

Housing Ombudsman Service – consultation on Business Plan 2020/21

Colchester Borough Council

Q 1. Do you have any comments on our performance indicators and whether these achieve a good balance between timeliness, quality, customer feedback and impact?

Faster casework timescales – the target for 2020/21 should be either an average of 4 or 5 months – not between 4 and 5 as proposed. Given the current performance is 6.7 months a 5 month target would seem challenging enough. 100% of cases should be determined within 12 months.

Quality – the proposed target of 95% of casework to be assessed as being at least of an “acceptable standard” implies 5% can be unacceptable. No casework should be assessed as being of unacceptable quality – therefore the target should be more challenging – for example at least 50% assessed as “good” and no cases assessed as unacceptable.

Customer and landlord feedback – the targets of at least 85% satisfaction with the service are welcome and seem appropriate as a starting point

Q 2. Do you have any thoughts on how else we can support more complaints to be resolved earlier?

A commitment from the Ombudsman to understanding at an early stage what outcomes/actions/compensation a complainant wishes to see is key.

Communicating this clearly to the landlord, or enabling the complainant to do so, at the beginning of the complaints process will provide the best chance of establishing how far apart the two parties are and if an early resolution can be achieved.

The suggested approach of encouraging mediation is welcomed.

Q.3 Do you have any comments on our proposed approach to formal resolution, in particular the provision of information to us?

The proposal of a triage approach to complaints is interesting, but more details on how this will be put into practice would be welcomed

A timescale of 20 working days rather than the proposed 15 working days for landlords providing information to the Ombudsman would seem more appropriate, particularly given the complexity and volume of information that is often required and the need to ensure confidentiality to 3rd parties is maintained through appropriate redactions

Q 4. Do you have any comments on strengthening our sector development and engagement activities?

The proposals of more timely, thematic and landlord specific approaches are all welcome.

The proposal to work with landlords experiencing higher complaint volumes is welcome.

In determining which landlords are experiencing high levels of complaints, it would be sensible to assess this based on stock numbers. Clearly a landlord with 30,000 units of housing will experience a larger number of Ombudsman complaints than a small landlord of, say, less than 1,000 units. A “per capita” approach is expected.

Q 5. Do you have any comments on the business plan overall?

The business plan is ambitious and sets out stretching targets to not only speed up the time taken to investigate and issue determinations, but also expands the role of the Ombudsman considerably. Proactive approaches to learning, working with the sector and with tenants is all to be welcomed.

The additional £3.6m income from nearly doubling of the per unit charges to members (up to £15,100p.a from £8,700 for Colchester) will need to be invested wisely to ensure the sector and its 5 million households receive the services set out in the plan.