

Curo Annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report 2023-24

Executive summary

When someone complains to Curo, we take this seriously. It means a customer is feeling frustrated, upset, unsafe or inconvenienced, and often that we have made a mistake or failed to deliver to the standard they and we expect.

We have continued to manage complaints in line with our policy and the Housing Ombudsman's Code of Conduct through this year, albeit in the context of high complaint volumes and increasing complexity, which has meant we have sometimes fallen short in some areas.

The ongoing cost of living crisis together with the legacy of the pandemic in terms of skills shortages in some key areas, have affected our ability to respond swiftly. However, so have changes to the benefits system, a more proactive national advertising campaign and substantial increases in no win/no fee legal firms targeting social housing residents. We know we can and must do better, so in response, we:

- Increased the size of the complaints team from four to seven colleagues
- Increased provision of complaints training for colleagues around the business
- Developed a new dashboard which provides all our teams with more detailed information on every complaint
- Listened to customer feedback and changed how we manage complaints
- Prioritised our focus on complaints at Board and Executive meetings
- Created a centralised support hub for property services teams, where most of our complaints sit
- Reported and discussed complaints performance at regular colleague briefings

However, we know we need to do more and in the year ahead we are making a series of further changes to improve our performance and culture. The key areas of focus will include:

- Recruiting an analyst to focus on learning from complaints and other forms of feedback
- Using root cause analysis and pattern recognition to learn from previous mistakes and avoid waste
- Reviewing our repairs model to eliminate waste and mistakes
- Making our service teams and managers directly accountable for complaints
- Simplifying our complaints model to reduce confusion and duplication of effort
- Moving the complaints function to the CEO's office

- Creating a Customer Services Committee of the Board which, in amongst other activities, will provide greater governance scrutiny over complaints performance and learning

This report sets out the key aspects of our complaint handling performance in 2023/24, highlights the areas where we need to get better, and summarises the service improvements we have made as a result of complaints activity.

The Curo Board reviewed this report at its meeting in May 2024, and has provided a response which has been published alongside this report on our website. Our Customer Oversight Group, which meets bi-monthly to review our overall performance (including complaints), also reviewed this report in May 2024, and its comments were included in this final version.

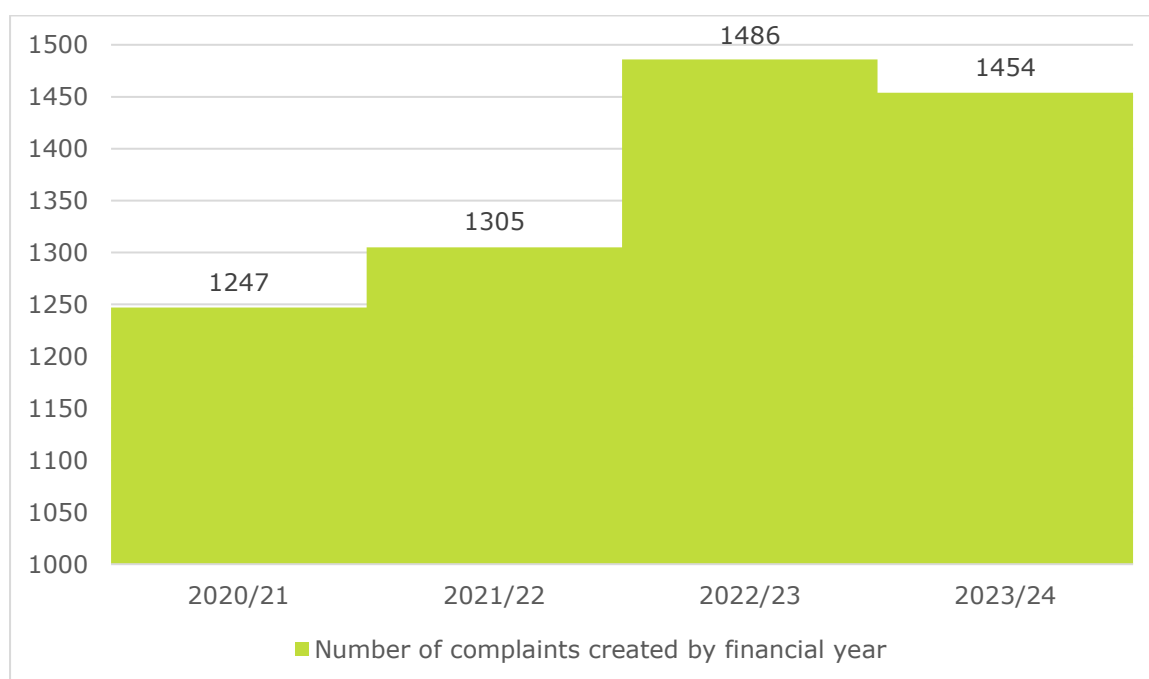
Victor da Cunha

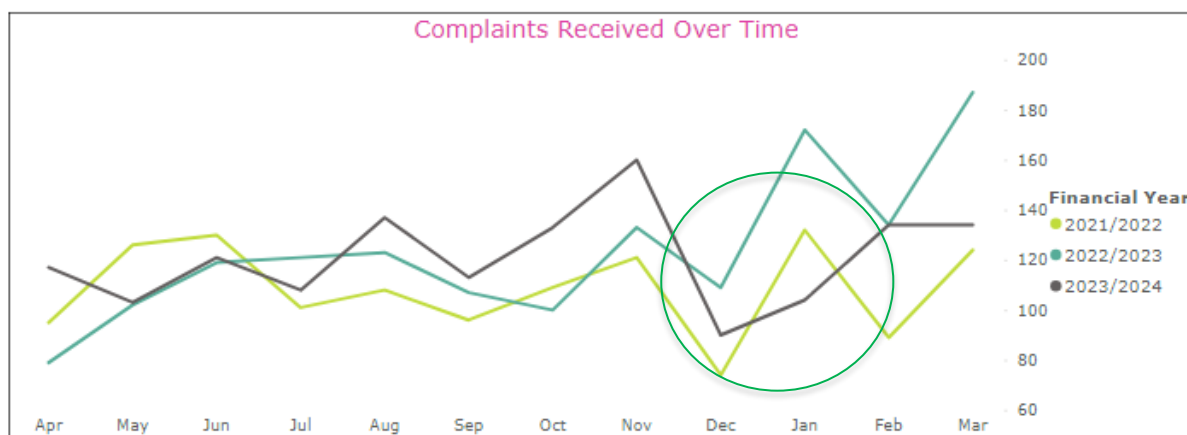
CEO and Board Member Responsible for Complaints

1. Summary of complaints handling performance

The following graphs and commentary detail how we have performed against a series of measures.

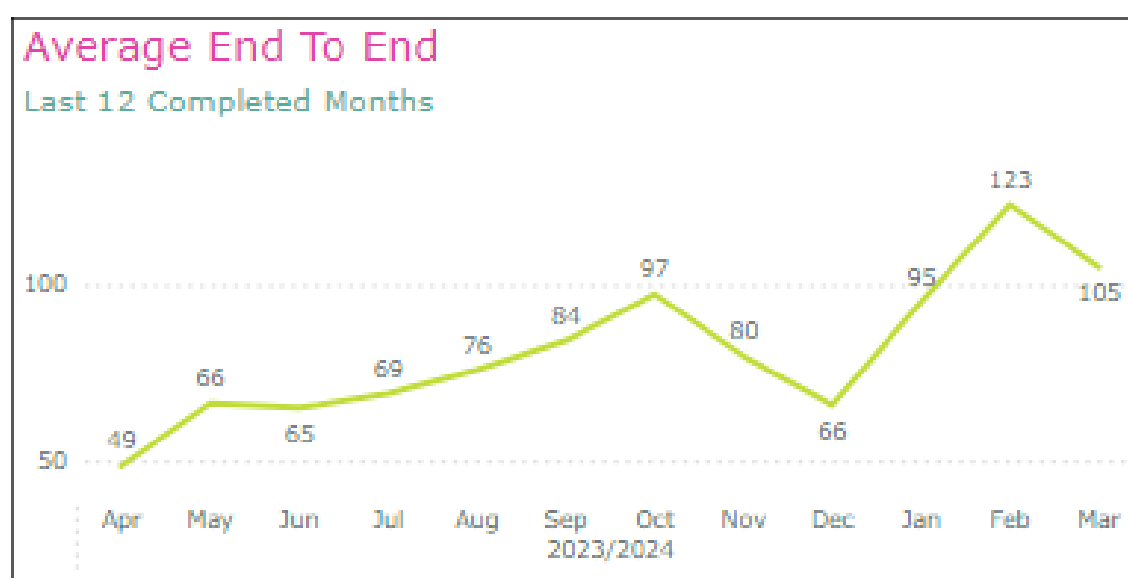
Total number of complaints received





The total number of new complaints increased in each of the previous four years, but we saw a slight reduction last year. Partly this was due to the way holiday dates fell over the Christmas and New Year period. Additionally, at this same time, our trades team engaged in overtime work during weekends to expedite repairs, and we recruited new surveyors which allowed us to respond to some complaints more quickly.

Average End-to-End Time (days)



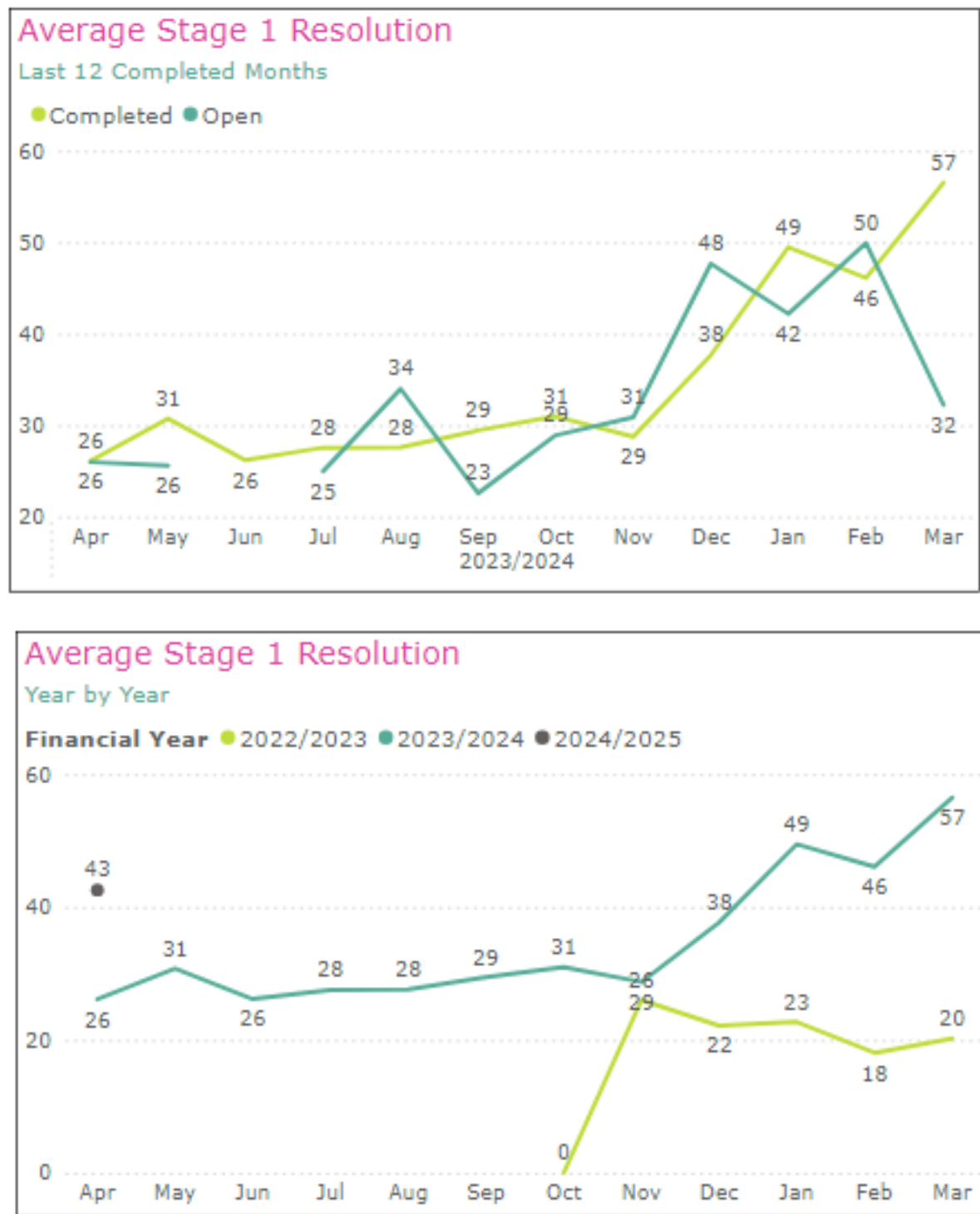
Overall we have seen our end-to-end time increase, which means customers are sometimes waiting longer and becoming more frustrated and we recognise the urgent need to reverse this trend.

We have seen complaints become more complex this year, with customers often adding elements to their complaint as it progresses, or referring to issues first mentioned more than 12 months ago. We have also seen an increase in customers refusing to allow us access to their homes to carry out work which would resolve a complaint.

These delays in turn have led to a rise in escalations to stage 2, which we have struggled to cope with within the timescales set out in the Housing

Ombudsman’s Complaints Handling Code. Addressing these challenges remains a priority as we endeavour to improve our complaint resolution process and minimise turnaround times.

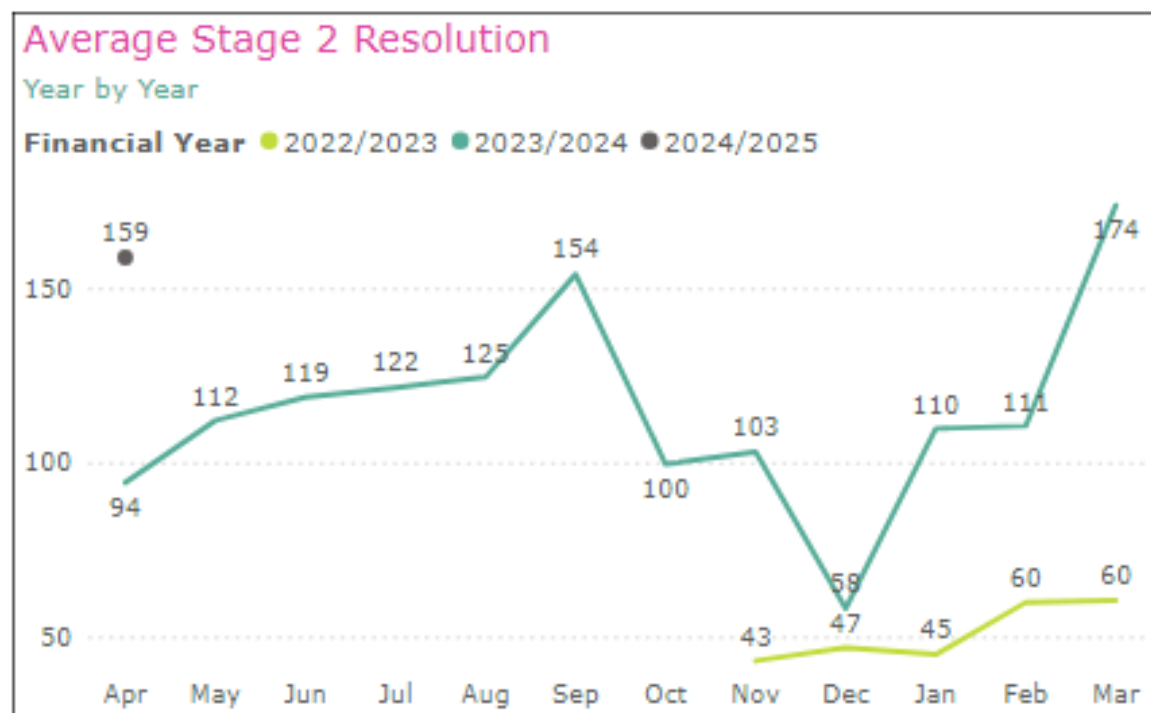
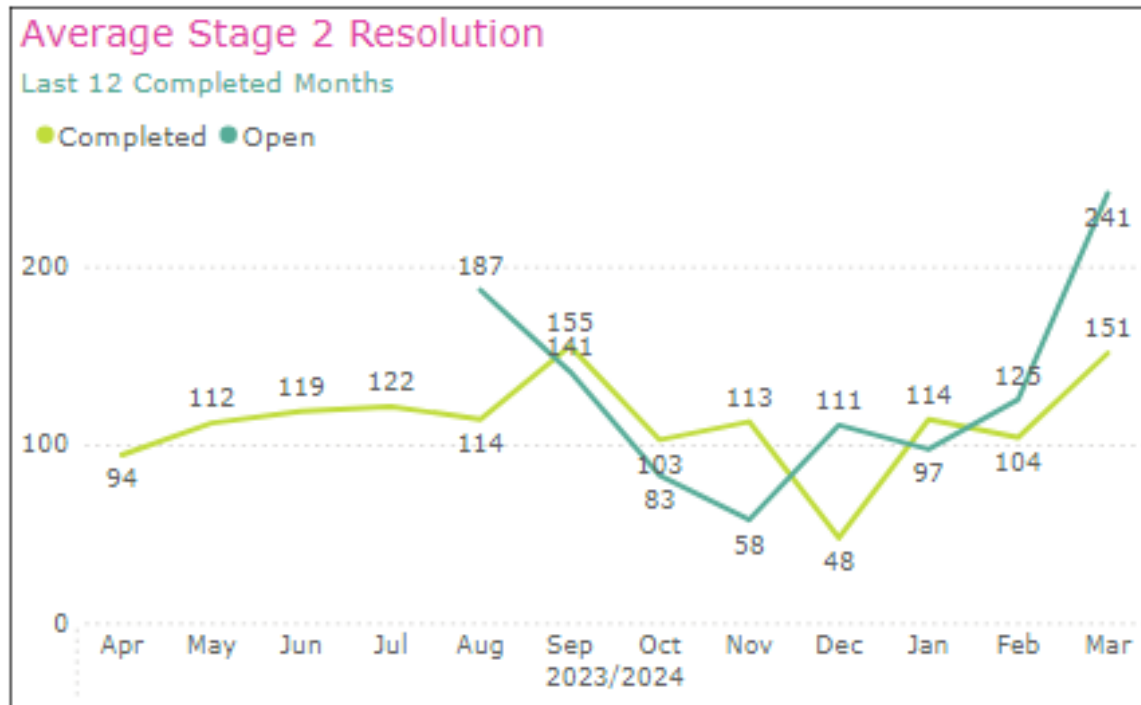
Average Resolution Time Stage 1:



As you can see from the graphs above, the average time to agree resolution at Stage 1 has been volatile month-on-month. There was a spike in December and January, when our offices were closed for the extended holiday period. Where

there is a delay in reaching a resolution with the customer, we will request a 10-working day extension in order to fully respond to all the complaint concerns.

Average Resolution Time Stage 2



It is taking us significantly longer to agree resolutions on Stage 2 complaints. The main factors for these delays are the complex nature of most of the complaints being escalated, and a growing backlog of cases we have been struggling to work through. As per the Ombudsman guidelines, when we know

we will be unable to begin addressing a case within 20 working days, we explain this to the customer.

In order to address the backlog, a number of our senior managers have taken responsibility for managing these Stage 2 cases to resolution which we expect will eliminate our backlog in the next few months. At the end of 23/24 we had 49 Stage 2 complaints in our backlog; at the time of writing, we have reduced this to 19.

Occasionally, we may refuse to accept a complaint. We don't have a blanket approach to refusals and will consider the facts and specific circumstances of each complaint when making a decision to refuse. If we do refuse to accept a complaint, we will always explain the reasons behind our decision to the customer.

Summary: performance against core metrics

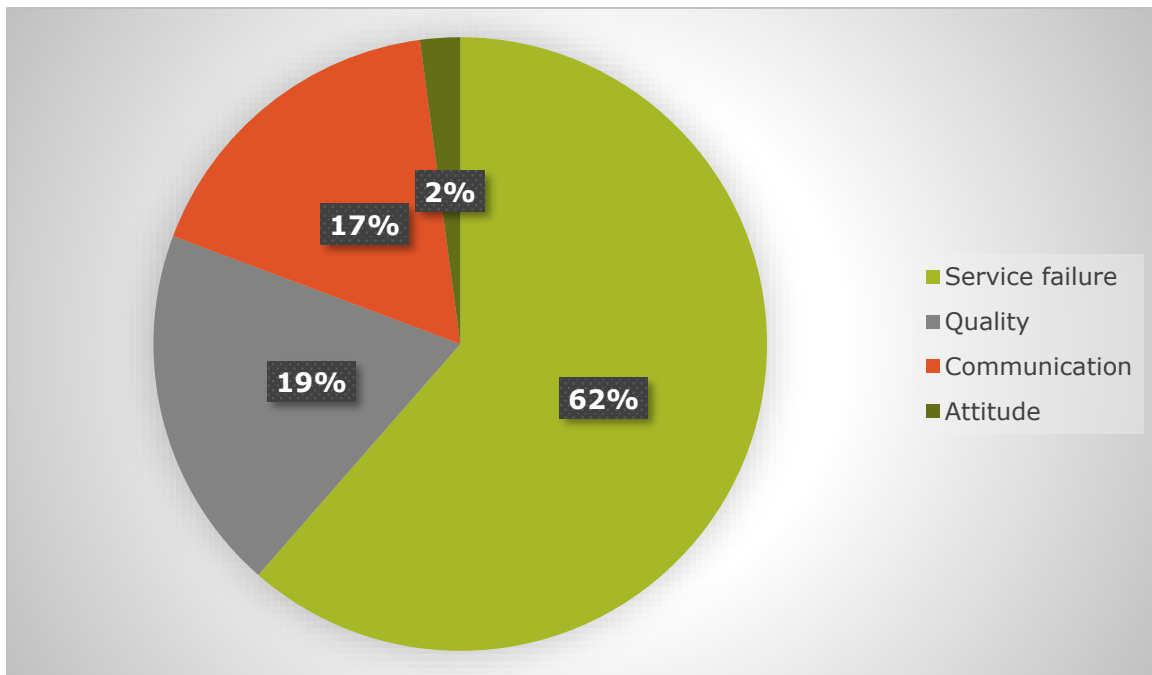
This table sets out performance last year and compares to the year before.

Measure	2022-23	2023-24	Variance
Number of complaints received	1486	1454	-34
Average time to reach a resolution (days)*	40.4	55	+14.6
Average time to resolve a complaint (days)*	56.6	81.7	+25.1
Percentage of cases resolved at first stage	74.23%	78.04%	+3.81%
Percentage of cases resolved at stage 2	19.21%	20.93%	+1.72%
Percentage of cases resolved at Management Review (old process)	6.48%	0.80%	-5.68%
Percentage of customers satisfied with Customer Resolution Service	59.3%	70.3%	+11%

** Average number of days to reach an agreed resolution is the time spent investigating the issue and agreeing with the customer what a suitable solution will be. Average time to resolve a complaint is the full time a complaint is open, right up until the issue is fully resolved.*

The data above confirms that we are taking too long to reach a resolution and to ultimately resolve complaints. We have however increased the proportion of complaints resolved at first stage – which is good news for customers – and also seen a significant increase in customer satisfaction.

2. Causes of Complaints



The main theme last year was **service delay**, which is unchanged from previous years. Repairs which were to be attended during the lockdown periods had to be rescheduled, and difficulties recruiting tradespeople in the post-pandemic period took our repairs order book to just over 4000 open jobs, almost double our normal target. Residents were experiencing long wait times for a tradesperson and becoming frustrated if the repair could not be completed on the first visit, as this meant they had to wait for another appointment.

Our residents also experienced serious delays due to challenges faced by our Specialist Works team who deal with more complex issues like damp, mould and leaks. High staff turnover, a very challenging recruitment market and poor contractor performance were persistent challenges, alongside ongoing material and other cost increases which have been significantly higher than the increase in rents we can charge.

Curo also maintain a large number of older 'heritage' homes which are more likely to require major structural works. This means we rely on the use of contractors which has also caused some delays based on their availability.

By the end of the financial year however, we have reduced our Repairs order book to 2,000 jobs, recruited a full team of surveyors in our Specialist Works team, and started to appoint a new roster of specialist contractors, alongside a dedicated in-house team of contract business partners, to ensure those contracts deliver value for our customers. We have already seen the wait time for repairs and surveyor visits reduce significantly, and we expect this to have a strong bearing on our complaints cases going forward.

With the full review of our repairs model starting in July, we anticipate this will also improve the **quality** of the repairs we carry out, and therefore reduce this as a cause of complaints.

Communication is again a major cause of complaints, and something the Customer Oversight Group felt particularly important. The main change we are making to improve communication at every step of a complaint is training our Property Service support hub, so that all colleagues understand the importance of keeping customers regularly updated. This team supports all our repairs and maintenance services, and are therefore involved in the vast majority of our complaints.

Currently **Communication** is also the focus of our latest customer scrutiny activity, and this is due to report in July.

3. Housing Ombudsman cases

If customers are not satisfied with the way we have responded to their complaint, they can ask the Housing Ombudsman to review their case. We make sure that all of our customers are aware of their right to do this. Last year, the Housing Ombudsman accepted 17 cases for investigation from our customers. This is an increase from the previous year in which five cases were investigated.

Most of the cases concern repairs, particularly for damp and mould. This was not unexpected due to the increased awareness and concern among residents about damp and mould, which was also the subject of a Spotlight report by the Housing Ombudsman, the recommendations from which have been built into our service model.

There has also been an increase in the complexity of cases which are referred to the Housing Ombudsman, some of which span years of frequent contact between us and the resident. We have also seen a greater focus from the Ombudsman on our responsibility to have an accurate record of residents' specific needs and disabilities so we can make reasonable adjustments to our services and accommodate their individual needs.

In addition to the cases which have progressed to investigation, we received 11 'nudges' from the Housing Ombudsman last year. A 'nudge' is where the resident has contacted the Ombudsman while their complaint is still open. This suggests that more of our residents are aware of the role of the Housing Ombudsman and how they can contact them.

	Reason for complaint	Housing Ombudsman determination
1.	Damp and mould	Maladministration for damp and mould, missed appointments, record keeping and complaint handling.
2.	Repair to gutter	Maladministration for repair to gutter and service failure for complaint handling
3.	Multi-faceted complaint concerning sharing of information with resident's advocate, offer of stay in respite accommodation, serving court papers	Data security and discrimination not within jurisdiction of Housing Ombudsman. No maladministration

	to address, response to reports of ASB, alleged discrimination and quality of complaint handling	but service failure for complaint handling
4.	Rat infestation	Severe maladministration for handling of pests in property and maladministration for complaint handling. The Ombudsman is currently reviewing its findings and orders.
5.	Delay in installing new oven	Reasonable redress (the Housing Ombudsman is satisfied that we offered a reasonable resolution)
6.	Condition of garden with respect to child's disability	No maladministration but service failure for complaint handling.
7.	Multi-faceted complaint concerning decision to assign single point of contact, behaviour of staff, repairs to driveway, toilet seat, path and render of property, consent request and handling of reports that property is cold and draughty	Under investigation. The Ombudsman has requested additional information.
8.	Sinking fund charges and request for breakdown of estimated costs	Maladministration for handling of service charge query and service failure for complaint handling.
9.	Handling of ASB case.	Under assessment (investigation being considered by the Housing Ombudsman)
10.	Curo not completing works the resident requested in the back garden.	Under investigation
11.	Multi-faceted complaint concerning service charge obligations, grounds maintenance and the resident's responsibilities for maintaining the property.	Under investigation
12.	Quality of and length of time taken to complete works to resolve damp	Under investigation
13.	Location of bin collection point	Under investigation
14.	Damp in bedroom	Severe maladministration for handling of reports of damp and mould. Maladministration for complaint handling. The Ombudsman is currently reviewing its findings and orders.
15.	Conduct of gas engineer. Resident also feels we have failed to recognise their needs as a wheelchair user.	Under investigation
16.	Damp and mould in property	Under investigation

17.	Reoccurring roof leaks leading to damp and mould and electrical issues. Resident feels we have failed to take their disability into consideration.	Under assessment
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During 2023/24, we received our first two determinations of severe maladministration.

Both cases have been subject to review in which we have asked the Housing Ombudsman to consider additional evidence. We have received a final determination for one of these cases and are currently in the process of complying with the Housing Ombudsman's remaining orders. The other case is still under review but we have complied with all orders of the original determination as far as we can.

We have also received four determinations of maladministration which is an increase from last year in which we received two.

Whenever we receive feedback (particularly determinations which conclude we were at fault) we hold case conferences with relevant teams and leaders. This has allowed us to learn lessons from previous mistakes.

We comply with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code and our self-assessment of compliance (as required by that Code) is appended to this report.

We confirm that during 2023/24 the Housing Ombudsman did not issue any findings of non-compliance against us in respect of the Complaints Handling Code, or issue any annual reports (or other relevant reports or publications) about us.

4. Complaints Review Forum & Scrutiny

We continue to meet with residents for our quarterly Complaints Review Forum, where customers review 3-4 anonymised complaints and each customer advises whether they give Curo a pass or fail, based on how we handled the complaint. The results from each meeting are as follows:

Date of meeting	Pass	Fail	Undecided
June	19	1	0
September	14	4	1
December	15	2	0
March	24	0	0

This equates to an overall pass rate of 90% which is broadly in line with the previous year. As a result of the discussions at the Forum, we have made a number of changes to our complaints handling approach, and we look forward to working with the group in the next year.

Our Customer Oversight Group commissions scrutiny activities, which are then carried out by other customers three or four times each year. Last year one of these scrutinies was on Complaints Management, and this yielded 55 recommendations, 53 of which have now been implemented, with the two remaining recommendations being actively pursued.

Through both the scrutiny and the ongoing work of the Complaints Review Forum, we have made the following positive changes to how we work:

- Reviewed the tone of voice and language of complaints correspondence
- Changed the way customer satisfaction requests are sent to complaint customers
- We now include Ombudsman determinations in discussions with Complaints Review Forum
- Improved the complaints support information and tools available to customers via our website
- Introduced reminders for colleagues who manage live complaints

5. Service improvement

We have a number of mechanisms in place which allow us to improve our services based on the complaints we receive. This includes:

- Reviewing Housing Ombudsman Spotlight Reports on key issues, and considering relevant changes to our policies or procedures
- Using the Housing Ombudsman Learning Centre
- At a team level, reviewing the data on our updated dashboard, to identify patterns and problems which can be rectified or mitigated
- At a corporate level, running formal case conferences to learn from every Ombudsman determination
- Informal case conferences involving senior managers from relevant services when a complex complaint is received
- Feedback from any of our resident engagement activities – passed on to the relevant service team via the Resident Involvement team – in particular:
 - Discussion at our Oversight Group where customers scrutinise complaints data
 - Feedback from our Complaints Review Forum
 - Feedback from Scrutiny activities throughout the year

We recognise that we have more work to do to embed these methods across our operations, and we have recently recruited a Data Analyst to sharpen our focus on root cause analysis and data patterns.

During 23/24, we made the following improvements to our services, based on the above feedback and learning mechanisms. This is in addition to the improvements listed under section 4.

- We have agreed to change how we 'pre-inspect' with our Surveyors, providing more information whilst on site with the customer, but also providing a copy of what has happened and what has been agreed with the customer and sent to the Contractor. This is being produced in a simple format and will reduce the issue of customers not knowing what works are due and why, and will support our teams to progress works orders more effectively and accurately.
- We are in the process of bringing our Specialist Works surveyors into our Responsive Repairs service, under one manager, as the separation of these teams was one of the root causes of the complexity which led to delays to customers' repairs. We believe this will improve diagnosis and reduce turnaround times.
- We have developed a pre-eviction protocol in our supported housing services, to ensure customers with specific needs are treated fairly, and we have considered all adjustments and options, before going any further with potential possession proceedings.

Complex repairs

More significantly, our analysis of complaint data revealed a recurring trend in challenges faced by customers seeking complex repairs, particularly during interactions with surveyors or contractors.

So we have conducted a comprehensive review to identify key insights and avenues for improvement aimed at preventing extended repair periods and improving customer communication.

Our efforts have culminated in three extensive 'journey mapping' sessions, aimed at thoroughly understanding the root causes of this type of complaint. These sessions delved into:

- The customer journey
- The colleague journey
- The ideal journey

We involved multiple teams in this and integrated customer feedback and complaints data into our analysis. From the insights gleaned, we have crafted a roadmap to our desired future state. This has been split into four sections:

- Pre inspection report (currently in testing)
- Post inspection report (currently in testing)
- Contractor management data (expected to be complete after Summer 24)
- Contact model training roll out (due to be complete July 24)

Customer Contact Team

We have also made a series of changes in our Customer Contact Team, who have undergone significant training on our complaint handling processes. We've meticulously aligned ourselves with the Housing Ombudsman Code, embedding its principles across our policies, procedures, training modules, and system

workflows. In instances where Code requirements are not met, we promptly adjust our compensation offers, and at the December 2023 meeting with the Complaint Review Forum, we reviewed all our complaints documentation and procedures.

One indicator of improvement is the rise in satisfaction with our complaint management over the past few years. We've witnessed a substantial 11.7% increase in satisfaction levels from 2022/23, which itself saw an improvement on previous years. We have also seen our highest-ever percentage of cases being resolved at Stage 1.

6. The future

This report has highlighted a number of changes we implemented during the 23/24 year, and others which are now in progress. We recognise that improvements are required to reduce the time we are taking to resolve complaints, and we have recently agreed with our Board a set of further changes which we believe will accelerate this improvement.

In addition to the recent recruitment of a specialist data analyst who will push our teams in terms of learning, we are also piloting a new approach to complaints handling in which our service teams will take much more responsibility for communicating with customers, agreeing resolutions, and then putting things right. These changes are likely to take effect in the second half of 24/25.

Here is a summary of the improvement activities we will be delivering over the course of the year ahead:

Activity	Intended Outcome	Target date
Pilot for new complaints handling model	Teams take more responsibility for complaints, waiting times reduce	Q3
Recruiting data analyst	Routinely carry out root cause analysis to identify patterns and learn from mistakes	Q1/2
Dedicated in-house team of contract business partners	Improved performance by contractors on complex jobs	Q1
Board Committee for Customer Service launched	Greater scrutiny of complaints performance at Board level	Q3
Full review of our repairs model	Further improvements to quality and speed of service	Q2/3
Scrutiny panel focus on communication	Recommendations put in place to improve customer communication	Q2

Our Self-assessment of compliance with the Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code is appended, together with a response to this report from the Curo Group Board.