Annual Complaints Report

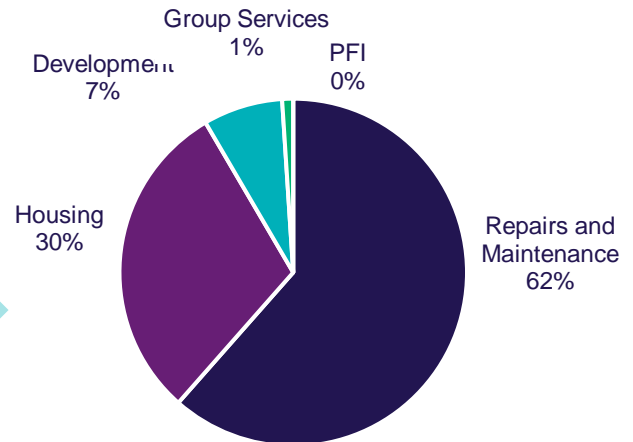2023-2024

ASTER

GROUP

Complaints Performance

An overview of our complaints performance from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024:

Complaint Type:

Compared to last year, the number of complaints recorded overall has increased by 352 (20.9%), with our formal complaints increasing by 109 (14%) and Fast Track by 243 (26%).

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Formal Complaints	536	374	614	769	**878**
Fast Track Complaints	782	580	785	915	**1,158**
Total:	**1,318**	**954**	**1,399**	**1,684**	**2,036**

Of our formal complaints, 62% relate to repairs and maintenance, and 30% relate to housing and tenancy management. When our formal complaints are broken down by service area:

Number of Complaints, per 1,000 homes:

The number of Stage 1 complaints per 1,000 homes increased from 21.73 to 24.05.

However, we improved the number of Stage 2 complaints received, from 5.46 per 1,000 homes to 5.40.

Group Services 1%
Development 7%
PFI 0%
Housing 30%
Repairs and Maintenance 62%

Stage 1   2022/23: **21.73**   2023/24: **24.05**

Stage 2   2022/23: **5.46**   2023/24: **5.40**

We have benchmarked the complaints per 1k property volumes against peer housing associations, and our performance is lower in comparison to other larger housing associations (over 15,000 homes).

Responses Sent in Time:

87.52%
Overall Compliance with target timescales for responding to complaint.

88.93%
Stage 1 responses sent in target

81.68%
Stage 2 responses sent in target

The Ombudsman sets targets for us to respond to complaints. For all stage 1 and 2 complaints responded to, 87.52% were responded to within the necessary timescales. This has decreased very slightly when compared with 2022/23 (87.81% overall compliance)

Compliance by Service Area.

Service	Stage 1 In Target	Total stage 1 sent	Stage 2 In Target	Total Stage 2 sent	Compliance
Maintenance	465	528	9*3	118	86.38%
Housing	221	247	55	62	89.32%
Development	56	60	16	21	88.89%
Group Services	5	5	1	1	100%
PFI	0	0	0	0	N/A
Total	747	840	165	202	87.52%

Escalation of Complaints (Stage 1 to Stage 2):

24% of the complaints we responded to were escalated from Stage 1 to Stage 2 in 2023-24. This is a slightly improved position on the previous two years (25% in 2022-23, and 26% in 2021-22).

Complaints about our new homes and development activity saw 35% of complaints escalated to Stage 2, although this is based on a lower number of complaints when compared to Repairs and Maintenance and Housing.

Percentage escalation year on year

■ % Escalation FY 22   ■ % Escalation FY 23   ■ % Escalation FY 24
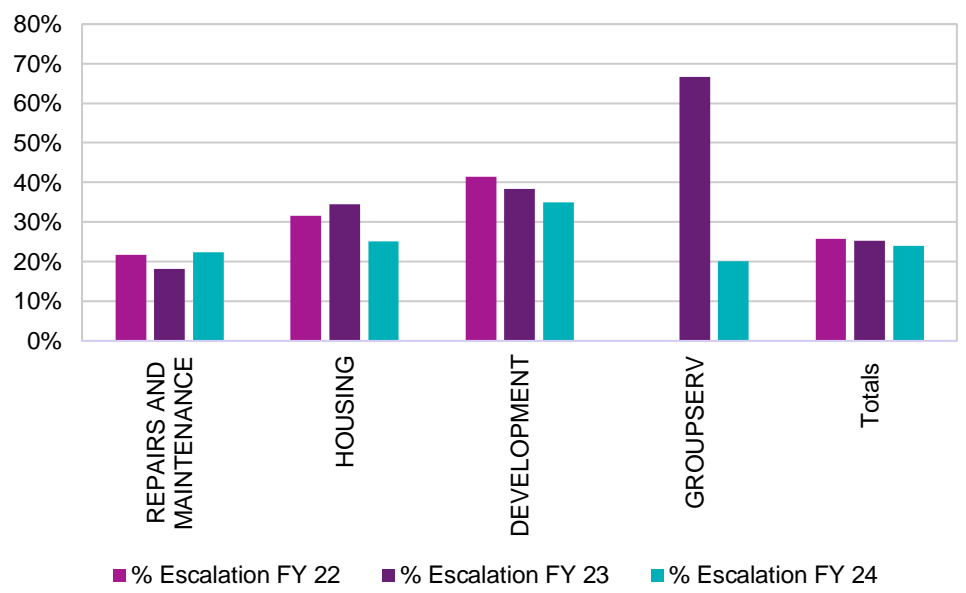
Compensation

We know that we don't always get it right, and awarding compensation is an integral part of the complaint handling code as a means of offering suitable redress following a service failure.

£ In total, we awarded **£415,758** in compensation for service failures in 2023-24.

£381,538 compensated our customers for service failures in relation to repairs and maintenance. This equates to 91.8% of all compensation paid out to customers.

£34,220 compensated our customers for service failures in relation to Housing and Tenancy Management complaints.

Entity Performance:

Aster Group is made up of a number of different legal entities. Specific performance relating to some of our smaller entities include:

Enham Trust

10 stage 1 complaints were responded to with 1 escalating to a stage 2 complaint (10%)
Response compliance was poor at just 20%, with only 2 of the 10 complaints responded to within timescale.
£4,537.00 was paid in compensation
1 complaint was referred to the Housing Ombudsman for review.

Enham complaints have now been integrated fully with Aster Group so performance and information will improve in 2024/25

Service	Stage 1 In Target	Total stage 1 sent	Stage 2 In Target	Total Stage 2 sent	Compliance
Maintenance	0	7	1	1	12.5%
Housing	1	3	0	0	33%
Total	1	10	1	1	20%

Central and Cecil

Service	Stage 1 In Target	Total stage 1 sent	Stage 2 In Target	Total Stage 2 sent	Compliance
Maintenance	21	26	4	6	83.33%
Housing	22	27	2	2	82.75%
Rent and Service Charge	11	13	3	5	77.77%
Complex	3	4	1	1	80.00%
Total	57	70	10	14	79.76%

In addition to this, there were 32 Fast Track complaints dealt with in 2023/24. 53.1% relating to Housing,37.5% relating to repairs and 9.4% relating to Rent and Service Charge.

£ In total, Central and Cecil awarded **£15,862.88** in compensation for service failures in 2023-24.

East Borough Housing Trust

4 complaints all acknowledged in target however 2 of the stage 1's were responded to outside of compliance.

2 complaints escalated to stage 2

Service	Stage 1 In Target	Total stage 1 sent	Stage 2 In Target	Total Stage 2 sent	Compliance
Maintenance	0	1	1	1	50%
Housing	2	3	1	1	50%
Total	2	4	2	2	50%

Learning from our complaints

Designated Complaints Panel

The DCP completed 11 reviews in 2023/24 compared to 8 in the previous year. The reviews covered a wide range of subjects from Service Charges, Trees, Damp and Mould and Responsive Repairs.

The reviews conducted by the DCP are often complex dealing with emotive issues, directly with the customer, where a resolution has not been achieved during Aster's formal complaints process. A review enables a customer to feel they have been heard and listened to, by an independent customer group, even if they do not achieve the resolution they are seeking.

Following the reviews the DCP made a number of service improvement recommendations which were accepted by Aster..

- The use of photo evidence – with our new complaints management module in Microsoft Dynamics customers can now send in photos that are immediately accessible to Case Managers.
- The DCP identified that learning logs were not always completed by Case Managers, therefore missing the opportunity to learn from the complaint and prevent repeat occurrences. The completion of learning logs is now mandatory, and complaints cannot be closed until a learning log is captured.
- In 6 of the 11 cases that the DCP reviewed, an increase in compensation was awarded. Having discussions with customers to explain the outcome of the complaint and the level of compensation to be awarded and how this has been calculated now forms part of the complaints process.
- Lettings and Voids process – we now leave a Hygrometer in all new relets for early intervention should the customer have any concerns regarding Condensation, Damp or Mould.

£ In total, the DCP awarded an additional **£1,150** in compensation for service failures in 2023-24.

Learning from our complaints

We use all insight available to drive a strong learning culture that enables us to improve our services. We use complaints learning, internal insight and feedback alongside external insight to inform any changes we make to our services and processes.

We are embedding that learning in our Modernisation Programme and Operating Model. Through this work we are improving our customer services using all insight available to us to modernise our services and ensure that meaningful improvements are made in a way that benefits customers now and into the future.

Our operating model principles have been developed and include:

Operating Model Principles:
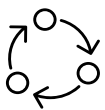
Connected Customers

Reliable and consistent service

Decisions closer to our customers

Proactive Customer Services

Adaptive and improving

Customer Focussed Culture

We'll explore how we have used our complaints learning in relation to these principles over the next few pages.

Our complaints learning has been included in these principles in the following ways:

Connected Customers

Our customers can self-serve in a way that is right for them.

We know from our complaints learning and our work with the Institute of Customer Services that customers can get frustrated if they are waiting for responses to carry out simple transactions. It's therefore important for us that we provide seamless, reliable and transparent self-serve transactions where it is appropriate to do so. It's also important to give customers the choice of their preferred channel and voice will always remain an option for our customers.

Giving customers the choice to self-serve transactions will allow our colleagues to spend more time on supporting our customers through more complex issues to improve customer satisfaction and gain insightful learning to improve services.

Reliable, Consistent Service

We are simplifying our internal processes, improving our systems and increasing transparency for our customers and colleagues.

We are using insight gathered from our complaints and customer voice activity to support with codesign of our services, ensuring that they are designed with the customer in mind. This will make it easier for colleagues to have the right information available when they need it to provide the best service to our customers.

An example of this is the introduction of the Microsoft Dynamics complaint module in April 2024. All communication with the customer is stored in this central system, with the complaint being managed from the initial contact with the customer all the way through to any determinations or orders from the Housing Ombudsman. This gives full transparency to our colleagues which in turn delivers a personalised service to our customers.

Decisions Closer to our Customers

We are working to increase the number of contacts we resolve when our customers first contact us.

Through our complaints learning, we know that service failures often happen when our contact centre are unable to provide a resolution (for example, where they do not have the right knowledge or information available). We also know through our work with the Institute of Customer Services that slow and/or poor-quality service are some of the most common reasons that customers complain across all sectors. We are therefore evolving the skillset within our contact centre colleagues and we are ensuring that our systems and processes enable us to resolve issues quickly and properly.

Customer Focussed Culture

We will listen to our customers, providing our services is an empathetic and human way.

We have embedded human centred communications through tone of voice learning for our colleagues. This has been rolled out as mandatory learning for our colleagues, and we are creating a letter library to provide examples of best practice for colleagues. Any relevant learning from complaints will be incorporated into the learning and the letter library.

We will also be publishing complaint learning to our customers each quarter through our customer E-Shot and via our website.

Proactive Customer Services

We use our insight and learning effectively to design and improve our services and predict where our services are needed most.

Service-related issues dominate complaints relating to housing issues, and it is important to us that we are predicting where our services are needed most through our data, automation, technology and insight. We are also piloting machine learning to analyse complaints data to help us predict where complaints are most likely to happen. This will allow us to prioritise our service improvements in those areas so that we can prevent complaints happening.

As noted above, most of our complaints (62%) are related to our repairs service. As a priority therefore, we are improving our reporting and understanding of our properties where there is a high demand for our repairs service. This will enable us to identify properties to be pro-actively reviewed for earlier intervention.

We have also trialled our contact centre supporting our maintenance functions by contacting customers pro-actively with updates which has reduced escalations for call backs. We found that this reduced overdue cases significantly.

Adaptive and Improving
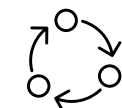
We are creating a culture of continuous improvement. We are using complaints and performance information to drive continual service improvements and measure those changes to make sure they meet the outcomes we need them to. For every complaint investigation, a learning log has to be completed so we can learn from every complaint.

Examples of how we are embedding this culture in relation to complaints include:

- Our complaints performance and information is scrutinised throughout our governance structure. Our Overlap Boards and Executive Board scrutinise our complaints performance and the learning from individual complaint cases where appropriate. Our Executive Board and Senior Leadership Team have also received deep dives on our complaint performance and resetting our complaint culture. Detailed scrutiny is also provided within our customer voice groups, operational panels and leadership teams.

- Sharing learning with colleagues within collaborative calls, our internal website and in person meetings. As an examples, we have shared learning following repair complaints at our Maintenance Leaders days so that we are learning from our mistakes and driving service improvement.

- We have introduced Learning Circles as an effective way to learn from our complaints. These allow us to learn from individual complaints using Restorative Practice principles, ensuring that complaints are considered in an open way that does not attribute blame and focuses on driving improvements as a result of the learning circle. Within these learning circles we have seen specific challenges discussed openly, resulting in ideas for improvement and prevention being shared. Issues discussed included resource, process, learning feedback, communication between teams, case management skills and systems used.

- Our internal audit team have carried out an audit focussing on our complaints case management and made several recommendations which was presented at the Group Audit Committee. We have acted on these to improve our service, including introducing that all stage 2 complaints are reviewed each month to drive service improvement.

- We have developed a new Dynamics Case Management Module for Complaints, which is live as of April 2024. This enables a reset of culture around complaints across our organisation and ensures that everyone has clarity as to what is expected of them within the complaints process. The system manages all communication through one system, providing a full audit trail.

  Learning from our complaints has directly influenced the development of this and we have ensured that this is linked to our repairs system, tracking all promised repairs though to completion and keeping the case manager informed throughout.

- We have reviewed and amended our Repairs and Maintenance Policy to provide better clarity following a complaint. This includes setting out who is responsible for updating customers where a repair moves from response repairs to planned maintenance, to remove ambiguity and ensure our customers receive a better service in similar instances.

- Our Right to Buy procedure was amended following a complaint, ensuring that a Regional Operations Director and the Home Ownership Manager will be involved in the decision-making process where there are repairs obligations.

- An internal audit was commissioned to provide recommendations to improve our approach to dealing with Pests and Infestations. This included developing a policy and revised procedure.

- Our new complaints system allows us upload and share photos. This was a direct result of complaints learning noting that we were not utilising photo uploads effectively at an initial stage, especially for damp and mould cases.

Housing Ombudsman

Annual Self-Assessments and Code Compliance

Our self-assessments against the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code can be found on our websites: (Self Assessment Form (asterwebsite.blob.core.windows.net))

Ombudsman Annual Report for Aster Group

The Housing Ombudsman's performance report for Aster Group for 2022-23 can be found here: Landlord-Report-Aster-Group-Limited.pdf (housing-ombudsman.org.uk). This year's report is likely to be published by Autumn 2024.

Our Maladministration Rate was 37% which is favourable when compared to a national Maladministration Rate of 55%. The Ombudsman noted that we performed similarly when compared to similar landlords by size and type.

Our findings for cases determined between April 2022 and March 2023 can be seen in this graph. Aster are compared to the average for landlords with more than 10,000 homes (the category that Aster fall into):

Legend: Landlords with more than 10,000 homes ■ Aster Group ■
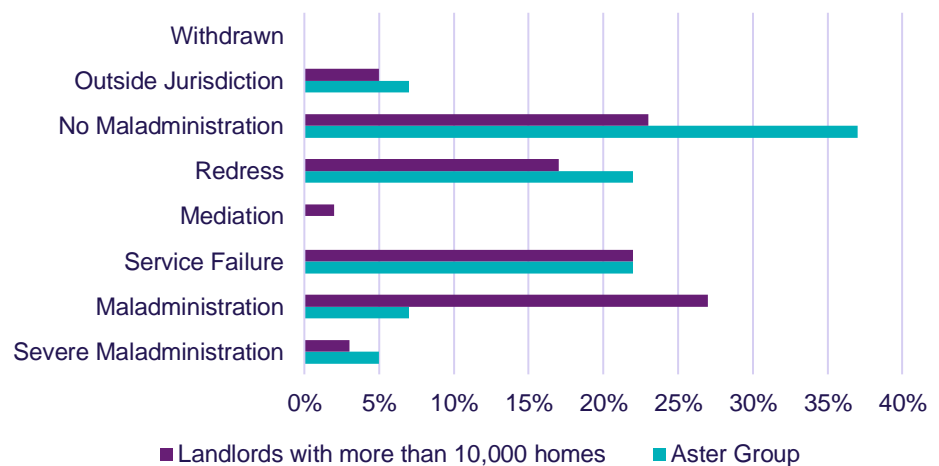
Ombudsman Publications for Aster Group

Eight Decisions have been published by the Ombudsman for the Aster Group, which can be found in full here:

Aster Group Limited (202214054) - Housing Ombudsman (housing-ombudsman.org.uk)
Aster Group Limited (202215791) - Housing Ombudsman (housing-ombudsman.org.uk)
Aster Group Limited (202201448) - Housing Ombudsman (housing-ombudsman.org.uk)
Aster Group Limited (202210364) - Housing Ombudsman (housing-ombudsman.org.uk)
Aster Group Limited (202210579) - Housing Ombudsman (housing-ombudsman.org.uk)
Aster Group Limited (202216842) - Housing Ombudsman (housing-ombudsman.org.uk)
Aster Group Limited (202205493) - Housing Ombudsman (housing-ombudsman.org.uk)
Aster Group Limited (202216313) - Housing Ombudsman (housing-ombudsman.org.uk)

Housing Ombudsman Determinations

Aster

There are currently 12 Aster complaint cases pending investigation by the Housing Ombudsman, with another 4 in the process of being prepared. 4 cases are subject to an Ombudsman's review, 2 requested by Aster and 2 requested by customers.

We received the outcome of one of the appeals on the 31st May 2024 where upon reviewing the actions of Aster the Housing Ombudsman amended their original decision regarding our handling of repairs from serve maladministration to maladministration.

In 2023/24 31 investigations were completed by the Housing Ombudsman.

Determinations

- No Maladministration 15
- Suitable redress 7
- Service Failure 9
- Maladministration 24
- Severe maladministration 3
- Outside of Jurisdiction 5

Predict **61%** Maladministration
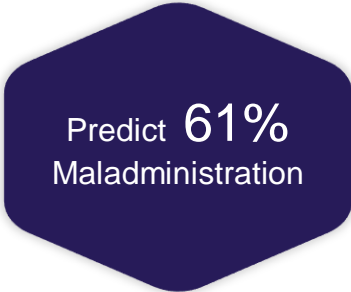
- We therefore had 36 Adverse findings and 22 with No Adverse findings, forecasting a Maladministration rate of 61% which is predicted to be within the Median range compared to other similar sized landlords.

Orders and Recommendations relating to non-compliance

The Housing Ombudsman issued 47 orders and 22 recommendations to Aster in 2023/24
The themes from these orders and recommendation are:

- Payment of addition compensation
- A personal or written apology to the customer
- Review complaint training to assist staff on understanding the impact on a customer when responding to a complaint.
- Agree timeframes with customer for completion of repairs
- Review the Housing Ombudsman Spotlight report on Damp and Mould and ensure staff awareness.
- Review of policy and procedure, specifically Letting, Voids, Right to Buy and Repairs policy to include Living Roofs.
- Review of staff training in relation to Living Roofs
- Additional training on NHBC warranties
- Earlier intervention for defect repairs when the developer isnt engaging with the customer.

All orders and recommendations have been complied with and Aster have had no Complaint Handling Failure Orders issued by the Housing Ombudsman.

Housing Ombudsman Determinations

Central and Cecil

There is 1 Central and Cecil complaint pending investigation by the Housing Ombudsman

In 2023/24 2 investigations were completed by the Housing Ombudsman.

Determinations

- No Maladministration 3
- Service Failure 1
- Maladministration 2

- We therefore had 3 Adverse findings and 3 with No Adverse findings, forecasting a Maladministration rate of 50%

Predict 50% Maladministration

Orders and Recommendations relating to non-compliance

The Housing Ombudsman issued 5 orders and 1 recommendation to Central and Cecil in 2023/24
The themes from these orders and recommendation are

- Awarding additional compensation
- A review of practices when raising complaints
- Introducing a Pest Control Policy
- A review of the C&C pest control contract provision
- Providing guidance and information on pest control on the website and customer newsletters

All orders and recommendations have been complied with and C&C have had no Complaint Handling Failure Orders issued by the Housing Ombudsman.

Enham and East Borough Housing

There is 1 Enham complaint pending investigation by the Housing Ombudsman

There are no complaints registered with the Housing Ombudsman for 2023/24 for East Borough Housing and no determinations.

Complaints not accepted by Aster or its Entities

Aster and its Entities have not recorded any complaints that they have refused to accept for 2023/24
We do take learning from this and have a new complaints module within Microsoft Dynamics which has a process built in to capture and complaints not accepted in 2024/25 to ensure compliance.

Customer Compliments

We use all insight available to drive a strong learning culture that enables us to improve our services, and this includes compliments relating to complaint handling as this helps us to share best practice to drive service improvement

Customer Feedback:

- Emma - Was spectacular, didn't give up and carried on until she found a solution that has now been resolved

- Thank you Aster. I reported that my boiler wasn't working at about 9.00am today Friday 26th April. It was treated as an emergency due to my wife's health. The engineer was here by 3.45pm and replaced a circuit board by 4.00pm. Brilliant service. I don't think that you would get better service than that anywhere.

- Customer would like to pass on his thanks to the 2 Aster response operatives who attended today in relation to a complaint , Tomasz and Shaun as he said they were amazing , kind and professional.

- I just wanted to give some feedback on what an amazing job Stacey is doing with dealing with my complaint. She is keeping me informed, her communication on email is comprehensive, and she's discussed outcomes with me along the way. She's great!

- Thank you for managing the issue I was having with my payment. Payment has now been made .Your concern and action gave me a totally different impression of the Aster group and a more positive view towards the repair of the wall . Thank you again Mr Taylor.

- Thank you for your time earlier to talk us through your investigation and your findings. I have reviewed the letter and accept your conclusions so will now sign, scan and send to the complaint team to process. John and I would like to thank you for your thoroughness, openness and professionalism throughout our conversation with you and your handling of stage 2 of our complaint. We are very much reassured from our interaction with you and feel confident that in the unlikely event of further issues, that you and your team would be able to quickly address them so many thanks for that.
  Thanks again for your help in progressing things to resolution.

- I think people are quick to complain when someone's got it wrong but never actually say when people get it right. Kane has been great, he came to the property actioned all the repairs, has kept me up to date. He's just been there, he's listened, he's been supportive.