

Housing Ombudsman Service

Consultation on our Business Plan 2023-24

Raising Awareness of the Housing Ombudsman Service

Q1 About Us

The Northern Housing Consortium (NHC) is a membership organisation based in the North of England. We are the 'Voice of the North' working with councils, housing associations and ALMOs to develop insight, influence and solutions to create better homes and places.

Q2 What materials or resources could we develop that would support you to raise awareness of the Housing Ombudsman Service? Tick all that apply

Videos

Leaflets ✓

Podcast

Webpage ✓

Social media posts ✓

Media campaigns ✓

Other

We could work with the Ombudsman on events and/or webinars for our members and/or their tenants and support the targeted development of appropriate materials or resources.

Q3 What in your view, would improve resident access to the Ombudsman?

We welcome the work the Ombudsman has done recently to raise awareness of its service among tenants, and it would appear this has increased the number of complaints being referred.

We still believe that not enough tenants are aware of the Housing Ombudsman Service.

There is further scope for a coordinated approach between providers and the Housing Ombudsman, especially towards the final stages of a complaint where it could be escalated, with a co-ordinated strategy to increase awareness among tenants. Providers very much want to resolve complaints before they escalate, and the arbiter role of the Ombudsman is valued by all parties.

If the resident wishes to escalate a complaint to the Housing Ombudsman Service, landlords should consistently support them to do so, and provide them with contact details for the Service and any details for any other assistance they may need such as an advocacy service. We are aware that the majority of landlords have assessed their

procedures against the complaint handling code and are operating this model of good practice.

If this is not happening *consistently* across all providers and a proportion of tenants remain unaware of their right to escalate a complaint this may require further monitoring of providers' compliance with the code. There also appears to be some confusion about accessing services and support when a tenant has opted for legal redress.

This requirement could be reinforced by the Regulator of Social Housing, as part of its review of the consumer standards, with a requirement on housing providers to ensure tenants are aware of their right to take a complaint to the Ombudsman.

We welcome the change that from last year residents no longer need to contact a designated person or wait eight weeks before referring their complaint. This removes a barrier, but other barriers continue to exist, including why certain tenants are more likely to not access services. We note that the draft Business Plan includes a proposal to build a better picture of the resident demographic and geographic groups which access the service less frequently. We support this approach and believe this is a necessary step to achieve a much more sophisticated understanding of the two-way relationship between tenant and landlord. We would encourage the Ombudsman to share its analysis with housing providers so that they are able to consider steps to further address any barriers highlighted. We could support the dissemination of any findings and learnings through our networks for our members.

Q4 Do you feel that you have a good understanding of the role of the Housing Ombudsman Service?

YES

Q5 If you answered 'No' to question 3, what would help to improve your understanding?

N/A

Q6 How could you help us to build awareness and understanding of our role with your residents?

Everyone within and connected to the social housing sector must work together and prioritise above all else the quality of housing being provided to social housing tenants.

While we are a membership organisation for councils and landlords, we also work directly with social housing tenants on some projects. For example, our [Social Housing Tenants' Climate Jury](#) saw 30 social housing tenants from across the North of England come together to discuss how can tenants, social housing providers, and others work together to tackle climate change in our homes and neighbourhoods. Our [Resident Involvement](#) events also provide tenants and residents with more opportunities for involvement, influence and information. These events can bring together tenants, their landlords and the Ombudsman Service.

As a membership body, we provide significant opportunities for landlords to meet and network together, sharing and learning from each other. We look forward to continuing to work with Ombudsman Services to help members raise awareness with tenants. Examples of current opportunities include our quarterly meetings in the North with the Ombudsman and our member organisations to provide a forum to consider, discuss and exchange views and information on a range of issues.

Our 'Communications in Housing' Roundtables aimed at communications professionals within the housing sector provide the opportunity to learn from colleagues and discuss a range of topics and sector themes.

We can also work with the Ombudsman on one-off webinars open to all our members.

Q7 If we were to develop more learning and support tools, which areas/topics would you most like us to target? And what formats would be most useful for complaint handlers, executives and members of governing bodies?

We welcome the Ombudsman reports on damp and mould and would encourage a continued focus on learning and support on this topic. Our member organisations are interested in practical solutions to damp and mould, but also learning from other members on how they are tackling important contextual factors such as fuel poverty and overcrowding. Support for elected members, where they are responsible for council housing stock, may differ in line with their roles and responsibilities.

Other areas and topics include energy efficiency, retrofit, managing disruption, etc.

An important learning and sharing approach is to highlight good practice, as well as where things have gone wrong. The '*what good looks like*' approach is a constructive tool for sharing learning. The format of this could include personal viewpoints from key individuals of how change was achieved.

In terms of a format that would be most useful for landlords, executives and governing bodies, we are aware of the publication of landlord performance reports on complaints and casework – this could be enhanced by a greater degree of flexibility in the transparency and search facilities for data through the production of a searchable database – a complete repository - with various parameters including thematic searches (with hyperlinks to relevant reports) which would allow decision takers to produce relevant reports for their own learning and best practice.

Q8 Do you have any other comments on our plans?

Our member organisations have seen a great improvement already in sector engagement with the Housing Ombudsman, including more consultation on cases and regular meetings to discuss trends and ideas. With the additional resources provided we hope that this can continue and grow with many more partners so that this good work focusing on prevention of complaints escalation can spread throughout the sector more widely.

Our response to the Business Plan reflects on the discussion and recommendations developed at our networks, webinars and roundtables, including tenant engagement sessions. For example, our detailed discussion with tenants on housing decarbonisation will be particularly relevant over the next few years as tenants' homes are decarbonised.

We hope we can continue to support the Ombudsman in their engagement with housing organisations in the North of England.

Whatever the extent and causes of individual complaints, it is incumbent on everyone in the social housing sector to work together and prioritise the provision of good quality housing.