

Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions Policy

1.0 Purpose of policy

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to provide a framework for dealing with complaints, compliments and suggestions.

2.0 Objectives

- 2.1 The complaints, compliments and suggestion system:
- Is consistent in how we handle complaints, compliments and suggestions.
 - Is non discriminatory.
 - Is easily accessible and well publicised.
 - Is simple to understand and use.
 - Allows speedy handling, with established timescales for responses and ensures customers are informed of progress.
 - Ensures a full and thorough investigation.
 - Respects customers' desire for confidentiality.
 - Provides an effective response and appropriate redress.
 - Provides information to Team Leaders, Managers and Directors so that services can be continuously improved.
 - Follows the Housing Ombudsman's dispute resolution principles.
 - Meets regulatory requirements.
 - Delivers a better service to customers by monitoring and measuring complaints, compliments and suggestions.

Policy detail

3.0 HOW DO CUSTOMERS MAKE A COMPLAINT?

- 3.1 We regard complaints as a positive source of feedback. Complaints are learning opportunities that enable us to be more responsive to the people we serve. Complaints can be made in the following ways:

- Face to face with any member of staff.
- By telephoning the relevant offices.
- In writing.

Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions Policy
Version 1
November 2017

- By using the websites.
- Via social media.
- Via a Councillor or MP or other third party.

3.2 We accept complaints from a customer's authorised contact.

3.3 We will accept anonymous complaints, even though it can be difficult to conduct a full investigation without knowing the identity of a complainant. This must be explained to the complainant, and they should be asked how they want to be advised of the outcome of an investigation.

3.4 We will support the principle of customers seeking assistance and support from third parties such as the Citizens Advice Bureau in pursuing their complaint.

3.5 The Unacceptable Customer Behaviour Policy clearly sets out our approach to managing the relatively few customers whose actions or behaviour are considered unacceptable.

3.6 Customers should endeavour to be as concise as possible if submitting a written complaint. This will enable a more swift and efficient response to any concerns.

4.0 WHO CAN COMPLAIN?

4.1 Anyone affected by a service we provide.

5.0 COMPLAINTS WE WILL INVESTIGATE

If customers complain about our money advice service, they must follow the guidance in appendix 1.

5.1 The following list is a guide to the range of complaints we will consider:

- Failure to provide a service or to achieve the required standards/quality.
- Employee's attitudes and their actions or lack of actions relating to a service.
- Dissatisfaction with the manner in which our standards and procedures have been adhered to.
- Dissatisfaction with our policies.
- Alleged discrimination.

6.0 WHAT IS EXCLUDED BY THIS POLICY?

6.1 The following are excluded from the complaints procedure:

- A first time request for a service.
- A request for information or an explanation.
- A matter being dealt with through legal action or an insurance claim, or is currently subject to legal action, an insurance claim or a claim for damages.
- Dissatisfaction with a decision where a complainant has not used the relevant review procedure e.g. if a customer is not happy with a rent increase/decrease letter an alternative appeals procedure exists.
- Complaints about services provided by individuals/companies not within our control e.g. Utility Companies, Local Authorities etc.

- Expressions of dissatisfaction about our decision to take legal action or the outcome of legal action.

7.0 WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A CUSTOMER MAKES A COMPLAINT?

- 7.1 Often a customer's concerns can be resolved at 'first point of contact' and do not need to go through our 2 stage process. These are known as 'informal complaints' or 'stage 0' complaints. Initially staff should always try and help a customer and try to resolve any problems they have at first point of contact. The emphasis is on resolving problems and putting them right with the minimum of delay. For example, many concerns can often be easily resolved by an apology or a phone call to rectify the situation e.g. contacting Building/Property Services to arrange a repair following a failed appointment.
- 7.2 If a complaint can't be resolved at 'first point of contact' or if a customer wants their concerns to be resolved by someone else, then a Team Leader or another member of their team investigates (this is still known as stage 0).
- 7.3 To ensure swift and efficient dispute resolution, a Team Leader or a member of their team telephones the customer within 1 working day to gain a greater understanding of all the facts and agrees the 'next steps' with them.

The Team leader/team member/customer then discuss and agree whether the complaint has been resolved.

If agreement cannot be reached then the complaint should be escalated to stage 1.

- 7.4 A central record of all complaints will be held on our ICT system. All complaints are logged on the day they are received (or the nearest working day).

If the customer requests contact only in writing then the guidance in section 8 should always be followed.

8.0 COMPLAINTS STAGES 1 AND 2

- 8.1 An acknowledgment letter is issued in writing within **1 working day**. A copy of the complaints leaflet will be included in the acknowledgement letter (so the customer knows how the process works).

NOTE – If a customer prefers to be contacted via email, the acknowledgement letter and an electronic version of the leaflet should be sent via email.

- 8.2 We will comply with the following standards:

- **Stage one** - Following a review of the complaint, a full written response will be issued to the complainant by a **Manager** within a maximum of **10 working days**. The Manager will offer to telephone the complainant to assist in investigating their concerns before sending a written response.
- **Stage two** - If the complainant is not satisfied with the response, and asks for a further review, the relevant **Assistant or Executive Director** will issue a written response within a maximum of **10 working days**. The Director will offer to

telephone the complainant to assist in investigating their concerns before sending a written response.

- 8.3 If complainants believe that their complaint has not been dealt with adequately after exhausting the complaints process, they are encouraged to contact a 'designated person' or the Housing Ombudsman as noted below. Customers will be provided with information about this as part of the stage 2 response letter.
- 8.4 After exhausting stage 2 of the complaints process, complaints can be reviewed locally by a 'designated person' rather than an Ombudsman. Such a person can be an MP, a local Councillor, or a recognised Tenant Panel. The designated person may help resolve the complaint directly, may refer the complaint to the Ombudsman, or may decline doing either. In the latter case the complainant may approach the Ombudsman for their consideration of the complaint. The complainant may also approach the Ombudsman directly if more than 8 weeks have elapsed since the completion of the internal procedure.

9.0 COMPLAINTS DECISION

9.1 We categorise decisions about complaints as:

9.2 *Complaint upheld*

9.2.1 This is where we agree that the complaint was justified.

9.3 *Complaint not upheld*

9.3.1 This is where we do not agree that the complaint was justified.

10.0 GENERAL RULES

10.1 To move to stage 2 of the complaints process, complainants must be able to answer the following questions (customers don't have to do this in writing and where necessary we can provide support):

- a. What specific parts of your original complaint have we not investigated?**
- b. What part of our response do you disagree with and why?**
- c. What would you like the outcome of your complaint to be (what would you like us to do)?**

10.2 If a complainant does not objectively answer the above questions we will not progress the complaint (we will not know what to investigate!). In such cases we will explain why we will not review the complaint and confirm in writing that the complaint will be closed. We will offer information about further steps a customer can take if still dissatisfied.

10.3 When escalating a complaint, customers may not 'add in new or additional concerns or allegations' to be investigated. Any new or additional concerns or allegations must be treated as a separate complaint (i.e. given a new reference number and investigated first at stage 0).

10.4 If a complaint is not upheld and our reason for this is not subjective, we will not escalate a complaint.

- 10.5 We understand that some complainants may not be able to articulate their thoughts and feelings in writing. We must always offer customers the opportunity to speak and/or meet with us so they can articulate their dissatisfaction.
- 10.6 If a complaint is particularly complicated or in exceptional circumstances, it may take longer to investigate than the published timescales. We will write to a complainant to tell them this (giving a reason why) and advise them of a new reply date. We must do this before the original reply timescale has elapsed. The reply date can be extended by a maximum of 10 working days.
- 10.7 Staff members that are the subject of a complaint cannot investigate that specific complaint.
- 10.8 If we have upheld a complaint, apologised to the customer (and addressed all the issues raised by them) and informed them of the lessons learned in writing, then the complaint cannot be progressed to the next stage.
- 10.9 If a customer complains about the way in which a complaint was handled or disagrees with the Complaints Policy (e.g. if the customer feels timescales were not met or feels the incorrect person responded to a complaint), it will not be escalated to the next stage of the complaints process. It will be treated as a separate complaint (i.e. given a new reference number, investigated at stage 0, plus investigated by a different Manager/Team Leader/Member).
- 10.10 Although complaints can be received from a range of individuals, only our tenants/leaseholders/service users/their advocates can escalate a complaint to the Housing Ombudsman Service. Leaseholders may refer their complaint to the First Tier Property Tribunal in cases of lease disputes.
- 10.11 Customers who are not Tenants, Service Users or Leaseholders (or advocates acting on their behalf) will have therefore exhausted our complaints process after completing stage 2.
- 10.12 If we have formally dealt with a complaint (at stage 1/stage 2), we will not deal with repeated submissions of the same complaint (we will inform the customer of this in writing).
- 10.13 A complaint made in the form of a petition on behalf of multiple customers will be treated as one complaint. Communications will be directed to the nominated signatory of the petition.
- 10.14 If a customer complains about several subjects at once (in the same piece of correspondence), the correct Officer to investigate is the Officer whose service area is affected most.

For example, if a customer complains about the attitude of their Housing Officer, the quality of a repair and the length of time taken to complete a repair then an Officer in Building/Property Services has responsibility for investigating and resolving the complaint. The Officer should liaise with their colleagues in Housing Management to provide an answer to **all** their concerns.

- 10.15 If legal advice/insurance advice is needed after receipt of a complaint, the complaints process may be delayed until the advice is received. The complainant must be notified of this in writing.
- 10.16 Priority will be given to resolving substantive live issues ahead of conducting any necessary investigation, without prejudicing consideration of the complaint.
- 10.17 All the complaints we receive are very important. Correspondence from public officials and external stakeholders should be actioned by the relevant Manager. The Manager must inform their Assistant Director/Executive Director as well as the Assistant Director of Customer Services on receipt of a complaint. The manager must obtain prior approval from their Assistant Director/Executive Director before any response is provided.

Public officials and external stakeholders include (this list is not exhaustive):

MPs (or their representatives), Councillors, civil servants, partnering contractors and agencies, funders, community organisations and voluntary groups and partnerships, the police, NHS, charities.

We must always obtain written consent (e.g. a letter/email) from a customer before sharing their information with a third party (even if the third party is an elected representative).

- 10.18 The issue will either be investigated as a new complaint or may be included as further information in a complaint that is already being investigated.
- 10.19 Letters addressed to Board Members must be given to the relevant Executive Director for consideration.
- 10.20 Customers seeking compensation or financial redress do not need to make a formal complaint to have their request considered. Requests for compensation will be considered in accordance with the Compensation and Goodwill Payments Policy.
- 10.21 We require any contractor that provides services on our behalf to comply with this policy by:
- ✓ Recording and responding to customer feedback when required.
 - ✓ Providing us with any information relating to a complaint when requested.
 - ✓ Assisting us with complaints investigations as appropriate.
- 10.22 Complainants have a right to ask for personal information associated with their complaint. To do this they must make a Subject Access Request. There will be no charge for this service.
- 10.23 We reserve the right to deal with a complaint differently (outside this policy) if circumstances require this. In such a rare case, we record why we have dealt with the complaint differently and inform the complainant accordingly in writing.

11.0 TIMESCALES FOR ESCALATING COMPLAINTS

- 11.1 Complaints must be raised within 2 months or as close as possible to the point at which the issue first arose.

- 11.2 If the complainant wishes to proceed to the next stage they must ask to do this within 10 working days of receiving the stage 0 or 1 decision.
- 11.3 In cases where a complainant can demonstrate a good reason for delaying the decision to escalate a complaint then the matter may still be considered.

12.0 COMPLIMENTS

- 12.1 A 'compliment' is an expression of satisfaction with a service that we, or anyone acting on our behalf have provided. This could be satisfaction with an individual member of staff, a team or a particular service area.
- 12.2 A central record of all compliments will be held on our ICT system. All compliments are logged on the day they are received (or the nearest working day) and shared with the relevant Manager to cascade to their team.
- 12.3 We will reply in writing to acknowledge a written compliment.

13.0 SUGGESTIONS

- 13.1 A 'suggestion' is an innovative idea that is acted upon to change the way we deliver our services for the benefit of the wider audience such as a change in policy or processes.
- 13.2 A central record of all suggestions will be held on our ICT system. All suggestions are logged on the day they are received (or the nearest working day) and shared with the relevant Manager to cascade to their team.
- 13.3 We will reply in writing to acknowledge a written suggestion.

14.0 Monitoring and Review

- This policy will be reviewed at least every 3 years. The review will be brought forward if there are significant changes to good practice, regulatory or legislative requirements.
- On at least a quarterly basis information will be reported to the appropriate Committee, including the recognised Tenant Panel (the report must include all complaints, compliments and suggestion statistics, plus details of any 'lessons learned' and recommendations for service improvements).
- Each year we will publish information about the number, nature and outcome of complaints (as required as part of the Regulator's Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard).
- The Chief Executive is responsible for delegating the monitoring, review and implementation of this policy.

15.0 Equality and Diversity

“This policy is implemented in line with the Equality and Diversity Policy and associated legislation. Consideration will be given to all protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations.

This policy and associated documents are available in different languages and alternative formats where necessary.”

16.0 Data Protection and Privacy

“We have a clear policy on data protection and sharing data with other partners/outside agencies under the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998. This is clearly set out in our Data Management Policy which, along with the supporting Data Management Guidelines, which must be followed throughout the operation of this policy.”

17.0 References

- Localism Act.
- Housing Ombudsman guidance.
- Regulatory Framework.
- Tenancy Agreement
- Tenants Handbook.
- Leaseholders Handbook.
- Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard
- Unacceptable Customer Behaviour Policy