

BRIEFING NOTE

Report from the Housing Ombudsman Conference - 31 October 2023.

- Councillor Mike Pringle, Member Responsible for Complaints
- Councillor Lee Brazier, Portfolio Holder - Housing

Councillors Pringle and Brazier attended this event which looked at the role of the Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC) and to learn more about how to be compliant with the Complaint Handling Code.

Central to the focus at the Housing Ombudsman is a mission to drive a positive complaint handling culture. When the Complaint Handling Code becomes statutory, the introduction of an MRC will be vital. An MRC forms part of a Landlord's Governing Body, which provides insight and learning into the Landlord's complaint handling performance.

It is noted that changes to the complaint handling code are currently out for consultation which closes this month. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman is carrying out a separate consultation as it doesn't currently have a complaint handling code.

The Joint Complaint Handling Code ('the Code'), from the Housing Ombudsman and Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman, sets out requirements for organisations that will allow them to respond to complaints effectively and fairly. The purpose of the Code is to enable organisations to resolve complaints raised by individuals quickly and to use the data and learning from complaints to drive service improvements. It will also help to create a positive complaint handling culture amongst staff and individuals.

Fortunately for Newark & Sherwood District Council, we already operate only one complaints process for both housing and all our other services.

The Housing Ombudsman, Richard Blakeway.

Richard Blakeway opened the day. He made it clear that the person who was acting as MRC was not expected to take all complaints on their shoulders. Their role was to share their findings with executives and board members, therefore acting as conduit to positive change.

Richard reiterated that the expectation of the MRC was put into legislation early this year and would become a statutory requirement by January 2024.

Short videos, introducing the changes we all face, are available on the Ombudsman web site [here](#).

Session 1 – Rebecca Reed, Ombudsman Head of Insight & Development

Rebecca led by following Richard's lead on the expectations of the MRC and referred to the position as being the "**Canary in the mine**" in that complaints should be a guide to performance. That receiving a high number of complaints shouldn't be seen as completely negative but seen as our residents engaging with the Landlord because they feel comfortable and safe in doing so, assuming that there is also a prompt and positive response to repairs.

During her presentation Rebecca highlighted that on a positive note, the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) national statistics showed that the East Midlands were bottom of the ASB league.

Session 2 – Angela Holman, Regulator of Social Housing

Angela made it clear that the regulator does NOT engage with resolutions of complaints, this is solely the purpose of the Ombudsman. The regulator is there to set a high bar on legislation, there are draft strategies in process now, with 1,100 tenants responding.

She stressed the need to “**put things right the first time**”, this will increase tenant positivity in their engagement with Landlords. Also, how important it is to have a clear and easy to use complaints procedure, where responses to tenant’s complaints are open, transparent and acknowledge any mistakes and failings.

COMPLAINTS = HOUSING INTELEGENCE & INFORMATION

Therefore, we should see positive Tenants Satisfaction Measure (TSM’s).

Councillor Pringle asked Angela, if the Regulator would be politically directed or whether they were looking to mirror how OFSTED report. Angela accepted the OFSTED comparison, but hoped they wouldn’t fall into that position; however, she did say that the “**Regulator would not be influenced by political governance**”. We may have to wait and see on this.

Session 3 – Lead by Alan Park, Compliance Manager

Alan works nationally for the Ombudsman in working with Landlords to enhance a positive complaint process.

This session was very much led by members from the floor, who had similar expectations and a general positive outlook for the changes ahead and that it will be positive for our tenants.

Session 4 – MENTI ngagement, Question & Answer session.

This session allowed attendees to anonymously answer a number of planned questions as to where we were from, what position we held and whether we were from a Council, ALMO or other.

There were only 7 Elected Members present, 2 of which were from Newark & Sherwood District Council in Councillors Pringle and Brazier.

Typed questions from the floor were then shown on a big screen and answered by a panel of 3. Most of the questions were around who should be the MRC and who should the MRC be positively challenging from the recorded data. The answer is that it should be the Chief Executive or a member from SLT.

It was also noted that, where necessary, there could be more than one MRC.

Final thoughts from Councillor Pringle

The day was really positive with a lot more information to take on board than I had anticipated, the Housing Ombudsman delivered their presentations with confidence, whilst allowing positive engagement from the floor.

I do think that compared to the other attendees who spoke during the sessions, we are very much ahead of the game. I would offer a suggestion of caution, in that we may have a visit, sooner rather than later, from the Ombudsman, once the code consultation is complete and statutory policy in place.

There is no doubt that the questions from the floor were a huge positive of the day, the only negative was the “pass the parcel of the microphone” between those asking questions from the floor, although the child like giggles were a light-hearted point of the day.

All in all, we were very well looked after, all presentations were positive and I would urge anyone who is able to, to engage in attending future conferences.