



HOUSING REPORT

Annual Report to Tenants 2023-2024



Hello

Welcome to the annual tenants' housing report, where we let you know about our performance across the past financial year - April 2023 to March 2024. The report provides key facts and figures about your housing service and gives an overview of what the team has been up to over the year.

The service has gone through a period of transition in the past year, one key change being our responsive repairs service coming in house from 1 December. Following a period of integration during which we experienced teething problems, the team is now placed to provide better customer service and be more accountable to you. It also provides us with more control over the quality and flexibility of our repairs service going forward.

Here at Ashford Borough Council Housing, we aim to be transparent and open with you about our work so that you can challenge and hold us to account. This year we have focused on keeping you informed about the things that matter to you, and asking your views on how we can improve. Our tenant satisfaction survey asked you what you thought about our services and the results can be seen on page 11.

We have been honest with you about our self referral to the Regulator of Social Housing as we believed that our housing management systems and knowledge of our housing stock were not good enough. We have now put an action plan in place to address these areas, with a stock condition survey taking place in 2024.

As you will likely agree, the past year was challenging for everyone but even more so for tenants. The continued rise in costs has been difficult for many residents and our welfare team and housing officers have been there to support you along the way.

We hope you find this report interesting. If you have any feedback or suggestions please email tenant.contact@ashford.gov.uk. We would love to have you more involved in scrutinising our work so that we can learn from you. If you are interested in finding out more about this please get in touch.

The Housing Team



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Our Property Portfolio

As at 31 March 2024, our total housing stock was 5,191 homes.

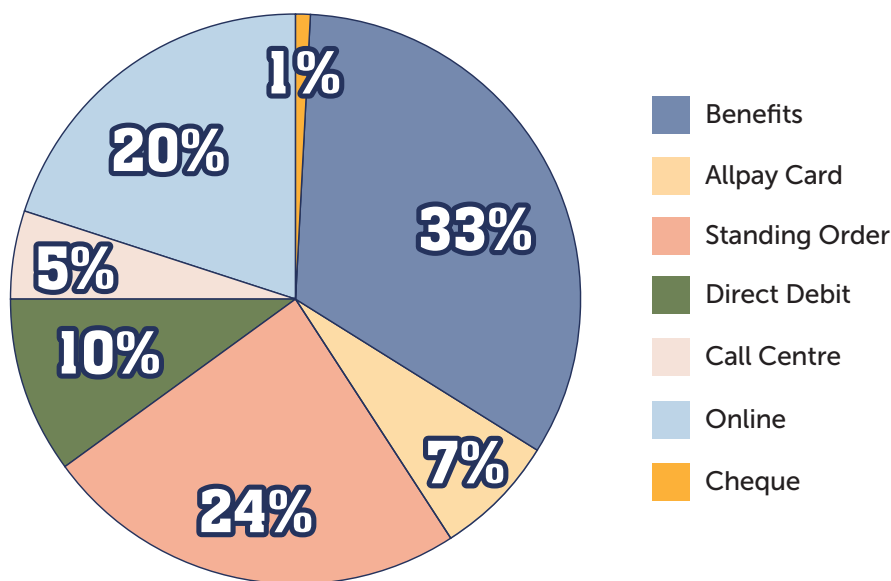
Rent values

In 2023/24 we collected 99.2% of rent that was due. During this period there were ten evictions for rent arrears.

Weekly rent comparison 2023/24

	1 Bedroom	2 Bedroom	3 Bedroom	4 Bedroom
Social Rent	£95.58	£109.13	£123.01	£130.14
Affordable Rent	£143.88	£157.88	£188.49	£222.83
Average Private Rent	£175.38	£274.15	£334.62	£403.85

How rents are paid



We are seeing a lot more rental payments being made online, allowing you to pay at a time convenient to you from the comfort of your own home or via smartphone when you are out and about. Aside from paying via our website, you can also pay via the Tenants Portal, as well as check your rent account balance. www.ashford.gov.uk/tenants-portal

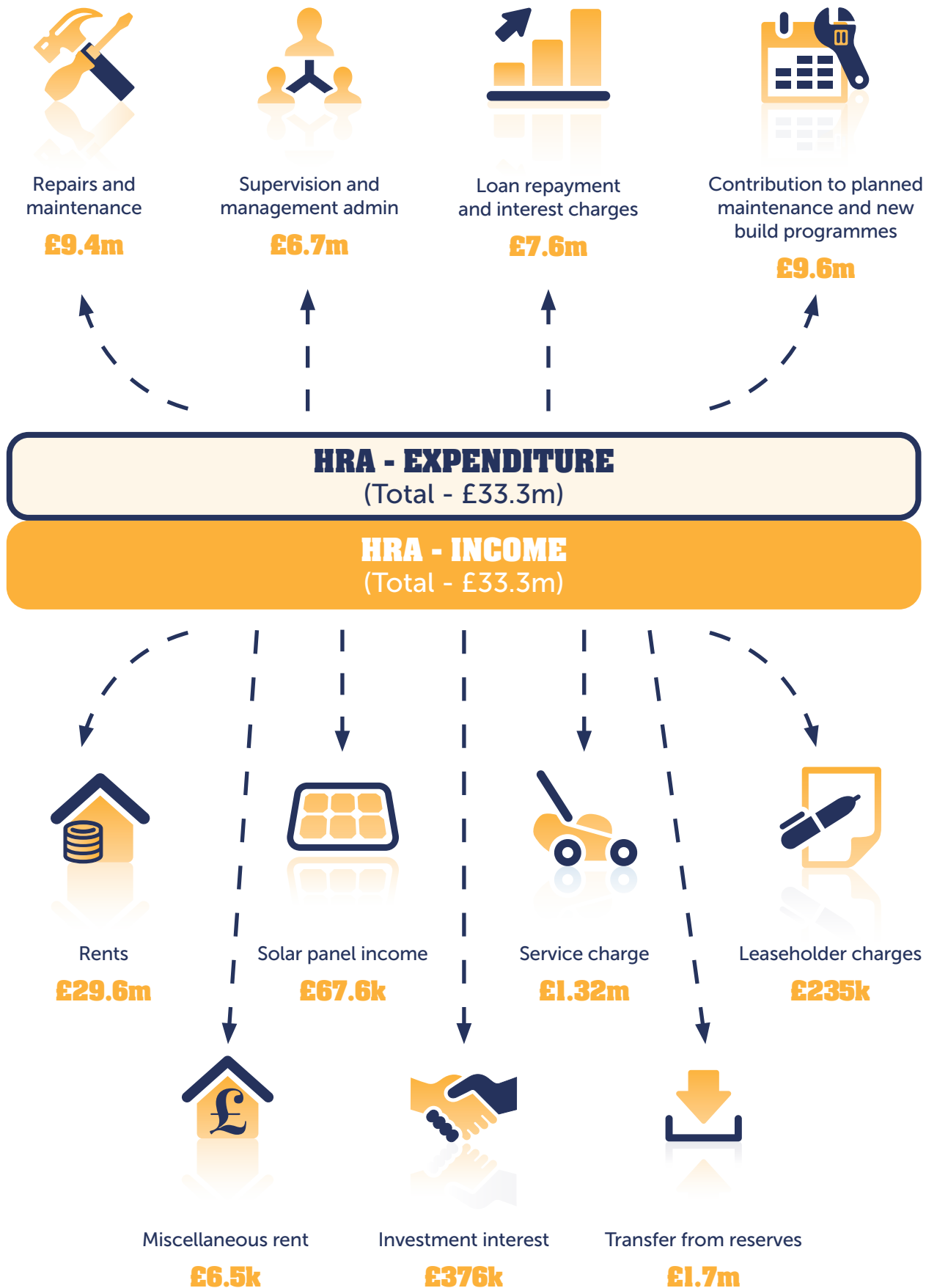
Direct debits are also a simple and easy way to arrange recurring payments. You can set up a direct debit to pay your rent and you will have peace of mind that it will always be paid on time directly from your bank account straight to us.

Remember if you are ever concerned about making rent payments or have any questions or queries about them, contact your Housing Officer that deals with rents www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-officer



Housing income and how it is spent

We want to be open and transparent with the income that we receive across the service and show how this income is spent.



Repairs, adaptations and improvements



Total number of completed repairs

13,516

Total cost of repairs

£5.97m

Average cost of repairs

£441.67



Quantity of emergency repairs

2,466

Cost of emergency repairs

£254k



Number of voids (empty properties)

278

Number of void repair jobs

808

Cost of void property repairs

£2.56m

Average void time

24 days

Rent lost due to voids

£155k



Number of disabled adaptations

252

Cost of disabled adaptations

£575.6k



Cost breakdowns:

New kitchens

£1m

New bathrooms

£274k

New boilers/heating

£465k

Insulation

£260k

Your safety is our priority

We require access to homes to carry out essential checks and servicing of equipment. Annual gas servicing of heating systems takes place across summer months to ensure your heating is in good working order and safe, ready for the winter months. It is also essential that gas appliances that are not used for heating have safety checks too. We will arrange for appliances owned by the council to have annual checks, however for appliances owned by tenants they are responsible for these safety checks. Portable gas heaters are strictly prohibited due to the risk of combustion.

Other important safety checks we carry out as part of our compliance processes are five-yearly electrical checks as well as lift, asbestos, fire and water quality safety checks, where relevant.

We have a strict policy regarding access for safety. We have sought warrants where access has been denied to ensure compliance, with the legal costs being recharged to you. It is a legal requirement for these checks to be undertaken and access must therefore be granted in accordance with that.

For more information regarding safety in the home www.ashford.gov.uk/living-safely-in-your-home

Ways of reporting repairs: 01233 330336 or www.ashford.gov.uk/report-repairs

Our partners are ABC Electrical Services, Swale Heating, Aspire, Calibre



Lettings

The total number of properties on the housing register at March 2024 was 1,523.

Total number of properties available for letting

Bedroom need	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
1	352	229	165
2	200	158	155
3	81	58	67
4	9	14	6
5 plus	4	0	0
Total	646	458	393

Percentage of units allocated to each category on the housing register

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Homeless	18%	31%	50%
Homeseeker	50%	45%	26%
Transfer	32%	24%	24%

Voids

	March 2022	March 2023	March 2024
Number of days to turnaround a void	30	19	24

Lettings and allocations policy

We have been reviewing our lettings policy and held focus groups with tenants in March. We asked them their views about how we allocate properties according to housing need and what they thought about potential changes to our policy. We will be consulting tenants

further to ensure that any new policy is fit for purpose and our banding and allocations are appropriate. Our current lettings policy can be viewed on our website

www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-assessment

Applying to the housing waiting list

If you cannot afford your own home, or your current home does not meet your requirements, then you may wish to apply to join the council's housing register. Please note that means testing and local connection criteria may apply. You can apply for social rented housing within the borough by completing our online application form. The form is available on the Kent Homechoice website www.kenthomechoice.org.uk

Once you have submitted your form and documents, it can take up to eight weeks for us to make an assessment of your application. We will then contact you and provide details of your application priority and how you can express an interest in available properties.

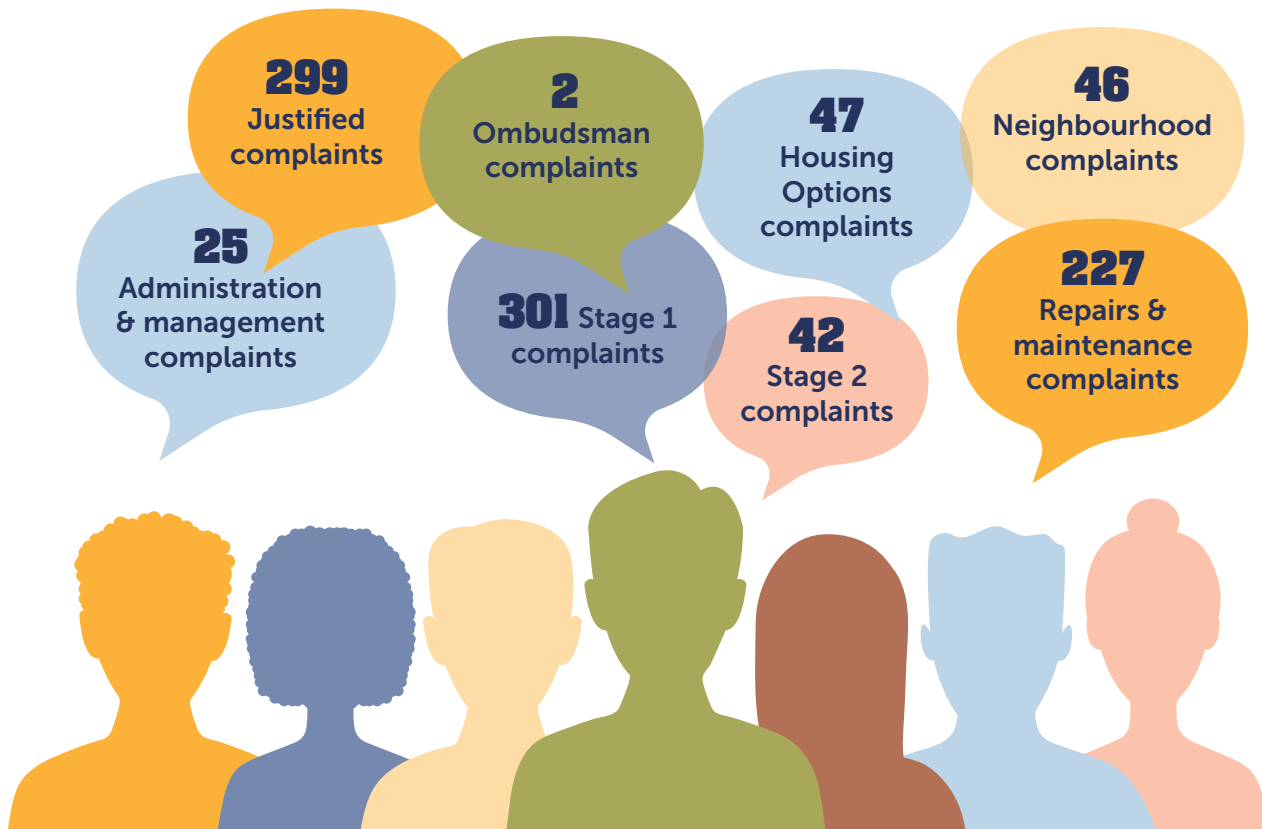
Unfortunately, we have a large number of people on our housing register compared to the number of available properties to let. Depending on their assessed priority banding, some people may have to wait many years before being offered a property. We would advise you to complete our new advice tool on the website ashford.adviceaid.uk/start for help with problem solving, what to do if you have been asked to leave your property or finding somewhere else to live.

Housing Advice Contact Details

Phone: 01233 331111

Email: housing.Advice@Ashford.gov.uk

Complaints



Complaints

Ashford Borough Council's Housing Department is committed to providing excellent housing services and aims to give the best customer service possible. If we have failed to provide a service, or a tenant is dissatisfied with the way in which a service has been provided by the Housing team (or by contractors providing a service on behalf of the council), we want to know about it. In most cases we hope and will strive to resolve problems in a quick and efficient manner. We will also use your feedback to help us make improvements. Where this is not possible, we have a formal complaints process to fully consider your complaint.

We will look into the issue, provide an explanation and an apology (where it is appropriate to do so) with a view to improving our services. We will aim to resolve the issue as quickly as possible.

You can complain about things like:

- Delays in responding to your enquiries and requests
- Failure to provide a service
- Standards of our services
- Our failure to follow proper procedure
- Unreasonable behaviour by an officer or contractor


What can't I complain about?

We will not treat certain issues as complaints and where this is the case, we will tell you by setting out the reasons why the matter is not suitable for the complaints process. Some failures of service will be dealt with outside of the complaints process and will be considered a service request.

How do I complain?

You, or a third party representative can make a complaint by:

- Completing a web form at: www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-complaints-procedure
- Email us at: complaints@ashford.gov.uk
- Telephone by calling: **01233 331111**
- Writing/visiting: Ashford Borough Council, Tannery Lane, Ashford, TN23 1PL
- Social media:

 Like Ashford Borough Council

 Post @AshfordCouncil

Housing Ombudsman Service

If you are not satisfied with how we have handled your complaint then you can complain directly to the Housing Ombudsman Service. The Housing Ombudsman can be contacted at any stage of the complaint process for advice and information.

The Housing Ombudsman is independent of all government bodies and can investigate your complaint. They will usually only consider a complaint after it has been through our complaints procedure as they expect you to bring your concerns to our attention first and give us a chance to put things right.

The Housing Ombudsman Service:

Tel: **0300 111 3000**

Email: info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk

Postal address: Housing Ombudsman, PO Box 152, Liverpool, L33 7WQ

More information can be found at www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk



Neighbourhood services

Events – Housing Officers and our Welfare Team have attended a number of Eat Well, Spend Less events that are held across the borough, providing advice and signposting tenants to Housing services. These events are ideal for engaging and chatting with tenants about what matters to them, and for them to benefit from speaking to other agencies. A food and hygiene bank is also available to.

Communal clear all – as part of our commitment to safety in blocks of flats, we contacted tenants with forward notice to remove items from communal areas in February. Tenants worked with the team to ensure that items that could cause a trip or fire hazard were removed. We hope that tenants will continue to assist with keeping areas clear going forward.

Estate inspections – we carried out 15 estate inspections in 2023/2024. Visits are being held more frequently, every fortnight, so that all areas in the borough are visited. On the inspections we look for any issues such as repairs, bulk items requiring removal, general estate concerns and inspect the play parks that fall under Housing. These inspections are carried out in addition to the ad hoc visits by the Neighbourhood Housing Officers. If there are any issues in the area you live please let us know so we can resolve these at the earliest opportunity. Also let us know if you would like to attend estate inspections. www.ashford.gov.uk/tenant-engagement.

Neighbourhood Housing Officers – following feedback from tenants who were unsure of who their housing officers were, we rolled out an easier way for you to be able to contact the officer who looks after rent or estate management for your area. Email addresses and telephone numbers are allocated by geographical area and will not change, no matter who the officer that looks after that patch is. This means that you would not always know how to get hold of officers when you need to throughout your entire tenancy. To find out who your housing officers are visit our website, www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-officer

Mutual exchanges – we have assisted 75 households to move via mutual exchange within the last year. There are a variety of reasons to move via this option, such as requiring a larger or smaller home, to move to be nearer family and friends for support. If you would like more information visit our website www.ashford.gov.uk/mutual-exchanges.

Downsizing – we continue to offer downsizing packages to tenants that are occupying family-sized accommodation who would like to move to smaller properties. By freeing up larger properties it helps those waiting on the housing list as well as saving those downsizing from paying spare room penalties. Those that wish to downsize could receive a financial reward, support with removal costs and assistance to help find the right property. 11 households benefitted from this scheme this past year. For more information and details of eligibility visit our website www.ashford.gov.uk/downsizing.

General Maintenance Operatives – our handy persons have been doing some amazing work across our general needs and independent living properties, helping residents with a timely and responsive service to tenants for tasks such as keeping communal areas clear and assisting with jobs that they may be unable to physically do for themselves.

Energy efficiency installations – our Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) project forged ahead this year helping to improve the energy efficiency of some properties. The aim to get properties up to a minimum EPC-rating of C has seen a variety of measures installed from solar panels, air source heat pumps, through to loft and cavity wall insulation. We hope that the properties on the project will benefit from reduced energy bills as well as a more comfortable home.

Tenants portal – More and more tenants are signing up to our Tenants Portal where you can check your rent account balance, see your payment history, make rent payments and update contact details, such as your phone and email address. You can also report day to day repair issues and view current and completed repairs. To register go to www.ashford.gov.uk/tenants-portal.

Anti-social behaviour – the council is committed to tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB) and works in partnership with partner agencies in order to achieve this. Staff have undertaken training in regards the tools which can be used to help tackle ASB. For more information on anti-social behaviour and how to report this visit our website www.ashford.gov.uk/anti-social-behaviour.

Statistics

The council had **22 Active Anti-social Behaviour** cases at the end of 2023/2024.

- 8** Notices of Seeking Possession were issued to tenants for ASB
- 8** cases were referred to mediation
- 44** Community Protection Warnings were issued to tenants
- 11** Community Protection Notices were issued to tenants
- 1** Eviction due to Anti-social Behaviour



Tenant Engagement

The department has a renewed commitment to engagement with our tenants, proactively listening to what they say and using this feedback to make positive changes to the service.

Tenant engagement strategy

Our tenant engagement strategy, approved in January, details how we will roll out getting tenants involved in the service and collaborate with you to make improvements. To look at the strategy and see how you can get involved, visit our tenant engagement pages www.ashford.gov.uk/tenant-engagement

Listening to tenants

We aim to be as inclusive as possible and provide tenants with a variety of ways to get involved, from completing surveys or participating in focus groups or resident panels, to joining us at events. Consultations have been carried out with tenants on topics such as a new play area in Noakes Meadow, our responsive repairs service, living in flatted accommodation, our lettings policy and we carried out our tenant satisfaction survey. The feedback and comments from all these discussions have influenced how we work and our plans going forward.

Keeping you informed

We have been focusing on letting you know more about projects that we are working on and keeping you informed about all things housing that affect you. We now have a dedicated Housing News webpage www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-news which is regularly updated, and a quarterly *Housing Matters* newsletter www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-matters which is posted out to all tenants and leaseholders.

You say, we did

Our tenant engagement officers have been physically present out and about in the borough, visiting tenants and attending events such as Eat Well, Spend Less to chat to tenants and signpost and advise them on all matters housing. We can feedback your thoughts and views directly to management to help make things better for you. For example, tenants told us that they did not know who their housing officers were, making it hard for them to get in touch. We simplified our housing officer contact details ensuring they remain the same throughout your tenancy, and contacted tenants to let them know those details for future use.

Accessibility


We have started to make inroads into ensuring that our website is easier to access for housing information and improved documents for tenants, such as the repairs handbook, making it easier for you to get the information that you need. Any suggestions for improvements that you would like to let us know about, get in touch with the tenant engagement team tenant.contact@ashford.gov.uk

Repairs HANDBOOK

2024-2027

Tenant Engagement Strategy

Version: 1.0
Date: 2nd January 2024
Review date: 1st September 2026



HOUSING MATTERS
Your homes, your news, your views

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Autumn 2023 Issue 2

Winter 2024 Issue 3

Spring 2024 Issue 4

Repairs changes

Tenant engagement

Your housing team

Housing news

Independent living

How are we doing

Practical advice

Keep in touch

Competition time!

Competition time!

Competition time!

Tenant satisfaction

Tenant satisfaction measures

The past year saw the Regulator of Social Housing issue new measures for housing providers to evaluate their performance and find out what their tenants think of them and the services that they provide. The Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs), ensure that we are more transparent and open about our work to both you and the Regulator and helps us to track and improve our performance and services.

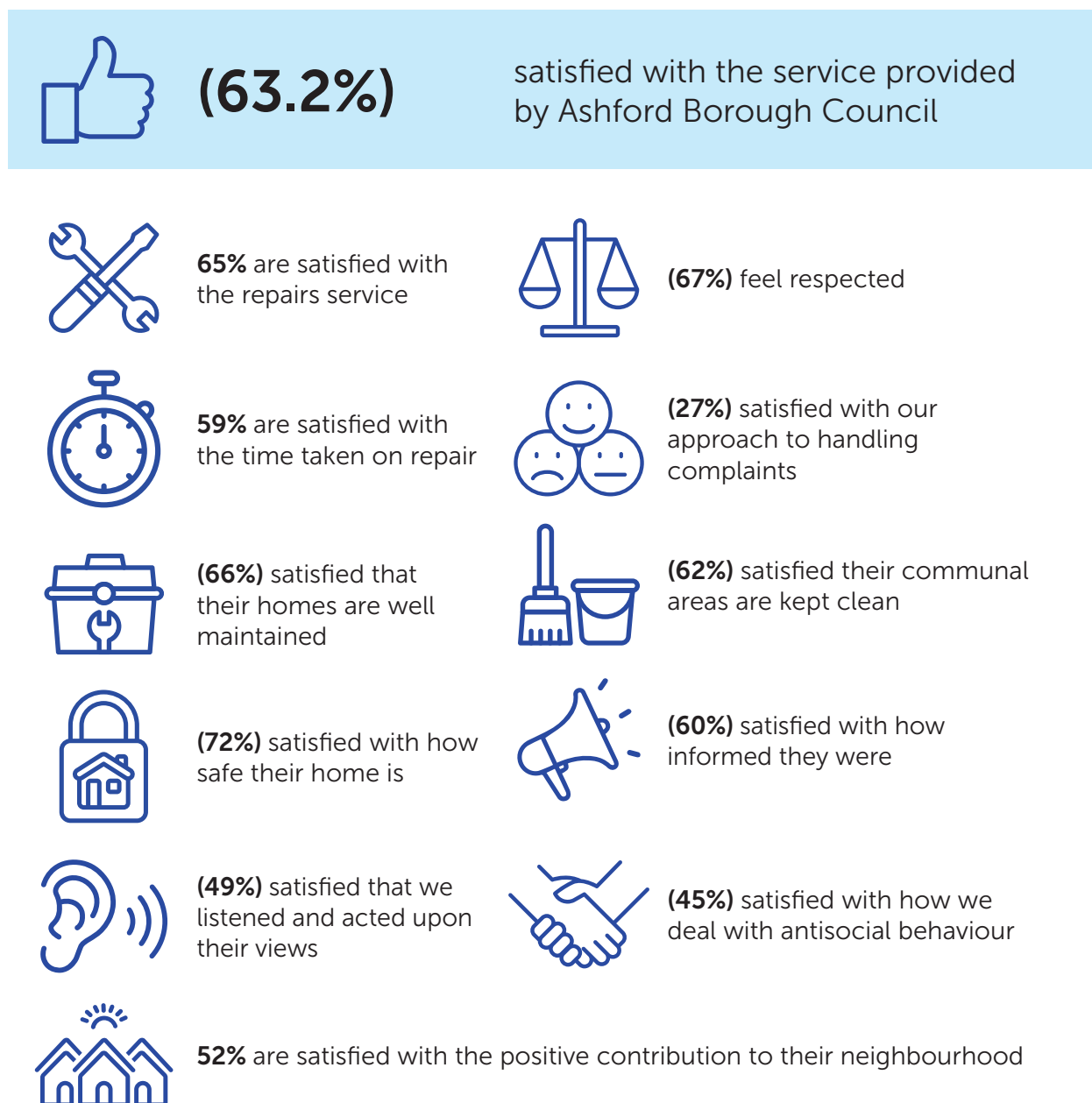
One key element of the measures was the tenant satisfaction survey. Across a six-week period in autumn, we surveyed all tenants using a variety of methods – telephone, post and email, to find out how satisfied you were with a variety of subjects; from how we handle anti-social behaviour to our repairs service. We heard back from 20% of tenants and a summary of what they thought about our service can be found below:

Thank you again to all those who participated. It is so important that we understand what we are doing right or wrong from our tenants who experience our properties and services daily.

We will be undertaking the next tenant satisfaction survey during a similar period in September, so keep an eye out for information about that as we want as many people as possible to participate.

Every single comment made on the survey has been assessed and we have an action plan focused on areas of concern such as how we handle complaints and anti-social behaviour and how we can improve our communication with you. For more information about the survey and TSMs, please visit www.ashford.gov.uk/tenant-satisfactionsurvey

Percentages of how satisfied tenants were for each TSM



Contacts

Ashford Borough Council Housing:

Neighbourhood & Rent	01233 330688 www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-officer
Repairs	01233 330366 (including out of hours) www.ashford.gov.uk/report-repairs
Complaints	01233 331111 or complaints@ashford.gov.uk
Damp & mould issues	damphelp@ashford.gov.uk
Swale Heating	0800 206 1371
Benefits & Welfare support	welfare@ashford.gov.uk

Others:

Housing Ombudsman Service:

PO Box 152, Liverpool L33 7WQ

Website at www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk

Telephone: 0300 111 3000

Email: info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk

Kent County Council:

County Hall, Maidstone ME14 1XQ

Website at: www.kent.gov.uk

Telephone: 03000 41 41 41

Citizen's Advice:

Seabrooke House, Church Road, Ashford TN23 1RD

Website at: www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Telephone: 01233 626185

Email: ashfordadvice@gmail.com

Help from the Government:

Find out what support you might be able to get to help with your living costs

www.gov.uk/browse/benefits

