

**Follow up report: Spotlight on
Noise complaints – Time to be
Heard**

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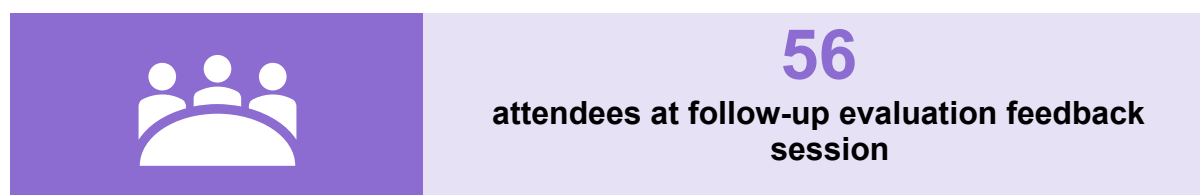
Introduction

This follow-up report summarises our evaluation of our Spotlight on noise complaints, [Time to be Heard](#), which we published in October 2022.

We contacted landlords who had attended our initial webinar and all landlords who had featured in the report. We also contacted an additional five landlords who had not featured in the report but have had an increase in their maladministration rate regarding noise or anti-social behaviour (ASB) complaints. All five of these landlords responded.

We asked landlords what changes or improvements they had made, or intend to make, as a result of the Spotlight report and its recommendations.


We have set out the themes identified from the evaluation and highlighted areas of practice which landlords feel have been successful. This will be explored more in our Centre for Learning resource materials.



Covering
19%
of social housing in England



Maladministration rate	2022-23	2023-24*
Noise	45%	68%
All other ASB	39%	67%



The most common response to the Spotlight report is a self-assessment against the report's recommendations (60%) and implementing an action plan.

Only 4% of the landlords who responded told us they had not made any changes as a result of the report.

Policies and procedures

“We soon realised that there was an opportunity for us to:

- consider things that we previously hadn't,
- review some pertinent policies and practices relating to this subject matter, and
- help re-shape mindsets so that we are more open to the potential contributing factors underlying noise complaints/enquiries.”

- Landlord quote

Our call for evidence for *Time to be Heard* highlighted that 76% of landlords dealt with noise reports under their ASB policy, despite both residents and landlords telling us that household noise was the issue most complained about, not ASB.

Throughout *Time to Be Heard*, we emphasised the impact of noise being incorrectly identified and treated by landlords as ASB. We asked landlords to consider developing a strategy for handling non-statutory noise and to treat such reports seriously, sensitively and proportionately.

This message appears to have resonated with landlords. 45% of landlords now have, or are planning, a good neighbourhood management policy. 38% of landlords said they have reviewed their existing policies and procedures. 22% of landlords now have, or are planning, a separate noise policy.

Other changes made include:

- the introduction of timescales for responding to noise complaints, ensuring these are monitored and that they form the basis of any service level agreements with third parties
- changing the mediation approach to 'conversation, not confrontation'
- triaging noise complaints to ascertain whether they fall under household noise or ASB

Case study – Sensitive handling of noise and proportionate use of resources

Miss L reported she was hearing noise from her radiators. The landlord attended to inspect them and found no issues.

Later that month, Miss L reported the communal lift was making a loud noise. The maintenance company responsible for the lift attended and, although they found no faults, they did switch off a fan that may have been generating noise.

Miss L reported further noise issues later the same month and said the noise was coming from the boiler room. She also raised a formal complaint that the noise situation was not being managed appropriately. The landlord attended again and checked the heating system and Miss L's radiators. No noise or defects were detected.

The landlord responded to Miss L's complaint and said that although it was satisfied with the actions it had taken, it would continue to monitor the situation. It also provided details of Miss L's housing officer as a point of contact.

Miss L remained dissatisfied with the noise and the landlord's head of property compliance visited the property with a mechanical engineer. They inspected the lift and the boiler room; no faults were detected. The landlord offered Miss L its 'guest flat.' Miss L attempted to sleep there, but felt the noise was worse there and so returned to her home.

The landlord checked to see whether any residents had complained about the noise. No other complaints had been made.

Miss L continued to complain about the noise and so the landlord completed a 'resident risk assessment' that recorded that the noise had been reported as still present, but all checks had been done without any indication of faults.

We found no maladministration. The landlord had responded to Miss L's individual concerns and continued to monitor and carry out checks, even after initial checks indicated there were no faults at the property. The landlord did not try and diminish

Miss L's experience and instead, offered her the use of its 'guest flat' in order to try and provide her with some respite from the situation. This approach showed it considered Miss L's wellbeing.

Void standard

“We've taken a different approach following the Spotlight report and have started to install sound proofing measures and carpets where we know noise is an issue.”

- Landlord quote

Our *Time to Be Heard* Spotlight report encouraged landlords to focus more on preventative actions, including making better use of the void standard to help reduce noise concerns for incoming residents. The report suggests that actions taken to prevent and/or mitigate for the typical sources of noise nuisance will, in the long run, be more cost-efficient than handling noise complaints, and provide a better quality of service to residents.

It is encouraging to see that a third of landlords told us they have made improvements and changes to their void standard and that the benefits of this are already being seen.

Two landlords told us they plan to review their void standards, and a further four said they have also reviewed their existing tenancy conditions.

The changes made to void standard policies and procedures include:

- installation of soft door-closure mechanisms, door pads and/or anti-vibration washing machine mats
- leaving carpets in the property if they are in a good condition, and identifying any other items, including curtains and furniture, which could also be left in the property to help with noise transference
- making floor repairs to reduce noise transference and including thicker acoustic matting where appropriate
- establishing a void standard review group
- changing the void standard to include more substantial works, which were usually scheduled for a later date once the resident had moved in, reducing net repairs costs
- removing laminate and hardwood flooring during void works
- reviewing previous reports of noise from the property and conducting noise insulation checks

- review of the pre-lettings checklist to improve the amount of information collected about the vacant property and surrounding area before advertising and matching with a new tenant
- window upgrade programmes

Landlords have begun securing funding to help residents purchase carpets prior to their tenancy starting. One landlord told us they had secured £133,000 in grants for residents during the last financial year whilst other landlords told us about their hardship funds for residents who cannot afford to carpet the property.

Landlords who attended the evaluation feedback session also spoke of making “better use” of the void standard, such as more inter-department conversations between voids, assets and planning teams.

These examples highlight some of the practical measures that can be taken to help reduce noise issues for incoming residents and reducing the likelihood of complaints.

Language, approach and communication

“Since the Spotlight on noise report, we have reviewed the tone of voice of our letters and have tone of voice champions to assist with this to make sure that our communication takes a ‘can do’ approach.”

- Landlord quote

In *Time to be Heard*, we said landlords need to be sensitive to the tone of their communication regarding noise and ASB. We made specific recommendations regarding tone of communication and preparing for the “access to information” scheme by ensuring professional courtesy in all internal and external communications.

29% of landlords told us they have made changes as a result of the report’s recommendations. These changes included staff training, a shift in terminology, and reviewing current communications in collaboration with resident focus groups.

Examples included:

- removal of terms such as “perpetrator” and “incidents” for non-ASB issues.
- creating a Customer Experience Team to investigate what ‘good’ service looks like for residents in terms of noise complaints
- targeted focus group with tenants who have experienced noise nuisance to understand their experience

- introduction of a ‘noise panel’ to look at domestic noise complaints
- a shift towards what one landlord described as “considerate living,” as opposed to being a “good neighbour”
- mandatory training identified and made available to all staff including:
 - having difficult conversations
 - bias and discrimination
 - professional courtesy
 - dignity and respect
 - effective communication
 - mental health
 - how to manage expectations,
 - how to hold “open and honest conversations” with residents
 - the ‘psychology of language.’
- introduction of professionalisation training programme based on the Chartered Institute of Housing’s [professional standards](#)
- adopting a reflective practice approach in staff one-to-one meetings
- a review of standard letters to ensure the tone contains no perceived dismissive tone, bias or accusatory language
- implementation of a new customer care charter

“It would be wrong to call one person a perpetrator, if all they are doing is living their life, in their home, reasonably – but that reasonableness is not at the same level as their neighbour.”

- Landlord quote

Landlords also spoke of treating noise complaints, especially low-level noise, more “seriously” and having a greater awareness of the potential severity of impact on the resident. Some landlords told us they consider this through a risk assessment matrix, with a greater focus on impact.

It was positive to see four landlords told us they now considered reasonable adjustments as part of their approach to noise complaints. Examples include:

- home visits, or telephone calls, to listen to the noise where the resident cannot use ‘noise apps’ to gather evidence

- allocating cases to senior caseworkers, which helped to establish where a resident requires further support, such as mental health referrals or hardship funding support
- dedicated customer support, domestic abuse and safeguarding services to tailor the service to residents and provide any necessary adjustments
- trialling the use of noise-cancelling headphones for residents with known noise sensitivity
- use of pre-tenancy risk assessment to see whether adjustments could make the property suitable for a prospective resident's individual needs

Our recent [Spotlight on attitudes, rights and respect](#) is a further resource for landlords looking to improve in this key area.

Case study – Poor communication

Ms Y lives in the ground floor flat of a house. Her upstairs neighbour removed the carpets in their property. Following this Ms Y began hearing noise which she described as “unrelenting” and “excessive,” which she said was affecting her family’s wellbeing. This included children jumping and playing ball games inside, as well as the use of a washing machine at unsociable hours. Ms Y sent noise recordings to the landlord.

The landlord wrote to Ms Y’s neighbour, referred the case for mediation and arranged for an independent witness to visit the property. The witness agreed that the noise was excessive and may be deliberate, noting that this was causing Ms Y and her family significant distress. The landlord sent a formal written warning to Ms Y’s neighbour. However, after Ms Y’s MP enquired, the landlord said that the noise was normal, not excessive, and not deliberate – in opposition to the independent witness report.

Ms Y complained about the landlord’s handling of her reports. The landlord responded acknowledging failures and committed to meet with Ms Y to agree an action plan. It subsequently decided there was evidence of ASB and said it would consider applying to the court for an injunction.

The landlord wrote to Ms Y’s neighbour advising it was considering legal action if the situation did not improve. The neighbour responded saying that “key areas” of the property had carpet and that they could also hear noise from Ms Y’s home due to the nature of the property.

Ms Y continued to report noise but received no response, so escalated her complaint. The landlord responded that it was still considering legal action and would update her. It did not respond to Ms Y’s subsequent requests for this update. In its final response to the complaint, it again acknowledged its failures, saying that it had

delayed in dealing with the reports appropriately in the first instance, and had failed to keep Ms Y updated. It offered compensation but said there was insufficient evidence to take legal action. It said it would continue to gather evidence and keep Ms Y updated.

We found maladministration. The landlord failed to communicate consistently or effectively with Ms Y and repeatedly failed to follow up on its commitments to keep her informed, causing avoidable distress. It also failed to conduct any risk assessment or provide any support or signposting, despite the independent witness describing the effect the circumstances were having on the household. We ordered £500 compensation. We also ordered the landlord to agree an action plan with Ms Y to deal with any ongoing ASB, including support for her and her family.

Case study – Demonstrating empathy

Ms X has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of a previous neighbour dispute. She contacted her landlord to report general day-to-day noise from the property above, including footfall, coughing, and the washing machine. The landlord visited both properties. It did not hear any unreasonable noise in Ms X's home. It inspected the flooring in the property above but did not consider any work was necessary. The landlord asked Ms X to make recordings of the noise, but she declined. Ms X's housing officer also offered to discuss the matter with the resident upstairs, but she declined this too.

Ms X complained about the landlord's response to her reports of noise, saying it was affecting her wellbeing. The landlord responded that it had managed her reports appropriately but that it needed recordings before investigating further. It acknowledged that the circumstances were causing distress and gave advice on applying for another of its properties.

We found no maladministration. The landlord took reasonable and appropriate steps to investigate Ms X's reports, and its offers of assistance were proportionate and did not dismiss or minimise Ms X's experience. It demonstrated empathy by recognising the strain that the matter had taken on its relationship with Ms X and responded to her formal complaint thoroughly. The landlord continued to offer support and further investigation of the problem after the matter exhausted its complaints procedure.

We recommended it consider supplying Ms X's neighbour with acoustic matting to reduce the noise from the washing machine.

Knowledge and Information Management

“Following the Spotlight report, we have reviewed our internal computer system to allow us to record cases separately. We found that particular issues were being recorded as ASB, when in fact they weren’t always.”

- Landlord quote

Time to Be Heard recognised the quality and quantity of records in a case can sometimes hamper a noise investigation. Common examples seen from our casework include noise reports being linked to a person rather than a property, and different systems across departments, meaning vital information could get lost.

We made three knowledge and information management (KIM) recommendations around the retention and processing of data, documenting decisions and aligning databases.

22% of landlords told us they have made changes to their KIM systems and processes, with a further 2% telling us they plan to make changes.

Feedback from our noise evaluation session with landlords was mixed, with some telling us they now were more data and insight-driven in their approach, but others commenting on a poor KIM culture, including having no records of noise complaints and systems not being joined up.

Changes were not always entire system changes with minor changes sometimes making a significant difference. Changes included:

- introduction of quality check process before closing any noise case to ensure the process and policy have been followed and that the correct documentation and records are on the system
- development of new business intelligence dashboards to help identify any noise ‘hotspots’
- introduction of a new noise transference case category to produce data that highlights particular buildings with repeat cases which might require a strategy to minimise noise
- ‘tagging’ properties where noise transference is a known issue so these can be considered further when they are void
- offering various routes to log a noise complaint including:
 - an online form

- an app
- the choice between digital or paper diary sheets
- direct telephone number
- being able to drop-in to the contact centre
- mandatory training for staff on General Data Protection Regulations, Freedom of Information requests and the need for analysis, as opposed to speculation or opinion, in records and communications

Our [KIM Spotlight report](#) contains recommendations and good practice examples for landlords. We also offer eLearning and virtual classroom sessions through our [Centre for Learning](#).

Multi-agency working

“We are an active partner in MARAC, MAPPA, THRIVE and PREVENT which ensures we focus not just on the individual but the community.”

- Landlord quote

Time to Be Heard highlighted some of the barriers and challenges in multi-agency working. It recommended a review of service level agreements (SLAs) with third parties and whether individual roles and responsibilities are clear.

20% of landlords told us of improvements and success in this area. These included:

- information sharing protocols, including relevant medical information and risks to enable landlords to review nominations and sensitively let their properties
- a joint pilot with [Mind](#), a mental health charity, to carry out joint visits at the earliest opportunity to prevent escalation
- signposting and, in some cases, paying for memberships to local mental health groups
- a review of SLAs with local councils and the Police
- establishing a regular programme of meetings with partner agencies
- revisiting referral pathways

Landlords spoke of the barriers that still exist. One barrier mentioned by several landlords in the feedback session was a lack of understanding about the role that should be adopted in health matters, with a lack of certainty on whether GPs and other medical practitioners are key partners. Others told us this issue had been

resolved by having a representative from local healthcare services on the ASB case review panel.

Other possible solutions suggested were greater use of the voluntary and third sector, with success stories shared of working with agencies such as Age Concern.

Low engagement with recommendations

Not all of the recommendations have a high engagement rate. Only 16% of landlords said they had increased their presence on estates or had increased home visits. Although landlords could see the benefit of housing officers visiting properties to witness the noise, there are resourcing implications and competing priorities.

Landlords shared ways they have attempted to improve staff presence efficiently – using data and insights to target areas where an increased staff presence would be most beneficial, and giving housing officers smaller ‘patches,’ thereby making it easier to attend in person.

We received no specific response to our recommendation about considering the impact of applications on the wider community, although this was touched on indirectly in responses to other recommendations. Landlords told us of the possible reason for this – such as the pressure of allocating properties as quickly as possible due to the demand.

Overall, financial constraints was the main barrier landlords identified to implementing the report recommendations. Landlords told us significant additional funding would be required. For example, landlords told us sound proofing would be at the cost of more urgent safety and decency works, or would require above inflation rent increases.

Further resources

Our public website <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/> includes several resources for use by landlords and residents when dealing with noise complaints and other problems.

Centre for Learning

The [Centre for Learning](#) is where member landlords can network, share, learn, and improve understanding. It includes:

- Training and events

- A library of our reports including Spotlight reports, special investigations, quarterly Insight reports, landlord complaints statistics and more
- Information on key topics, including [noise](#)
- Podcasts, including our podcast on [noise complaints](#)

Further advice for landlords is available on the [landlords](#) page where you can find information about the Complaint Handling Code, the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, and other helpful resources including guidance notes.

Online casebook

All our decisions are published in our [online casebook](#) as part of our commitment to being open and transparent. You can search by complaint category, landlord type and decision date, and apply other filters to find relevant cases.

Advice for residents

The [residents](#) page on our website has many useful resources for residents who are finding it difficult to resolve a complaint directly with their landlord, including fact sheets on specific topics such as [ASB and noise complaints](#).

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