



Complaints Handling Culture

Research into Social Housing in England

Winter 25/26

Research Sponsors:



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Executive Summary

The social housing sector continues to undergo significant cultural and regulatory transformation following the Social Housing Regulation Act 2023, Awaab's Law and the statutory Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code. These developments have sharpened expectations around how organisations listen to, learn from and respond to residents' concerns. Although processes have become more structured, complaint handling remains the lowest-scoring Tenant Satisfaction Measure nationally, suggesting a persistent gap between procedural compliance and residents' lived experience of the complaints journey.

To understand the cultural situations that contribute to this gap, Campbell Tickell developed the Complaints CultureScan, a perception-based survey tool, piloted with five providers and supported by over 1,000 responses from colleagues, governing bodies (Boards and elected members) and resident committees/panels.

The Scan provides insight into the cultural conditions (we refer to these as seven 'pillars') that shape how complaints are experienced, and how organisational values, behaviours and systems interact in practice.

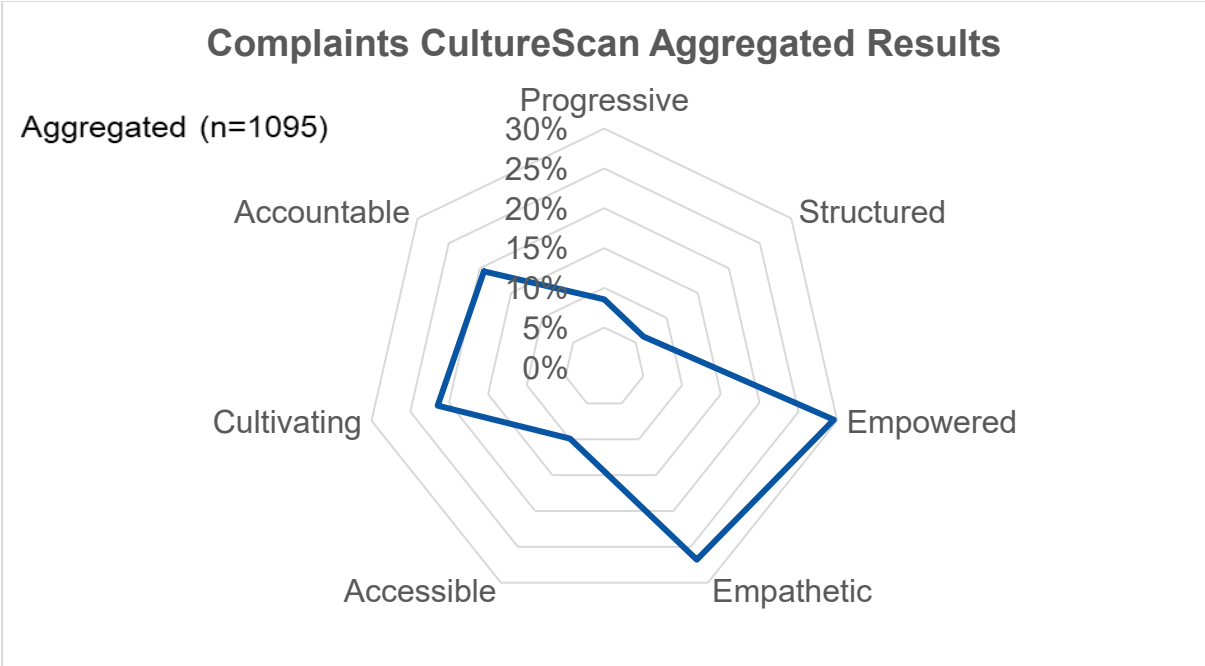
How the Seven Pillars define a positive complaints culture

Bringing together the literature, sector landscape and organisational practice, the seven CultureScan pillars reflect the key characteristics evident in positive complaints cultures:

- **Empathetic** – Residents feel genuinely heard, understood and acknowledged. Empathy shapes the tone, quality and timeliness of interactions.
- **Empowered** – Colleagues have the authority, capability and clarity to act quickly and confidently.
- **Accountable** – Individuals and teams take responsibility, follow through on commitments, and own the resolution.
- **Progressive** – Complaints drive learning, root-cause analysis, service improvement and organisational development.
- **Structured** – Processes, data and systems are clear, reliable and consistently applied, supporting both colleagues and residents.
- **Accessible** – Residents can raise concerns easily; communication is clear; reasonable adjustments are routine.
- **Cultivating** – Leaders model values, support colleagues and create psychologically safe, learning-oriented environments.

Together, these elements describe a culture where colleagues are supported, residents feel respected, and organisational systems reinforce, not undermine, the values that providers aim to embody. This creates the cultural conditions that enable reliable, fair and trusted complaint handling experiences.

What the CultureScan Shows



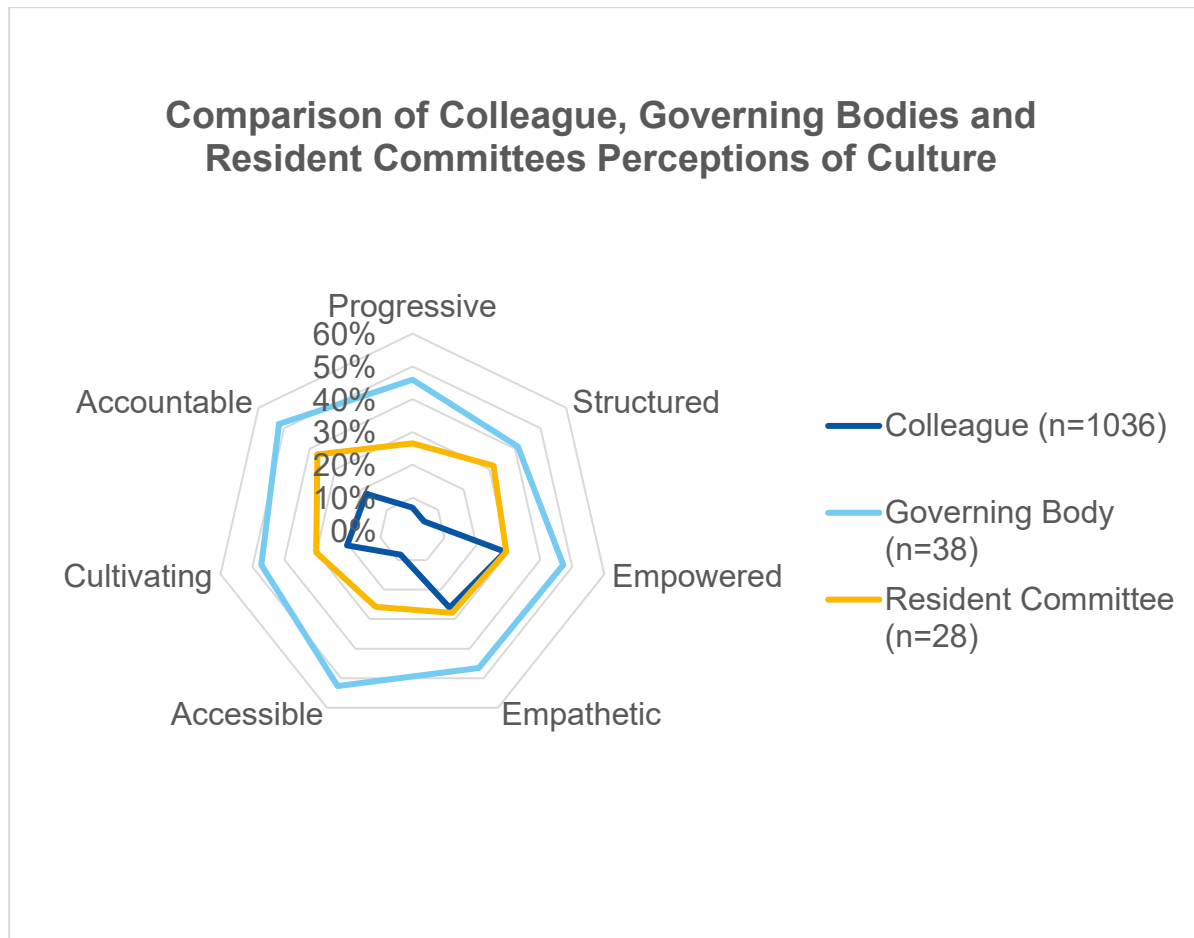
Across all pilot organisations, three perceived cultural strengths were consistently identified: **empathy**, **empowerment**, and **leadership commitment**. Colleagues reported being encouraged to understand residents’ circumstances, feeling able to take ownership, and seeing leaders invest in training, redesign and cultural development.

At the same time, three cultural pillars scored consistently lower: **Structured**, **Progressive**, and **Accessible**. Respondents described experiences with fragmented systems, unclear ownership, recurring issues, and processes that remained harder to navigate than intended. These areas are interdependent, as weaknesses in structure can limit the ability to embed learning or ensure accessible experiences.

While empathy emerged as a clear cultural strength, the wider report highlights that colleagues often experience significant emotional labour in complaint handling. High workloads, unclear systems and fragmented processes can create avoidable friction, reduce psychological safety, and make it harder for colleagues to maintain the empathetic, reflective interactions they value. This can shift practice from relational to procedural, not because colleagues lack care, but because the structural conditions surrounding them constrain the space to stay curious, engaged and person-centred.

Perception Gaps Across Governing bodies, Colleagues and Residents

A significant theme of our research is the divergence in perceived culture between governing bodies, colleagues and resident panels. Governing bodies held the most positive and balanced overall view, while colleagues, reported more challenges around structured and progressive. Resident committees generally sat between the two.



These gaps appear linked to differences in visibility. Governing bodies *typically* receive compliance-based and summary reporting, whereas colleagues and residents experience the day-to-day reality, including communication, handovers and the emotional labour associated with complaint resolution. This distinction highlights the importance of richer, more qualitative insight for governing bodies to understand service reality as well as too providing colleagues with the big picture view.

Additionally, the report highlights the important role of the Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC) in addressing these gaps. By reviewing cases in detail and following complaint journeys end-to-end, the MRC can provide governing bodies with

a richer, more contextual understanding of residents' experiences than metrics alone can offer. Their insight appears to help close the gap between operational reality and high-level assurance, strengthening scrutiny and ensuring governance decisions reflect the lived experience of residents and colleagues.

Culture as a Driver of Performance

While recognising the limitations of the pilot sample, the analysis identified a strong association (0.77) between overall cultural maturity and satisfaction with complaint handling. We do not suggest direct causation, but the correlation suggests that certain cultural conditions may help explain why some organisations achieve more positive resident experiences.

Of the seven pillars, empathy showed the strongest relationship with positive outcomes for residents, including higher satisfaction and improved timeliness. Empathy also correlated with lower Stage 1 complaint volumes, which may indicate that empathetic early interactions help resolve service issues before they reach a complaint.

However, empathy alone was not sufficient when structural and learning conditions were weaker, reinforcing the interdependence between cultural values and system design.

The findings suggest several areas that organisations across the sector may wish to reflect on when seeking to strengthen complaint-handling cultures:

1. Strengthen leadership expectations and accountability

Leadership signalling, through priorities, investment, communication and visibility, appears to shape how cultural values are understood and enacted. Ensuring that expectations about fair and constructive complaint handling are clearly articulated and reflected in organisational behaviour and decisions may help reinforce the intended culture.

2. Build a shared understanding of the service reality

Differences in perception across governance, colleagues and residents highlight the importance of insight that reflects the lived experience of complaint handling. Approaches that combine quantitative data with narrative, case-based and qualitative feedback may help support more rounded understanding and more informed decision-making.

Additionally, informing colleagues – regardless of role – of the changes being made and the bigger picture may also help in internal perceptions, especially if this is linked back to colleague and resident feedback.

3. Create a clear and consistent operating model

The findings suggest that clarity around processes, roles and information flows plays a meaningful role in shaping both colleague and resident experience. More consistent structural foundations may help reduce avoidable friction and support more reliable customer journey.

4. Meaningfully empower colleagues

Empowerment was consistently reported as a cultural strength, and the analysis suggests that ensuring that colleagues have the information, guidance and permissions to act confidently may support earlier resolution and reduce residents feeling the need to escalate their complaint to get a resolution.

5. Treat complaints as learning opportunities

The sector increasingly recognises that complaints provide important insight into how services operate. However, this insight only contributes to improvement when organisations actively examine patterns, share learning across teams, and embed changes in practice. Shifting from a compliance-focused approach to one centred on continuous learning enables complaints to inform meaningful development rather than simply being recorded. This also requires an understanding of the wider resident experience, beyond the volume of complaints linked to specific service areas such as repairs.

6. Keep empathy at the heart of the service

Empathy emerged as the strongest predictor of positive outcomes. The research suggests that approaches which help colleagues understand resident perspectives and maintain clarity of communication may support more constructive interactions, improved timeliness, and lower demand at formal stages of the process.

Overall, the research highlights the importance of cultural conditions in shaping both resident experience and organisational performance. While strong values are evident across the sector, greater consistency in structure, learning and accessibility may support more reliable outcomes and strengthen trust in complaint handling.

We are grateful to the organisations that took part and sponsored this research:

- Barnsbury
- Community Gateway Association
- Gentoo Group
- Sovereign Network Group
- West Lancashire Borough Council

1. Background and Context

The landscape of social housing in England has been, and continues to be, shaped by a period of significant change and transformation. Prompted by tragic events and the legislation that followed, a heightened level of scrutiny has emerged around organisational culture, transparency, and the lived experience of residents. The sector has undergone a fundamental reframing of what complaints represent within landlord-tenant relationships.

Over recent years, the handling of complaints by social housing providers has received increasing attention. The sector has shifted from viewing complaint handling as 'just' a service function to treating it as a strategic priority. Registered Providers (RPs) – whether housing association, local authority or others - now face the expectation to engage in proactive, strategic thinking about how complaints are managed, how learning is embedded, and how organisational culture shapes outcomes.

This shift has been catalysed in large part by tragedy. The Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 and the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in 2020, while living in his family's social rented home, exposed the devastating consequences of dismissing or overlooking tenants' voices. Subsequent inquiries revealed systemic and repeated failures to act on resident complaints, demonstrating the centrality of listening, empathy, and responsiveness. These events exposed the consequences of organisational cultures in which residents' voices were minimised, dismissed, or deprioritised, highlighting that complaint handling is not merely a process but a reflection of deeper cultural assumptions about whose experiences matter and how concerns should be treated.

In response, regulation has evolved. The Social Housing Regulation Act 2023 has led to strengthened consumer standards, and, with the statutory Housing Ombudsman (HOS) Complaint Handling Code, places a stronger emphasis on transparency, responsiveness, accountability and equity. These measures formalise the requirement not only to process complaints effectively, but to cultivate a positive complaint-handling culture, embedding expectations around fairness, empathy, and learning.

New data sources have strengthened this shift. The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) now reports systematically on consumer standards, including complaints handling, while the HOS casework and annual reporting highlight persistent failure themes such as communication breakdowns, delays, poor record keeping and a lack of coordinated response. These failures are increasingly understood not only as operational issues, but as symptoms of deeper cultural patterns.

Alongside these regulatory shifts, complaints themselves have become an increasingly critical source of insight into organisational culture and resident experience. They provide a direct, real-time view of how systems function, how colleagues behave under pressure, and whether residents feel heard and treated fairly. As the HOS continues to identify recurring failures related to communication, delays, record-keeping and fragmented service delivery, complaints offer organisations one of the clearest indicators of where cultural misalignment are occurring in practice. In this way, complaints act not only as expressions of dissatisfaction but also as diagnostic signals, revealing whether stated organisational values are reflected in day-to-day experiences, and where improvement is most urgently needed.

Despite this increased scrutiny and structural reform, sector data shows that tenant satisfaction with complaint handling remains low. In fact, the Tenant Satisfaction Measure (TSM) “satisfaction with handling complaints” continues to produce the lowest score across all twelve measures. This suggests that, although processes may be improving, the emotional and relational experience of complaint handling remains a challenge. As a result, there are growing calls for more empathetic, people-centred approaches that empower residents and colleagues to resolve issues together.

These debates point clearly to the importance of organisational culture as the cornerstone of effective complaint handling. Both the RSH and the HOS emphasise that a positive complaints culture is fundamental, yet culture is intrinsically difficult to define, articulate or measure. This report aims to address that gap by conceptualising the characteristics of a positive complaints culture and offering a practical framework to support cultural improvement across the sector.

By examining both the theoretical foundations of complaints culture and the lived experience across five pilot organisations, we explore what a positive complaints culture looks like, what inhibits it, and how leadership, structure, empowerment and learning interact to shape resident experience. These questions informed Campbell Tickell’s research approach, developed in partnership with five registered providers, and delivered through a new tool: the CT Complaints CultureScan®. Using this tool, we engaged colleagues, governing body members (Boards / Elected Members / Committees) and resident representatives across the pilot organisations to triangulate perceptions and build a comprehensive understanding of the lived reality of complaint handling culture.

2. Research design

This research was designed to move beyond assessing whether organisations simply meet complaint-handling requirements. Instead, it sought to understand the cultural conditions that shape how complaints are experienced by residents, colleagues and governing bodies. The approach was structured around three stages:

1. Framework development

We developed the tool by:

- Reviewing academic literature on organisational culture and how it influences service outcomes. This gave us a theoretical foundation for thinking about complaints as more than a process.
- Alongside this, we examined current sector insights, including the Housing Ombudsman's reports and the Regulator of Social Housing's consumer standards and regulatory judgements, to identify what positive complaint handling looks like in practice.
- We also used Campbell Tickell's own experience of working with organisations on culture and complaint reviews to help us refine this into a set of practical indicators.

The literature helped identify the cultural attributes most associated with positive complaint handling, while sector casework and regulatory insight informed how these attributes manifest in day-to-day practice.

This gave us a 7-Pillar Framework designed to measure an organisation's culture and ensured that the Complaints CultureScan framework was theoretically grounded and practically applicable across different landlord contexts.

Pilot

The framework was piloted with five registered providers of social housing. We attempted to make this a diverse data set, with the pilot group intentionally varied across three criteria:

- A mix of one Local Authority and four housing associations, with one of these being a Community Gateway
- Ranging from small, community-based providers to large, national organisations
- Covering different regions of England to ensure findings not skewed by any local conditions
- A mix of Consumer Standard Regulatory Judgement Gradings (C1-C2)

While the organisations that participated were already committed to improving their complaints culture, their differences provided a useful test of how the tool performed in different contexts.

Each organisation participated in an internal perception survey completed by colleagues across the organisation (i.e. not 'just' the complaint team), Board or Elected Members, and resident committees/panels, generating over 1,000 responses. This provided a 360-degree view of how culture is experienced inside each organisation.

Triangulation

Perception data was then triangulated with external performance indicators including TSMs, HOS determinations, RSH regulatory judgements and organisations' public self-assessments. This stage enabled us to compare how cultural conditions were perceived internally with how they appeared to translate into resident experience.

Roundtable

Once the initial analysis was complete, we held a roundtable with representatives from each organisation and tenant forum members. This session helped validate the findings and added further insight into why certain pillars scored more strongly than others. Participants shared practical examples from their own experience, which brought valuable context to the quantitative data.

Timeline

Data collection took place between August and October 2025, with survey windows lasting two to four weeks depending on the organisation. Individual reports were shared later in the year, followed by the roundtable in January 2026.

Research limitations

As with any research, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

First, the pilot involved five organisations that had already demonstrated a commitment to strengthening their complaints culture. As a result, the findings may not fully reflect organisations at earlier stages of cultural maturity, operating under different pressures or with more constrained resources. The sample offers valuable insight but cannot be generalised across the sector.

Second, while the study generated over 1,000 individual responses, the number of organisations involved limits the extent to which formal statistical testing can be applied or organisational variables (such as size, stock profile, governance model or local context) can be controlled for. The correlations identified, therefore, are indicative patterns rather than definitive causal relationships.

Third, the research relied on a combination of self-reported perceptions and publicly available performance data. Perception surveys provide essential insight but are shaped by visibility, psychological safety, personal experience, and role. Although triangulation with external performance data mitigates this to a degree, the subjectivity inherent in perception data remains a limitation.

Finally, the Complaints CultureScan was conducted at a particular moment in time. Cultures evolve in response to leadership, resource pressures, regulatory change, and organisational priorities. The findings therefore represent a point-in-time assessment, not a fixed state.

For these reasons, the research should be interpreted as providing insight into how cultural conditions influence complaint handling, rather than sector-wide conclusions. However, the consistency of themes across the pilot group, despite their structural and organisational differences, suggests that the patterns identified offer a meaningful foundation for further exploration and improvement.

3. Literature Review: Defining a Positive Complaints Culture

The Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

A growing body of research demonstrates that organisational culture plays a decisive role in shaping behaviour, performance and service quality. Culture is widely understood as a system of shared beliefs, values and assumptions that shape how people think and act within an organisation. In the context of complaint handling, these cultural elements influence not only how concerns are interpreted and addressed, but also how consistently residents experience fairness, empathy and accountability.

To understand how culture influences complaint handling, two established frameworks provide helpful conceptual grounding:

Schein's Three Levels of culture

Schein's model conceptualises culture as operating across three layers:

- visible artefacts (e.g. systems, processes and behaviours);
- espoused values (e.g. stated values, strategies and goals); and
- basic assumptions (unconscious, taken for granted beliefs).

By examining all three levels, leaders can identify inconsistencies, for example, when espoused values do not match actual practices, and decide where change is needed. The model also highlights that cultural development is not achieved through surface changes alone, it requires aligning visible behaviours, stated values, and deep assumptions. This understanding enables organisations to create a more authentic, coherent, and sustainable culture.

Applied to complaints, this model highlights the importance of alignment between what organisations say they value and what residents experience in practice. For example, an organisation may espouse openness and fairness, but if colleagues respond defensively to complaints or if processes feel opaque or inconsistent, residents encounter a cultural misalignment that undermines trust. This framework helps explain why organisations may experience misalignment between stated values and lived practices.

Barrett's Values-Driven Organisation

Barrett's framework emphasises how organisational values evolve in response to internal and external pressures.

A central idea in Barrett's approach is that values-driven organisations are the most successful because their cultures promote trust, purpose, and alignment. He introduces the concept of 'Cultural Entropy' which refers to the amount of energy an organisation loses through unproductive or fear-based behaviours, such as blame, control, conflict, and internal competition.

High levels of cultural entropy indicate a dysfunctional culture where anxiety and mistrust shape day-to-day actions, ultimately reducing employee engagement and performance. In contrast, when leaders demonstrate care, openness, and trust, cultural entropy decreases, enabling employees to feel safe, motivated, and committed to organisational goals.

In the context of complaints, Barrett's model is useful for understanding how organisational responses can become defensive or risk-averse, and how these behaviours can inhibit learning and damage relationships with residents. Cultures characterised by openness and psychological safety are more likely to accept, analyse and learn from complaints, whereas cultures shaped by fear or control are more likely to minimise, deflect or overlook them.

Together, these frameworks imply that improving complaints culture requires attention to both the deep assumptions that quietly shape behaviour and the explicit values that leaders choose to model and reinforce. Aligning visible procedures, leadership behaviours, and organisational priorities is therefore essential for creating a complaints-handling culture that is fair, responsive, empathetic, and open to learning rather than defensive or dismissive.

The literature also shows that complaints culture is not a single behavioural trait, but a multi-dimensional construct shaped by interrelated organisational conditions. To understand how positive complaints practice is created and sustained, it is therefore helpful to break complaints culture into a set of core pillars that together determine how an organisation responds to, learns from, and values complaints. These pillars provide a structured way to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of current practice and to identify where targeted cultural change is required:

Cultural attitudes

Attitudes significantly influence complaint handling. Hogg et al. (2017) found that compassion and empathy are crucial to a positive complaints culture in healthcare settings, where negative staff behaviours and poor communication exacerbate complainants' distress. According to Hogg, staff training to develop their emotional intelligence and compassion, was necessary to providing better care. Similarly, Susskind et al. (2003) found that customer orientation, defined as placing importance on understanding and addressing customer needs (Kelley., 1992), enhanced satisfaction, even when the complaint outcome is not fully favourable for the customer.

Approaches to handling

Effective complaints handling combines structured procedures with empathetic flexibility. Filip (2013) highlights that clear, accessible procedures signal organisational commitment to resolving issues, while allowing discretionary judgement to ensure staff can respond humanely. Bureaucratic rigidity alone may communicate indifference or inhibit staff responsiveness, whereas flexible approaches aligned with trust and care promote better outcomes (Susskind et al., 2003; Barrett, 2017). Clarity in timeframes, communication, and resolution processes, coupled with opportunities for feedback, enables staff to act decisively and tenants to feel heard.

Learning and improving

A learning-oriented culture reframes complaints as opportunities rather than threats. Harris and Ogbonna (2009) found that concealment occurs when complaints are perceived as personal threats or burdens. Filip (2013) argues that monitoring complaints trends and reflecting on resolution strategies can improve services and rebuild trust. Leadership plays a central role in fostering this mindset: when mistakes are framed as learning opportunities rather than failures, staff are more likely to engage proactively (Cote, 2015; PHSO, 2021). Both Schein and Barrett suggest that aligning values and assumptions to support learning reduces cultural entropy and strengthens the organisation's capacity to respond constructively.

Leadership

Leadership shape culture by signalling priorities and modelling behaviours. Susskind et al. (2003) found that supervisor support was critical for embedding high standards of customer service. Cote (2015) identifies three leadership principles: aligning staff with mission and values, inspiring confidence during challenges, and leveraging mistakes for learning. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) (2021) also stresses learning over blame, preventing issues from escalating, making complaints meaningful, and sharing insights across the organisation. Leaders who

embody transparency, ethical practice, and responsiveness foster a complaints culture in which staff feel supported and tenants feel valued.

Empowerment

Empowering staff encourages proactive resolution and accountability. Delegation, information sharing, and decision-making authority increase psychological empowerment, job satisfaction, and commitment (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009).

Empowered employees are more likely to act decisively, communicate empathetically, and uphold organisational values in complaint resolution (Barrett, 2017). However, empowerment is effective only within cultures where staff are supported, mistakes are tolerated, and leadership provides guidance and oversight.

Positive complaints cultures integrate compassionate attitudes, clear yet flexible procedures, institutionalised learning, accountable leadership, and empowered staff. Conversely, negative cultures - characterised by blame, defensiveness, and concealment - emerge from misaligned values and assumptions.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that positive complaints cultures are not defined solely by processes or policies, but by the cultural conditions that underpin them, including alignment between values and behaviours, psychologically safe environments, consistent leadership modelling and staff empowerment. These elements shape how organisations interpret concerns, how consistently residents are treated, and how effectively learning is embedded.

Enablers of positive complaint cultures

This section examines the practical application of a positive complaints culture within social housing in England. It draws on case studies, sector reports, and best practice guidance.

Resident-centred practice

A resident-focused approach is central to positive complaint handling. Organisations that prioritise empathy, responsive communication, and clear accountability consistently build higher levels of trust and satisfaction. Behaviours such as offering prompt apologies and openly acknowledging mistakes are strongly associated with improved outcomes, demonstrating the power of relational, rather than purely procedural, approaches.

Current policy and regulatory frameworks, including the Social Housing Regulation Act 2023, Awaab's Law, and the National Housing Federation's (NHF) Together with Tenants charter, further reinforce the need for transparency, fairness, and embedding tenant voice within organisational culture. Sector case studies illustrate how restorative and collaborative practices can deliver meaningful improvements to

resident experience and organisational learning. These practices align closely with Barrett's cultural framework, which emphasises shared values such as fairness, respect, and open communication as fundamental drivers of organisational behaviour and culture.

Learning as a core value

At the heart of a strong complaints culture is a commitment to learning as a core organisational value. The Housing Ombudsman (Inside Housing, 2023) highlights that strong leadership, openness, and transparency encourage organisations to learn from complaints rather than respond defensively. Landlords that embrace complaints as a tool for organisational improvement, rather than a threat to reputation, reinforce a culture of accountability and continuous development, consistent with Schein's model of embedding organisational norms and assumptions.

Leadership plays a crucial role here: leaders who model openness and transparency help create an environment in which staff view complaints as opportunities for improvement rather than reputational threats.

Empowerment and capability

Colleague empowerment is also central to positive complaints culture. Training programmes that develop communication, empathy, and problem-solving skills allow staff to act autonomously while adhering to organisational values. Staff with clear authority, guidance, and access to information are more confident in resolving complaints efficiently, reinforcing the cultural norms identified by Barrett as essential for sustainable organisational transformation. Embedding values-led training across all staff, including contractors, ensures consistent, empathetic interactions with residents and fosters a shared understanding of the organisation's commitment to resident well-being.

Structure and systems

Investment in staff training and development equips colleagues with the skills to manage complaints with empathy and professionalism, ensuring that tenants are treated respectfully and their concerns addressed appropriately. Effective use of technology and data systems allows organisations to monitor complaints, identify trends, and proactively resolve recurring issues. Internal communication and collaboration also play a vital role, as regular meetings and data-sharing protocols encourage consistent responses, transparency, and knowledge sharing, fostering a culture of collective responsibility.

On the other hand, procedural and bureaucratic approaches can stifle learning and responsiveness, as complaints may be treated merely as regulatory obligations rather than opportunities to improve resident outcomes. This blame-oriented

environment undermines trust and inhibits the development of a tenant-centric approach. Resource constraints and ineffective systems further exacerbate these challenges. Limited staffing, poor-quality data, and fragmented information systems reduce the ability to manage complaints effectively, delay resolution, and obscure organisational learning, as highlighted by the HOS Knowledge and Information Management report (2024).

Leadership support, through the provision of resources, clear policies, and empowerment of staff, is integral to sustaining these cultural norms and reinforcing the importance of complaints as a strategic tool rather than a burden.

Leadership

Leadership is central to embedding and sustaining a positive complaints culture. Leaders articulate the vision, values, and expectations that define the culture, prioritising tenant-centricity, empathy, and learning. Housing Ombudsman guidance emphasises that culture must be driven from the top, ensuring that complaints are recognised as opportunities for improvement rather than threats to organisational reputation. Modelling desired behaviours is equally important, as transparency, accountability, and visible responsiveness to complaints reinforce cultural norms and set expectations for staff.

The RSH Regulatory Casework Review (2025) highlights that landlords demonstrating positive engagement and self-referral of issues foster trust, oversight, and a learning-oriented culture. Leaders also play a crucial role in enabling the necessary resources and structures to support complaints handling. By embedding data ownership, creating oversight committees, and providing accessible complaint channels, leadership signals that the organisation values tenant experience and is committed to continuous improvement. This empowerment extends to staff, who are equipped and authorised to act in alignment with organisational values, reinforcing a culture of accountability, learning, and empathy throughout the organisation.

4. Campbell Tickell's Complaint CultureScan

Informed by these insights and utilising Campbell Tickell's organisational CultureScan© and sector knowledge, we have developed a framework that defines key characteristics of complaints culture, allowing it to be understood and assessed.



The definitions for these characteristics are:

Accountable: Places value on ensuring the organisation, teams and individuals take responsibility for actions and outcomes. Commitments are followed through, investigations are thorough and colleagues take ownership of the solution.

Progressive: Places value on using complaints as opportunity for improvement. Actively seeks root causes and implements changes to prevent recurrence.

Empowered: Places value on colleagues being trusted and given the authority and resources to deliver swift, effective response and resolutions at the earliest opportunity.

Structured: Places value on clear, well-defined and consistently applied systems. Procedures are robust to drive consistency, reliability and fairness in interactions and resolutions.

Empathetic: Places value on understanding and acknowledging the feelings of complainants. Interactions focus on compassion and are human-centric, so complainants feel heard and validated.

Accessible: Places value on making raising a concern a low-effort, straightforward and transparent experience. Communication and resolution are easy to navigate regardless of who you are.

Cultivating: Places value on strong leadership that sets a positive tone from the top. Ensures psychological safety for colleagues and customers, and feedback is understood as an opportunity.

Based on related culture work by Campbell Tickell, in a positive complaint culture, we would expect to see some or all of these elements present and interplaying with one another in a dynamic way. So, for example, an organisation that scores highly for empowered may also be likely to demonstrate higher scores for empathetic and accountable, because colleagues feel psychologically safe and supported to act in alignment with organisational values. Similarly, an organisation that scores highly for Structured is likely to score higher for Accessible and Progressive, as effective systems and processes make it easier for tenants to navigate services, understand how to raise concerns, and ensure that learning is consistently captured and embedded across the organisation.

5. Sector Landscape

Having set out the theoretical and practical components of complaints culture, a review of public sector data reveals how cultural dynamics play out in practice within social housing today. The latest evidence from the HOS and the RSH highlights persistent and systemic challenges that reflect many of the cultural characteristics identified in the literature.

Recent years have seen a significant rise in complaint volumes, with the HOS issuing 7,082 decisions in 2024/25, a 30% increase on the previous year. This escalation suggests not only growing tenant willingness to escalate issues but also enduring weaknesses in landlords' ability to resolve concerns early and effectively. Maladministration remains at a concerning 71% of determinations, with communication failures, record-keeping issues, and procedural weaknesses consistently emerging as the primary causes. These findings strongly align with cultural themes identified in the theory section, particularly those relating to defensive

behaviours, procedural rigidity, and misaligned organisational assumptions about accountability and resident voice.

Repairs-related complaints continue to represent the dominant category of cases, rising by 43% during 2024/25. They frequently involve issues such as damp, mould, leaks, and heating failures, accompanied by recurrent themes of delay, inadequate communication, and insufficient regard for the impact on tenants' living conditions. These are operational issues, but these patterns also point to persistent shortcomings in empathy, respect, and resident-centred approaches highlighted earlier as central to positive complaint handling. The recurrence of such issues across the sector further stresses the need for cultural as well as operational change.

A number of common failure themes emerge consistently across casework and regulatory assessments. These include insensitive or accusatory communication, poor staff behaviour, inadequate reasonable adjustments, and evidence of discrimination or bias in decision-making. Such behaviours map directly onto the cultural features described in the literature review, particularly fear-based or defensive responses, misaligned values, and weak psychological safety among colleagues. They also reflect deeper cultural assumptions that may undervalue residents' insights or minimise the seriousness of their experiences.

Despite these challenges, there are encouraging signs of progress. TSMs indicate relatively strong performance in fairness and engagement measures, although satisfaction with complaint handling (TP09), at 36%, remains the lowest-performing measure nationally. Organisations demonstrating stronger outcomes tend to embed stronger learning cultures, empower colleagues appropriately, and align leadership behaviours with organisational values. Nevertheless, high variation persists across the sector, reinforcing the central argument that procedural compliance and regulatory adherence, while necessary, are insufficient on their own to deliver consistently positive resident experiences.

The variation in performance across landlord types demonstrates this. While the same regulatory framework, guidance and procedural expectations apply across all landlord types, the experience delivered to residents can still vary significantly. Local authorities, for example, continue to show higher maladministration rates (87%) than housing associations (73%), and appear more frequently in the lowest regulatory gradings of C3 and C4. Whilst this trend does not always relate to Local Authority complaints performance, it remains a critical factor. 46% of the Local Authorities currently graded C3, and 71% of those graded C4, have complaints handling directly cited as a cause for concern. Through the lens of Schein and Barrett, this suggests that even when processes are aligned on paper, the cultural conditions that underpin how those processes are enacted may differ. Factors such as visibility of leadership

behaviours, levels of psychological safety, or the extent to which learning mechanisms are embedded can influence how consistently guidance is translated into day-to-day practice. This highlights that shared procedures alone do not guarantee a shared resident experience.

At the same time, the sector increasingly recognises the enablers of improvement. Investment in training and capability development, the strengthening of data and technology systems, and greater internal collaboration have all emerged as important levers for change. These enablers align closely with the cultural principles articulated in the literature, underscoring that effective complaint handling is fundamentally shaped by organisational culture rather than by process design alone.

Above all, in sector best practice leadership stands out as the single most decisive factor in shaping and sustaining complaints culture. Leaders influence expectations, allocate resources, and model the behaviours that define organisational norms. Organisations that self-refer issues, take transparent approaches to learning, and engage constructively with the RSH tend to exhibit stronger learning cultures and improved tenant confidence. This mirrors the literature's findings that cultural transformation requires visible leadership commitment, openness to learning, and the alignment of behavioural expectations across all levels of the organisation.

Overall, the sector landscape illustrates that persistent challenges around delays, communication, record-keeping and accessibility are not purely operational deficits but symptoms of deeper cultural patterns. This context reinforces the need for structured cultural assessment, such as the Complaints CultureScan, to understand how leadership, behaviours and systems interact to shape resident experience in practice.

6. Complaint Handling Culture – CultureScan findings

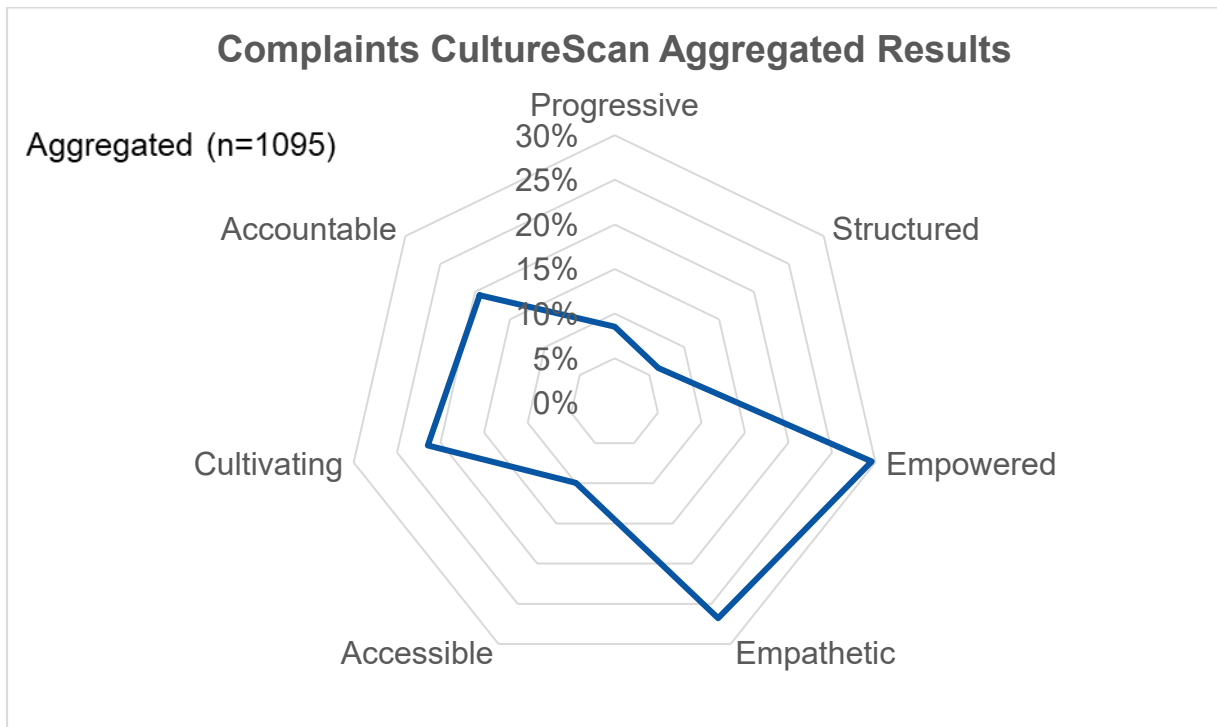
The CultureScan pilot provides insight into the cultural conditions shaping complaint handling across the five participating organisations. While the specific contexts of each provider vary, the findings reveal a number of consistent themes that align closely with wider sector patterns reported by the Housing Ombudsman and the Regulator of Social Housing.

These themes illustrate how organisational culture influences resident experience and how cultural strengths and barriers can manifest in day-to-day practice.

What the Pilot Reveals About Complaint Handling Culture¹

Across all five pilot organisations, it was clear that colleagues are working hard to deliver a positive and empathetic experience for residents. Organisations Individuals perceive their organisations culture as one that is empathetic, where colleagues are encouraged and to listen and taking the time to understand individual needs. In addition, the results show that organisations view themselves as empowered to put things rights and resolve issues quickly. These strengths reflect the values that sit at the heart of the sector and illustrate a willingness to do the right thing whenever possible.

¹ The aggregated results combine the perceptions of the governing body, resident committee and colleagues across all five pilot organisations. The scores (%) represent the percentage net positive perception where 0% signifies a neutral balance of positive and negative views, and any negative scores indicates a cultural weakness.



At the same time, several cultural characteristics were consistently rated lower. The Structured, Progressive, and Accessible pillars scored noticeably below others, suggesting areas where cultural conditions may be less well established or less consistently experienced across the organisation. These findings mirror wider sector themes. The HOS continues to identify communication failures, inaccessible processes, inadequate record-keeping and the absence of coherent learning loops as primary contributors to maladministration. Repairs-related complaints, often driven by delays, poor coordination and inconsistent responses, illustrate how weaknesses in Structured, Progressive and Accessible pillars may translate into in high-volume failure demand and resident dissatisfaction across the sector.

The data suggests that weaker performance in one of these three pillars is often accompanied by lower scores in the others. For instance, respondents described certain challenges related to inconsistent record-keeping, unclear ownership, and systems being fragmented, which together shape the extent to which learning and accessibility can be embedded in practice. These interdependencies indicate that cultural development in these areas may require reinforcing several organisational conditions simultaneously rather than addressing them in isolation.

Feedback indicated that although organisations were undertaking improvement activity, colleagues often reported seeing similar issues recur. This pattern suggests that learning was not always embedded in ways that addressed root causes or prevented repeat experiences for residents. The recurrence of issues despite visible

change efforts may help explain why the Progressive pillar scored lower across the pilot group. This theme also aligns with wider sector evidence in which improvements in process or structure do not always translate into sustained changes in resident experience.

Case study: Gentoo – Embedding a progressive culture through cross-organisational learning

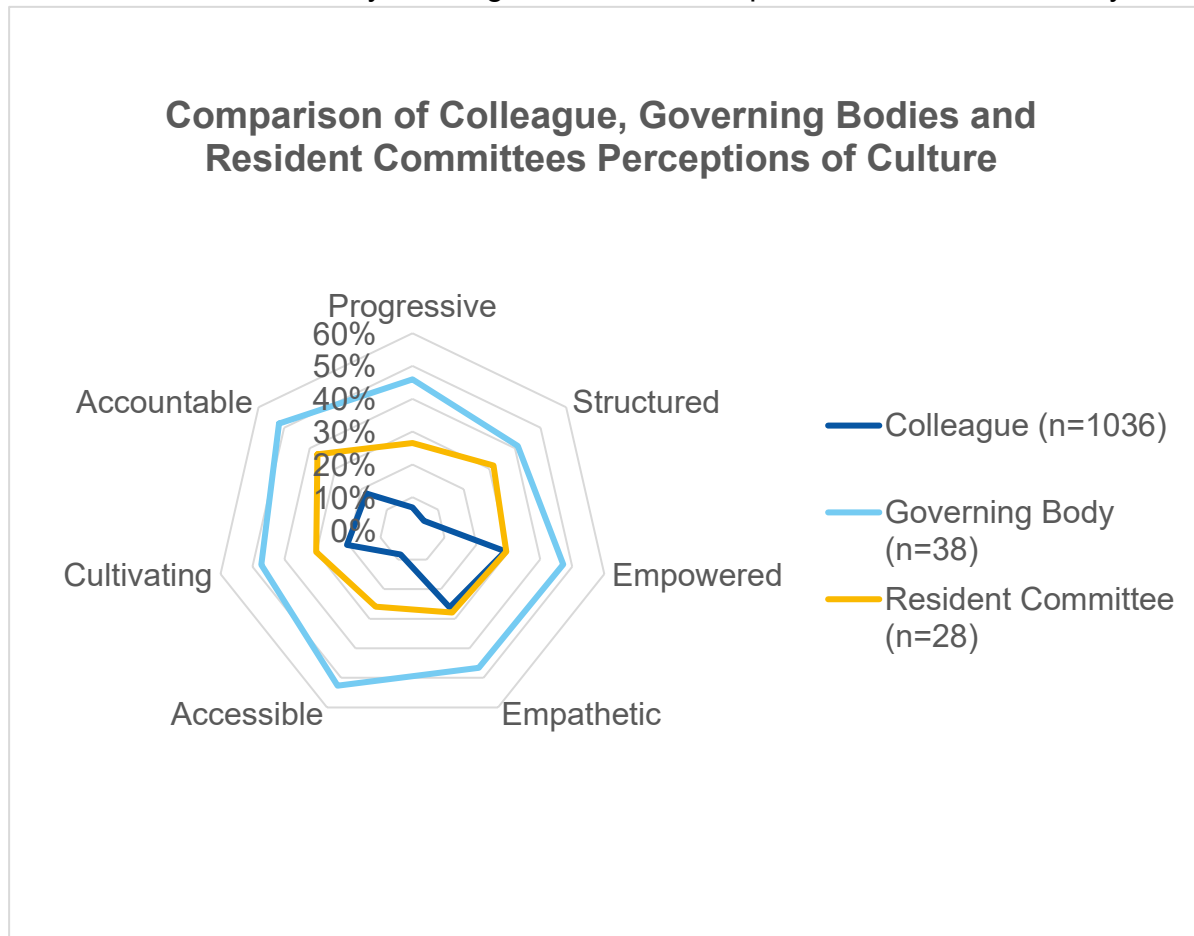
Gentoo offers an example of how organisations can strengthen learning and move away from siloed approaches. Rather than reviewing cases solely within the service area where the issue originated, Gentoo now brings multiple departments around the table to examine what happened, why it happened, and what can be changed. For example, historically if there was a complaint around repairs and maintenance, review discussions were limited to colleagues from the repairs and maintenance function. Under Gentoo’s newer, more joined-up approach, these reviews now routinely involve representatives from housing as well as other relevant teams. Bringing multiple departments around the table enables a fuller examination of the resident’s experience and the organisational factors that contributed to the issue, supporting deeper learning and identifying changes needed to prevent recurrence.

Perception gaps²

Governing bodies tended to report the most positive and balanced view across all pillars, while colleagues identified more challenges. Resident committees generally

² The Scan uses a tailored survey for each group that measured the same seven pillar framework and scoring methodology (where 0% represents a neutral consensus). It is important to note the disparity in sample sizes between the different groups as this difference means that a single strong opinion carries greater weight in determining the final score for the smaller groups. However, as these differences in samples are largely reflective of the difference in population sizes, we remain confident that the results show clear differences in perception amongst governance, delivery and scrutiny

sat between the two, likely drawing on both direct experience and their scrutiny role.



Governing bodies typically see performance through aggregated data, assurance reports and compliance-based indicators. Colleagues and residents, by contrast, experience the day-to-day realities: handovers, system gaps, unclear ownership and the practical constraints that influence the pace and quality of resolution.

This potentially explains why perception gaps are often greatest on pillars such as accessibility, structured working and learning – areas that tend to be less visible in high-level reports but highly visible in everyday interactions.

It may also explain the comparatively lower empathy scores among governing bodies while colleagues note this as the biggest cultural strength. The information presented at governance level is often framed through compliance-based metrics, such as whether responses were issued on time, rather than the quality of the response. This focus on compliance assurance over experience can make it harder for governing bodies to fully appreciate the emotional and relational impact of complaint handling that colleagues encounter first-hand. The Scan showed that both resident panels and

governing bodies recognise complaints as invaluable for informing good decisions, but expressed a desire for richer, more meaningful insight.

“I think as part of [panel name] we could benefit from accurate data and not always percentages”. – Resident group member

“Perhaps we could receive some more information on lessons learnt, corrective actions and impact for tenants” – Board member

These perspectives highlight that, while quantitative data is essential, it does not always illuminate the lived experience of residents or the organisational factors shaping complaint outcomes.

While differences in perspective are natural, they carry important implications. When governing bodies rely primarily on high-level metrics, there is a risk of misalignment in decision-making, where strategic priorities do not fully reflect operational reality or residents’ experiences. This limited visibility can also lead to blind spots at governance level, making it harder to identify systemic barriers, recurring issues or cultural conditions affecting service delivery.

Similarly, resident and customer panels require more than just statistical reports to fulfil their scrutiny role effectively. While they may have some direct touchpoints with residents and their own experiences, they also need insight that captures how complaints feel to those experiencing them. Providing narrative-based evidence, case studies and qualitative examples ensures panels and committees can understand customer experience beyond their own perspectives, strengthening their ability to challenge, question and co-design improvements with the organisation.

Case study: SNG – Communicating resident experience beyond metrics

SNG is strengthening its complaints insight by evolving how information is communicated internally. Alongside traditional performance data, SNG is starting to incorporate video and audio clips into its *Voice of the Customer* reporting. This enables colleagues and governing bodies to hear residents’ experiences directly, helping shift the focus from metrics alone to the quality and impact of the resident journey. The approach supports a more nuanced understanding of service reality and encourages more empathetic, informed decision-making.

Another practical opportunity to strengthen governance visibility and reduce perception gaps lies in the role of the Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC). In

several organisations, the MRC plays a pivotal assurance function by engaging directly with the complaints process and providing a deeper, more contextual understanding of resident experience back to the governing body. Unlike high-level reporting, the MRC's insight is grounded in real cases and direct conversations, enabling them to highlight where processes work well, where cultural strengths such as empathy are evident, and where structural or systemic issues create friction for residents and colleagues.

Some of the pilot organisations provided examples of their MRCs reviewing individual complaints in detail, often following them from first contact through to resolution. In these cases, the MRC was seen as able to bring a nuanced appreciation of the resident journey into strategic discussions. This can close the gap between operational reality and oversight, helping the governing better understand the impact of communication, handovers, record-keeping and decision-making on residents' experience. The MRC can also surface patterns that are not always visible in quantitative dashboards, supporting more informed scrutiny and strengthening the governing body's confidence in the organisation's approach to complaints and learning.

Our research also suggests that there is another explanation for this perception gap in the way that information is communicated to colleagues. By design, many providers have focused on ensuring that Boards, elected members and residents receive clear, structured updates on complaints performance, learning and improvement activity to provide oversight, assurance and transparency.

However, the same level of visibility is not always replicated when it comes to colleagues. While differences in perspective are natural, they carry important implications. Colleagues who are less aware of progress, learning or the intent behind decisions may perceive that issues recur or that improvements are not being embedded, even when work is underway but not widely communicated. Over time, this can contribute to reduced organisational confidence, where both colleagues and residents question whether cultural expectations are being lived consistently across the organisation.

Case study: Community Gateway Association – Shifting perceptions of complaints

Community Gateway Association has taken steps to improve how colleagues perceive the organisation's approach to complaints by reframing how complaints are discussed and shared internally. The organisation is placing greater emphasis on complaints as opportunities for learning and service improvement rather than focusing on fault or blame. The organisation is also broadening how insight from complaints is shared across teams to strengthen colleagues' understanding of themes and outcomes, and to build confidence in the organisation's approach. Alongside this, there is a greater focus on demonstrating how colleague feedback contributes to service improvements, helping reinforce a more constructive and learning-focused culture.

Structured

Across our study, the Structured pillar scored the lowest. A structured culture extends far beyond systems and the complaints process alone. It encompasses the full design that enables colleagues to deliver consistent outcomes, including:

- performance management frameworks that make expectations clear, measurable and repeatable
- role clarity about who does what, by when and to what standard
- oversight and assurance mechanisms that test whether processes are working in practice
- record-keeping standards that allow for accurate tracking, handover and review
- data quality and reporting structures that enable leaders to spot failure patterns early training and capability development that ensure behaviours align with expectations

Despite variation in size, geography and provider type, we found common challenges around:

- systems that do not support a holistic resident journey
- inconsistently applied procedures
- reliance on individual workarounds
- fragmented workflows across teams

“Reduce the number of systems as I feel this would help track the customer journey easier. for example, different areas of the business log contact with customers on different platforms...” – Colleague

These issues place unnecessary pressure on both colleagues and residents, creating avoidable effort that distracts from delivering the experience colleagues want to provide. Even highly committed colleagues struggle to offer a consistent, high-quality

service without clear processes and reliable information, and residents notice quickly when their journey feels fragmented or when they are passed between teams.

While empathy and positive intent are strong cultural strengths, residents may not always feel them when structural pressures intervene. When workload is high and systems are unclear, colleagues can be drawn into treating the complaint as a task to process rather than a person to understand. This shift, from relational to procedural, can inadvertently lead to more defensive behaviours, not because colleagues lack care, but because the pressures around them reduce the space to stay curious about the resident's experience.

“Currently, officers are required to manage enquiries, patch issues and formal complaints separately even when they relate to the same underlying problem. This creates unnecessary duplication, increases admin and diverts focus from resolving the actual issue” – Colleague

Improving the structural conditions around complaint handling is therefore not about adding extra bureaucracy or scripts; it is about removing the friction and workload pressures that limit colleagues' capacity to work in the empathetic, reflective ways they value. The Scan highlights the emotional and relational effort colleagues invest in resolving complaints positively, yet organisations risk over-relying on individual tenacity, which can lead to variability in the resident experience and colleague wellbeing.

“In my experience, employees at [organisation] genuinely care about the customer and want to provide a resolution. It is the tenacity and 'extra mile' approach of the front-line staff that mean so many complaints are resolved.” – Colleague

When colleagues have reliable information, clear expectations and well-sequenced workflows, they experience greater psychological safety and reduced cognitive load. This enables them to slow down, stay curious, and engage meaningfully with residents rather than defaulting to procedural safeguards. Stronger structural foundations give colleagues the time and confidence to apply their cultural strengths consistently, rather than feeling they must revert to defending the process.

As W. Edwards Deming observed, “A bad system will beat a good person every time.” Strengthening structural foundations ensures that committed colleagues can spend less time navigating barriers and more time delivering the service experience residents expect.

The role of leadership

The Cultivating pillar was rated positively across the pilot organisations, and qualitative feedback highlighted ongoing efforts by leadership teams to invest in complaints training, redesign service structures, and model expectations related to customer focus and responsiveness. These activities appear to play an important role in supporting colleagues and signalling organisational priorities.

“[The biggest strength is] Our culture and commitment to put customers at the heart of everything we do, from CEO, Exec team, Senior management and staff their desire to make a difference for Customers .The changes that have been made and new staff taken on, training that has been given and our desire to maintain our G1 AND C1 and V2. Customers are now believing in what we say we do.” - Colleague

At the same time, the Scan participants emphasised that while leaders often speak positively about the importance of a strong complaints culture, there are opportunities to demonstrate this commitment further through the integration of cultural expectations into operational design. For example, clearer processes, better information flows, and reinforced expectations around follow-through were areas respondents felt would help translate leadership intent into more consistent resident experience.

Case study: WLBC – Strengthening culture through joint training

WLBC has been concentrating on its tenant focussed approach by introducing joint training sessions for colleagues and contractors. Using facilitated, scenario-based sessions delivered by a specialist organisation, teams explored real-life issues together and practised constructive, empathetic responses. Bringing colleagues and contractors into the same room helped build shared understanding, consistent expectations and a more cohesive approach to resident interactions. Senior leaders also took part in the sessions, modelling the behaviours and cultural expectations they want to embed across the organisation. Their involvement reinforced the importance of learning together and demonstrated leadership commitment to improving the resident experience. The training has been positively received and is helping strengthen collaboration and cultural alignment across teams.

Recognition also emerged as a theme. While comments positively discussed the impact teams have made in resolving residents’ complaints, there was a recurring sense that these positive outcomes are not routinely celebrated or shared. This

presents a significant opportunity for leadership to actively highlight, champion and embed effective practice.

Highlighting examples of constructive complaint handling, particularly where a difficult interaction has been turned around – especially where empathy, ownership and problem-solving have transformed an interaction – can reinforce desired behaviours, build confidence, and strengthen organisational pride in delivering fair and empathetic service. This also extends to celebrating instances where colleagues were able to put it right before it needed to become a formal complaint. This recognition is a way of embedding cultural expectations, demonstrating what good looks like, and ensuring colleagues see the value of their efforts.

“Through lessons learnt and complaint driven service improvement, it would be good to see more of the continuing proactive approach to ensure ongoing mitigation so that there is not a repeat of a negative experience for tenants. This would include ensuring that any new members to the organisation are made aware of any significant changes and the impact of the change etc.” – Board member

From the findings it is clear that leadership has already played a key part in shaping positive cultures within the pilot organisations. Continuing to further emphasise this by aligning stated values with investment and celebrating examples where colleagues have delivered positive outcomes for residents will further ensure that cultural strengths already present deepen and spread across the organisation.

7. Correlation with Performance

The CultureScan analysis indicates that organisational culture is closely associated with complaint-handling performance.

While recognising the limitations of the pilot sample, the findings provide initial evidence of how cultural attributes may relate to resident experience and operational outcomes across the participating organisations.

Culture as a performance driver

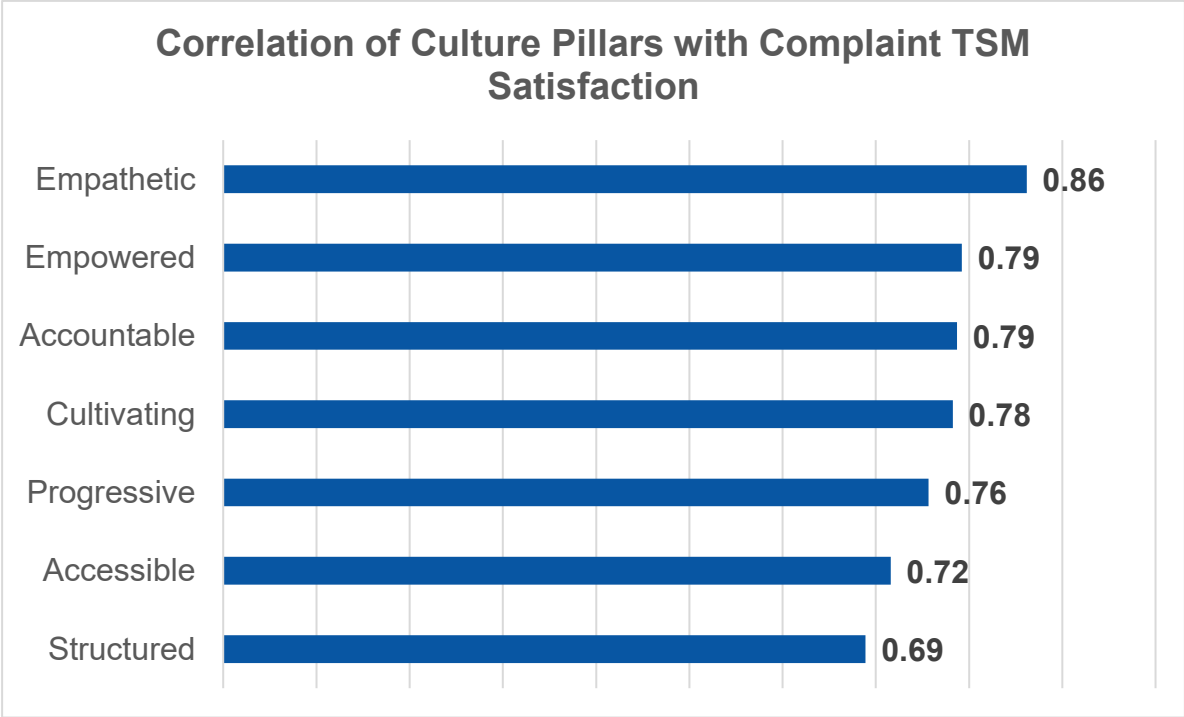
Across the dataset, there is a strong correlation (0.77) between overall cultural maturity and satisfaction with complaint handling, suggesting that cultural conditions may play an important role in shaping how residents perceive the complaints process.

Nationally, satisfaction with complaint handling continues to be the lowest-scoring Tenant Satisfaction Measure, despite clearer regulations and improved guidance. The findings from the Scan may offer some insight into why this gap persists.

The results indicate that while formal processes contribute to compliance, they do not appear to be the sole determinants of resident experience. Instead, features such as empathy, accountability, and empowered decision-making were more closely associated with positive perceptions of complaint handling among residents and colleagues. This suggests that culture may shape how effectively organisations are able to translate procedural requirements into experiences that feel fair, timely, and responsive.

The significance of empathy

Among the seven cultural pillars, the Empathetic pillar demonstrated the strongest relationship with resident satisfaction, showing the highest correlation with multiple aspects of complaint-handling performance. The findings indicate that when residents feel heard and understood at the first point of contact, concerns may be more likely to be resolved informally and earlier in the process.



Higher empathy scores were strongly associated with lower Stage 1 complaint volumes (–0.69) per 1000 homes, suggesting that empathetic interactions may help resolve issues before they turn into formal complaints. For example, when asked how complaint handling could be improved, one resident respondent shared:

“To fix a complaint before it becomes huge. Looking at issues before they reach the formal complaints stage. Asking residents if they have an issue what they would like to happen next, make sure it does and let the resident know the steps to be taken and when.” – Resident member

Case study: Barnsbury Housing Association – Building trust with residents

As a small neighbourhood-based association, Barnsbury Housing Association have spent the last year strengthening trust and connection with their residents. They are doing this in two ways:

First, through their Staying Connected visits. These are hour-long in-home conversations with every resident. Alongside updating records, they use this time to offer financial inclusion and benefits advice and ask whether there are any issues with their home or well-being Barnsbury Housing Association should know about. These visits have helped them spot problems that residents had not reported, such as damp and mould, adaptations and outstanding repairs that residents didn't want to "both them" with. Acting on these issues early has helped identify repairs and potential disrepair cases, while showing residents that the condition of their homes matter.

Second, they have improved how they follow up, both on outstanding repairs and ongoing damp and mould cases. By tracking issues proactively and keeping residents updated, they are able to resolve problems sooner and prevent them from escalating into formal complaints.

In addition, empathy showed a strong association with timeliness. Higher empathy scores correlated with improved Stage 1 response times (0.76) and even more closely with Stage 2 timeliness (0.88). These findings may reflect how ownership, confidence, and a desire to 'put things right' can influence the pace at which colleagues work to address concerns, complementing the role of formal processes.

While empathetic cultures were also linked to lower Stage 2 complaint volumes (–0.57), the escalation rate showed a comparatively weak correlation (0.11–0.22), suggesting that factors beyond the initial interaction—such as workflow design and structural clarity, may influence whether a complaint proceeds from Stage 1 to Stage 2.

For example, the findings relating to the Progressive pillar may provide additional context. Although change activity was underway within all pilot organisations, colleagues' reports of recurring themes suggest that learning processes were not always sufficiently embedded to drive sustained improvements. This may influence performance indicators where repeated demand, unresolved root causes or recurring service failures affect complaint volumes or escalation patterns. This aligns with earlier findings on the role of structure and learning in shaping consistency across the end-to-end journey.

Crucially, the qualitative insights highlighted how empathy extends beyond the initial interaction and the Stage 1 to Stage 2 process. Effective aftercare, such as following up on agreed actions, confirming resolution, and ensuring issues do not reoccur, was identified as an important contributor to positive experience. These elements may reinforce empathetic practice by demonstrating commitment and accountability beyond the point of formal closure.

The findings suggest that structural supports, including prompts for follow-up and mechanisms for checking completed actions, may help ensure that aftercare occurs reliably. In this sense, empathy and structure appear complementary, cultural behaviours shape the quality of interactions, while system design influences their consistency. Equally, effective systems play a critical role in enabling colleagues to fully understand the resident's circumstances and history with the landlord. When information about previous contacts, vulnerabilities, preferences or ongoing issues is easy to access, colleagues are better able to respond to the complaint as part of a bigger picture. This supports more personalised, relational interactions and ensures that empathy is grounded in a fuller understanding of the resident's experience.

These findings indicate that cultural attributes, in particular empathy, may play a significant role in shaping complaint-handling performance. While empathy emerged as the strongest predictor of positive outcomes, the findings also highlight the importance of structural clarity, data quality, and learning mechanisms in supporting consistent practice. These patterns suggest that cultural alignment across behaviours, systems, and leadership may contribute to more reliable and trusted outcomes for residents.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings from this research indicate that complaints provide valuable insight into organisational culture, leadership behaviours and the day-to-day experience of residents. Across the five pilot organisations, the CultureScan results present a picture of strong values and a clear commitment among colleagues to engaging with residents constructively. In particular, empathy and willingness to resolve issues emerged consistently as cultural strengths.

At the same time, the analysis suggests that structural conditions, such as clarity of roles, consistency of systems, and reliability of information, play an important role in shaping how cultural intentions are experienced in practice. The lower scores for the Structured, Progressive and Accessible pillars reflect challenges also highlighted in wider sector evidence relating to communication, coordination, record-keeping and the ease with which residents can navigate processes. These patterns point to areas where cultural alignment may be less consistent across organisation.

The persistence of perception gaps between governing bodies, colleagues and resident committees further illustrates the complexity of complaints culture. These groups engage with and experience the complaints journey differently, which may influence how they assess culture and performance. The findings suggest that strengthening shared understanding through richer insight, more integrated information flows and visibility of learning may support more consistent organisational perspectives.

Overall, the research indicates that while policy and process remain important foundations, cultural alignment across values, behaviours, structures and leadership appears closely associated with more consistent and trusted complaint-handling outcomes. The relationship observed between cultural maturity and resident satisfaction reinforces this pattern, particularly the strong association with empathy and its links to timeliness, early resolution and reduced Stage 1 volumes.

The findings suggest several areas that organisations across the sector may wish to reflect on when seeking to strengthen complaint-handling cultures:

1. Strengthen leadership expectations and accountability

Leadership signalling, through priorities, investment, communication and visibility, appears to shape how cultural values are understood and enacted. Ensuring that expectations about fair and constructive complaint handling are clearly articulated and reflected in organisational behaviour and decisions may help reinforce the intended culture.

2. Build a shared understanding of the service reality

Differences in perception across governance, colleagues and residents highlight the importance of insight that reflects the lived experience of complaint handling. Approaches that combine quantitative data with narrative, case-based and qualitative feedback may help support more rounded understanding and more informed decision-making.

Additionally, informing colleagues – regardless of role – of the changes being made and the bigger picture may also help in internal perceptions, especially if this is linked back to colleague and resident feedback.

3. Create a clear and consistent operating model

The findings suggest that clarity around processes, roles and information flows plays a meaningful role in shaping both colleague and resident experience. More consistent structural foundations may help reduce avoidable friction and support more reliable customer journey.

4. Meaningfully empower colleagues

Empowerment was consistently reported as a cultural strength, and the analysis suggests that ensuring that colleagues have the information, guidance and permissions to act confidently may support earlier resolution and reduce residents feeling the need to escalate their complaint to get a resolution.

5. Treat complaints as learning opportunities

The sector increasingly recognises that complaints provide important insight into how services operate. However, this insight only contributes to improvement when organisations actively examine patterns, share learning across teams, and embed changes in practice. Shifting from a compliance-focused approach to one centred on continuous learning enables complaints to inform meaningful development rather than simply being recorded. This also requires an understanding of the wider resident experience, beyond the volume of complaints linked to specific service areas such as repairs.

6. Keep empathy at the heart of the service

Empathy emerged as the strongest predictor of positive outcomes. The research suggests that approaches which help colleagues understand resident perspectives and maintain clarity of communication may support more constructive interactions, improved timeliness, and lower demand at formal stages of the process.

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