

# Housing Ombudsman - Spotlight on: Attitudes, respect and rights

---

## Introduction

The Housing Ombudsman has published its latest spotlight report on attitudes, respect and rights. The report assesses what it means to be vulnerable in social housing in 2024, what “vulnerable” means and how social landlords can better respond to the needs of those residents. You can read the full report [here](#).

The report follows analysis of the Ombudsman’s recent caseload (complaints) and a call for evidence published in June 2023 asking:

- What the main barriers to effective communication are
- What main issues advocacy services are asked to support residents with and whether they had seen an increase in requests for assistance
- Residents’ experiences of requesting reasonable adjustments

As a result of findings from the report, the Ombudsman calls for a broader, more embracing concept of vulnerability, based around individual circumstances with no shame. It argues that society’s appreciation of mental health, dementia, autism, neurodiversity and much more is evolving, and social landlords’ services cannot be isolated from this evolution. A landlord’s approach will be more effective the more it can focus on an individual’s circumstances.

---

## Key findings

The Ombudsman received 1,663 responses to their call for evidence:

- 1,275 from residents
- 171 from landlords
- 217 from advocacy services

Residents rated their landlords on a scale of 1-5 on their communications around:

- Updates to repair requests
- Changes to rent and service charges
- Changes to their named housing officer
- Changes to policy, guidance or legislation
- How to make a complaint
- How their landlord is performing.

Most residents rated their landlords between 3 and 5 when keeping them informed around changes to their rent and services charges. However, for everything else more than half of residents rated their landlord one – the lowest possible score.

Of the 1,275 residents who responded, 58% said they considered themselves to have a disability and of those only 19% said their landlord had made reasonable adjustments for them.

A strong theme in resident responses was digital exclusion, with many respondents reporting a “one size fits all” approach to communication which often doesn’t reach the whole intended audience and

fails to consider individual circumstances. Residents also reported difficulties trying to contact their landlord.

Landlords also reported barriers to effective communication with their residents, with the main reasons for this being reported as a lack of resources, breakdown of trust and communication preferences.

94% of advocacy services reported that there had been an increase in support requests over the past 18 months. Staff at citizens advice also reported an increase in requests for support from social housing residents. The main issue advocacy services reported being asked for support with was repairs (including damp and mould).

Many advocacy services described the attitude of social housing providers negatively, with one stating that housing officers have become completely disillusioned with the work they do. There is a perception amongst respondents that landlords are not interested in responding promptly to complaints and that residents face difficulty getting listened to.

## Insight from casework

Casework suggests that the issues around communications and relationships can be split into two areas: people (behaviours and attitudes of landlord staff) and processes (external and internal frameworks the landlord adheres to).

### People

Regardless of the demographics of those involved or the type of service provision, the overarching theme was the way the landlord communicated with its resident. The main areas of concern included insensitivity, dismissing the resident and their lived experiences and offensiveness, including an accusatory tone. These attitudes often resorted in allegations of discrimination of unfavourable treatment which was then compounded by a failure to give respect and recognition and investigate the allegation.

### Processes

The casework found failure to act on vulnerabilities because they were not recorded on the system, or a failure to take known vulnerabilities into account when making decisions or providing a service. Many findings of severe maladministration are made in cases where the resident was vulnerable. Recording vulnerabilities is the first step in providing a sensitive and responsive service. This information must be kept up to date, be accessible and be shared and used appropriately.

The Ombudsman states that when considering its approach to vulnerabilities and individual circumstances, meeting legal requirements should be the baseline, not the aspiration and that landlords should consider creative, person-centred and bespoke responses to the individual needs of residents.

There is a lack of understanding around reasonable adjustments and what the landlords' obligations are in this area. Landlords are often unable to evidence how they respond to requests for reasonable adjustments and where policies are in place it was found that these are not always adhered to.

There is evidence from the casework that landlords are sometimes subject to unwarranted and unpleasant verbal abuse from residents and in other circumstances are subject to excessive contact from residents which can be difficult to respond to and manage. In this case, the landlord may need to implement an unreasonable behaviour policy or process.

Casework also found that landlords were reaching conclusions and presenting these as the factual position without evidence of a full investigation. It was also found that often, once a matter is raised as a formal complaint, the resident has already repeatedly expressed concern about communication and procedural issues and has been dissatisfied with the landlord's response. Rather than being an opportunity to reset the balance, address the issues fully and restore the resident's confidence, complaint handling sometimes only serves to reinforce residents' feelings of unimportance, unfairness and inequality.

## Recommendations

The report concludes that there is a pressing need for landlords to adapt and meet the needs of all their residents and ensure the most vulnerable residents are not left behind. It states that for many landlords, their current approach is potentially inadequate for responding effectively to the needs of the population it serves.

The Ombudsman outlines 28 recommendations for government, social landlords and complaints handlers. Recommendations to landlords include:

- To review mission statements to ensure they reflect current and future services
- To undertake a review at Board level as to whether they are offering a “human-centric” service provision
- To review vulnerability policies in conjunction with current practice – including defining what is meant by ‘vulnerability’ which it recognises is a very wide term.
- To implement a vulnerability strategy and a specific reasonable adjustments policy
- To introduce minimum staff training requirements including training on customer care, mental health, learning disabilities and sight and hearing loss
- To consider a dedicated taskforce for vulnerability
- To conduct a forecast of the future to identify any gaps in services for residents into the future
- To raise awareness of the complaints procedure and make sure it's accessible for residents who may face barriers
- To ensure the complaints policy permits complaints about staff conduct, attitudes and approach
- To establish and enforce a clear process for how complaints about bullying / discrimination will be investigated.

It also sets out recommendations for government and policy makers, including:

- Creating a new Royal Commission on housing, aiming to recognise housing policy as a health intervention
- Proposing a long-term strategy for social housing.

---

## Implications for Riverside

This latest report from the Housing Ombudsman is another key report for social landlords to read and understand. It is particularly interesting because not only does it make practical recommendations drawing from its own experience as an arbiter of serious complaints, but it also makes wider policy recommendations about the fundamental purpose of social housing and its role in meeting wider outcomes, including health. In doing this it pays little consideration to the resources available to landlords, the role of other stakeholders, and the need to tackle some of the issues

identified for residents living in other tenures such as the private rented sector. Because of the relatively narrow lens it brings to its analysis, it also completely misses some areas of good practice in the sector, including the provision by many landlords of tenancy sustainment services which go over and beyond core landlord services.

We recognise the need for customers to be at the heart of our business and for any decisions we make, as well as our policies and procedures, to take into account a customers' individual needs. This is one of the key themes of our ED&I strategy, as well as a major area of work being picked up as part of our preparation for the new Consumer Regulation regime.

Riverside will need to consider the recommendations from the Ombudsman in this context to determine whether there is further work we need to do to our policies, procedures, systems or practices to address the needs of vulnerable customers.

---

## Reactions from the sector

[National Housing Federation - Housing Ombudsman launches spotlight report on attitudes, rights and respect](#)

[CIH respond to the Housing Ombudsman's Spotlight Report | Chartered Institute of Housing](#)

[Housing Ombudsman calls for Royal Commission to create long-term plan for social housing - HQN \(hqnetwork.co.uk\)](#)

---

If you require further detail on any information in this briefing, please contact: Emily Pumford, Policy and Strategy Advisor [emily.pumford@riverside.org.uk](mailto:emily.pumford@riverside.org.uk)