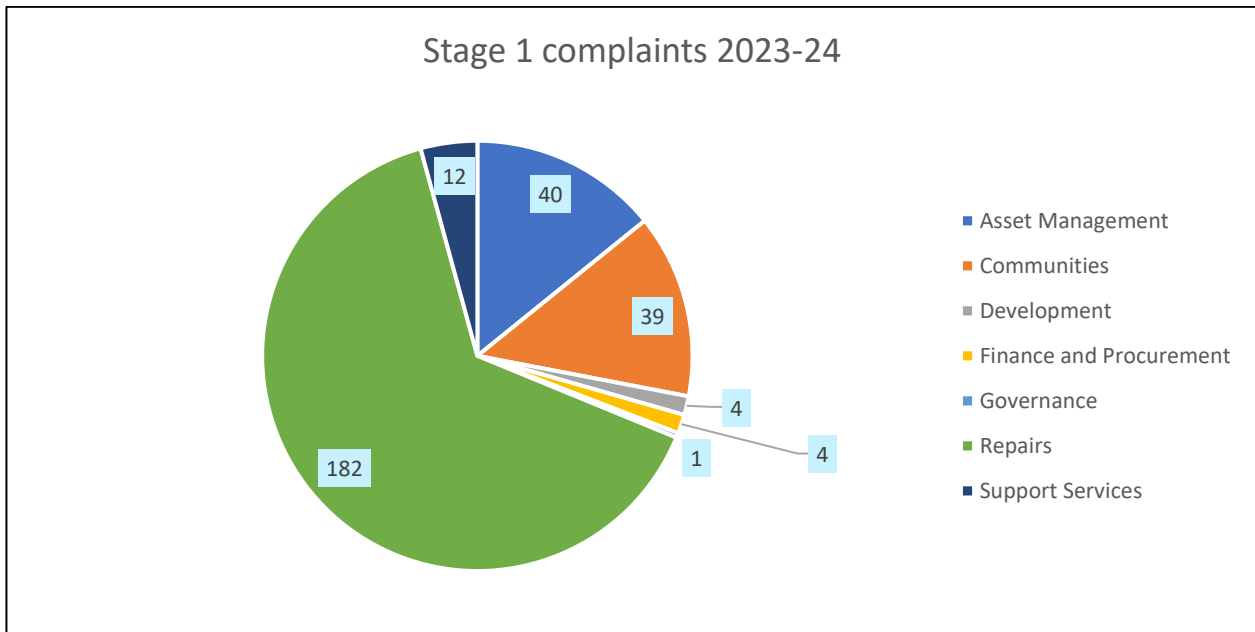
How many and at what stage did they conclude?

We received 361 complaints (stage 1 and 2) from April 2023 – March 2024, mostly from tenants of Connexus (334), but also leaseholders, shared owners and service users (27)

For the purposes of this report, the data is taken from the 347 complaints (stage 1 and 2) that we provided resolutions to during this time no matter if they are a tenant, shared owner etc. The chart below shows at which stage each of these complaints concluded.



Which service area did the complaint relate to?



What our response times were?

- 214 out of 282 (76%) customers were offered a resolution at Complaint (stage 1) within the agreed timeframe.
- 57 out of 65 (88%) customers were offered a resolution at Review (stage 2) within the agreed timeframe.

How many cases did we use an extension to the response deadline?

We do sometimes have to advise you that we need more time to complete the investigation and respond. In 2023-24 we extended the timescale on the following:

- 103 out of 282 (36.5%) at Complaint stage
- 19 out of 65 (29%) at Review stage

What were the outcomes of the complaints received?

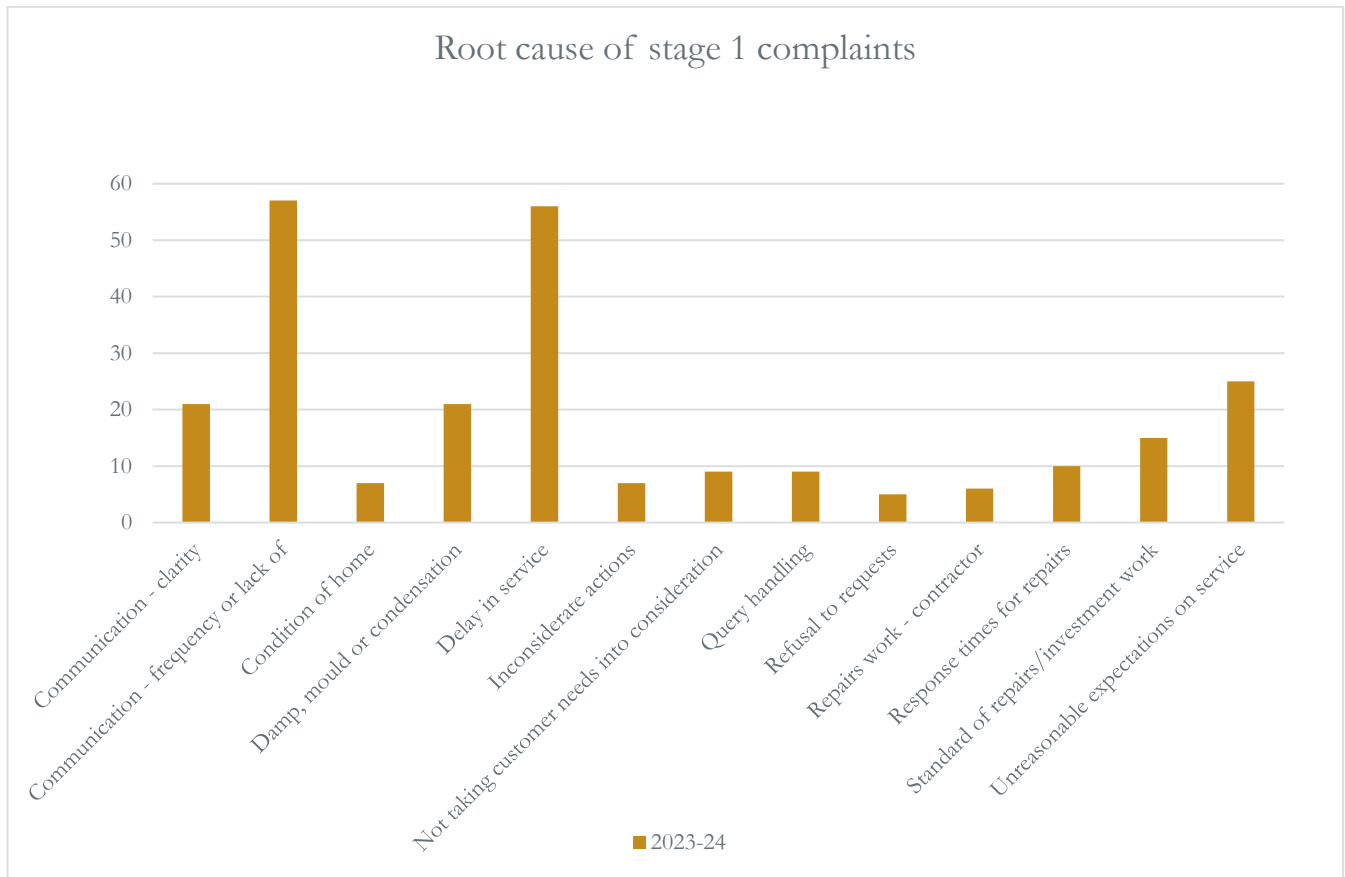
At stage 1, we found that for 85% of the complaints we received, we had not done something as well as we would have expected, so offered a way to put the situation right.

Why did complaints escalate through the process?

Our aim is to resolve complaints at the first stage, and in line with the Housing Ombudsman code, we offer a second (Review) stage if you do not agree with our findings. We have found there are 2 main reasons for a request for a Review, these being:

- The stage 1 did not answer all the points raised.
- The actions offered were not carried out when we said we would.

What are our complaints about?



As the graph shows, there are 2 main themes that stand out, these being:

- Communication (keeping you informed and/or lack of clarity)
- Delay in providing the requested service

What complaints have been refused?

We have only refused to allow one complaint in the last year. The reason was that we had already fully investigated the issue and the customer had already requested that the Housing Ombudsman review how we had handled their complaint.

Reviews concluded by the Housing Ombudsman

The Housing Ombudsman have reviewed 8 complaints during the year. They found that across these there were:

- 4 service failures
- 7 maladministration (for service failures)
- 4 maladministration (for complaint handling)

Examples of what the Housing Ombudsman found are noted below:

Service Failure

- For our response to concerns about the width of the access to a home.
- For our failure to follow our Colleague Safety Awareness Register (SAR) Procedure.
- For our response to reports of noise nuisance.

Maladministration

- For our response to concerns about a heating system fully.
- For our handling of a request for reimbursement for a damaged item.
- For our response to reports of damp and mould.

Complaint Handling

- We did not use both stages of the complaint process – we jumped to stage 2.
- We did not respond by the required deadline.
- We did not log the complaint when first received causing a delay in the complaint response.

In addition to the findings highlighted above, the Housing Ombudsman also instructed us to pay more compensation than we had originally offered in some cases. In all these cases, we complied with their request.

If you want to find out more information about these complaints and any other complaints the Housing Ombudsman has reviewed, you can find them on their website at: [Decisions Archive - Housing Ombudsman \(housing-ombudsman.org.uk\)](https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/decisions-archive).

You can also take a look at the report from the Housing Ombudsman about Connexus performance on the complaints they reviewed in 2022/23. It's on their website - [Landlords Archive - Housing Ombudsman \(housing-ombudsman.org.uk\)](https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/landlords-archive) (type in Connexus).

The Housing Ombudsman compile a report of all landlords who have had 5 or more reviews conducted by them in the year. In 2022/23, compared to other landlords of a similar size, we performed well - with a maladministration rate of 14% compared to the average of 55%.

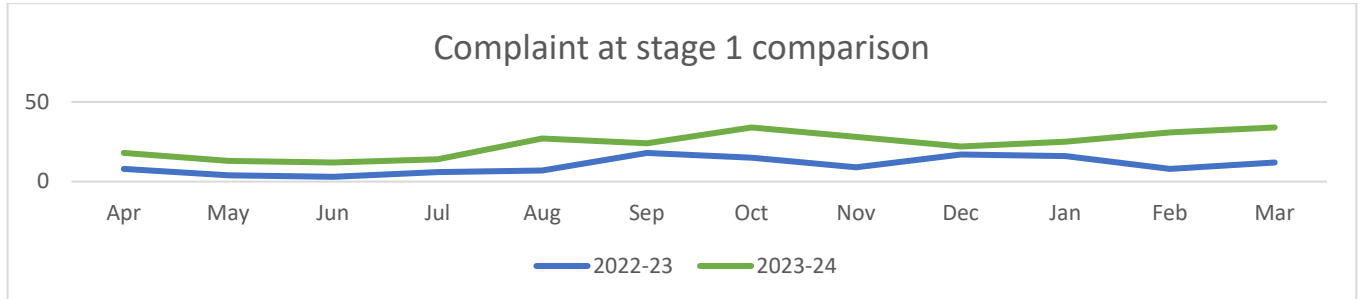
The self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code

We published our self-assessment against the complaint handling code (Code) along with this report on our website, which confirms that we are compliant with the requirements of the Code. The self-assessment allows us to review and reflect on whether our policy and procedure guide us to meet the Code. As a social housing landlord, this is something we must do, as it is now a statutory requirement.

We are confident that we have the correct policy and procedures in place. This means that we follow the Code and have confirmed this as part of our self-assessment. However, this report reflects on whether our performance matches what we say we will do in practice. We have concluded that we have areas to improve on and have listed any service improvement plan actions using this symbol ➤ each time we note an area for improvement in this report.

Accessibility and awareness

We made our complaints process as easy to access as possible which has allowed more customers to tell us when they are not happy. The graph below clearly demonstrates an increase in the volumes of complaints we received at stage 1.



Complaint handling staff

Our managers who respond to complaints are trained to do so. Where we receive the highest volume of complaints, a dedicated Complaints Manager directly supports those managers.

Whilst our procedure provides guidance to fully investigate each complaint and include specific information about the complaints process in our response, we acknowledge that we could do better and be more consistent with this.

As a result, we have included the following in our service improvement plan:

- Create a compulsory annual training programme for all managers who respond to complaints.
- Promote the external resources that are available and provided by the Housing Ombudsman.

The complaint handling process

Acknowledgement of complaint

We aim to acknowledge complaints at stage 1 and 2 within 5 working days. In 2023/24 we achieved the following:

- 12 out of 282 (96%) were acknowledged in time at Complaint stage.
- 8 out of 65 (88%) were acknowledged in time at Review stage.

Where we missed the acknowledgement, this was due to various factors which included:

- delays in a complaint being passed to the team for it to be recorded (7).
- the cyber-incident that Connexus experienced in December 2023 which stopped us accessing our systems for a short period of time (4).
- human error (5).

As a result of the missed, or late acknowledgements, we have reminded colleagues of the strict deadlines and to log a complaint as soon as you tell us.

Response letters

We told you earlier that we do not always respond on time, and acknowledge we need to improve on this. We are also working on the content of our response, so that we provide you with a full response, and put things right, as early as possible within the process.

Since April 2024, when the Code became statutory, we have been clear with managers that a consistent failure to follow our policy and procedure could result in disciplinary action for the colleague concerned.

As a result, we have included the following in our service improvement plan:

- Provide accurate, reliable and up to date data to our Senior Managers that allows them to monitor the performance of their team and allow them to see where action is needed.

Notes and records

Record keeping is an area we need to improve. We regularly promote the importance of recording notes for any customer contact and/or for any work carried out to your home. We currently have several different systems which departments use for specific purposes, which do not always link together.

As a result, we have included the following in our service improvement plan:

- We will investigate the ability for our core systems to connect with one another, if this is not possible, we will investigate the implementation of a single system to ensure that important information about our customers and their homes is accurate and accessible for all teams.

Restricting a customer's access

Connexus has an Unacceptable User Actions and Behaviour Policy in place. Upon review we have found that it does not reference that it has been considered alongside the provisions of the Equality Act 2010.

As a result, we have included the following in our service improvement plan:

- We will review our policy in line with the provision of the Equality Act 2010 and update it accordingly.

Self-assessment, reporting and compliance

We provide information that we believe is important to you about how we respond to complaints through this report and via our newsletter. We stated above that we want to increase this by sharing more regular information on our website.

As a result, we have included the following in our service improvement plan:

- We will actively seek your views around the content of our regular updates to ensure that what we are publishing is what you want to know about.
- We will involve customers to provide challenge around our responses to the annual self-assessment.

Scrutiny & oversight

The last internal audit of our complaints process was completed in July 2023 and we achieved reasonable assurance for both design of controls (our policy and process) and operation of controls (how we perform). 4 recommendations were made as a result, all of which have now been implemented

What improvements have we made?

In 2022/23, following an increase in complaints about our approach to heating repairs, we looked at how we managed the service and this resulted in a significant reduction in complaints (70%) in this area and reinforced our regulatory compliance in terms of keeping you safe.

We had an increase in damp, mould and condensation complaints in 2023-24 and as you saw earlier, 3 determinations from the Housing Ombudsman were related to how we handled reports of mould and damp. The service was being delivered using three sub-contractors, which made it difficult to ensure a consistent approach and response. Therefore we created an internal team who, over time, will replace the use of sub-contractors. This team will ensure a more flexible, swift and consistent response.

The use of sub-contractors, and the service they deliver to you on our behalf, is also an area that has been reviewed. We have updated our Service Level Agreement (SLA) with them and our approach has changed to ensure that you are informed who will be attending and when, and who will keep you updated. Where these sub-contractors do not meet our SLA, then we support them in the first instance to improve, but will ultimately take the appropriate action if their service to you does not improve to meet our standards.

We have introduced a Voice of the Customer strategy and a part of this is that, when you tell us something, we consider whether an issue could have wider consequences for other customers. As such, the following policies and/or procedures have been updated or developed as a direct result of feedback and/or Housing Ombudsman Orders:

- Unacceptable User Action Policy – inclusion of a case review timeline.
- Leasehold Management Policy & Decant Policy - updated following feedback from customers in Market Drayton and the Maisonettes to provide clearer guidance to those affected.
- Compensation Policy – clarity in terminology used and values.
- Insurance Claims – process developed to compensate for damaged goods where no insurance
- Complaints policy and procedure – updated to include advocates, been clear that we will not go straight to a stage 2 response

In addition to direct customer feedback, and as part of our work around the Voice of the Customer, we have also taken the opportunity to review our approach in key areas identified by the Ombudsman through their series of Spotlight reports; including:

- Reasonable adjustment Policy and Procedure
- Neighbourhood Management Policy and Noise Complaints Procedure

We are currently changing our repairs service and will be bringing in a new repairs system, currently planned for autumn 2024, which will allow us to better track repairs from report through to conclusion and any repairs that are given to a sub-contractor to complete.

We have put steps in place to improve our contact with you about a repair, such as, we will:

- contact you to agree a date, rather than just tell you.
- contact you if the date needs to be moved for any reason.
- tell you when we have completed an outside repair when you were not home.
- make a follow-on appointment while we are at your home, where possible, if we cannot complete the repair on the day we attend.

The challenges we face when delivering services to our customers

Maintaining and investing in homes, which includes replacing components such as kitchens and windows, responding to reports of damp, mould and condensation and delivering our responsive repairs service are our priorities, but we are facing an increasing number of challenges, such as the increasing cost of materials, the competitive job market for skilled colleagues and the increasing demand on sub-contractors from all landlords to meet their repair and investment responsibilities.

Conclusion

We acknowledge that we sometimes get things wrong, even when we try and put things right, we do not always get that right either. Whilst we are pleased that for most of our customers, the complaints process works and delivers satisfactory outcomes, we know in several instances we can, and must, do better. This report, and service improvement plan, provides the detail about what those improvements need to be, and we will provide an update against progress in future communications.

We are always keen to hear from anyone who would like to get involved with us at Connexus to help shape and influence our approach to services. If you want to know more, please just get in touch through our customer services team, we would be delighted to hear from you.