

Policy for Dealing with Complaints, Compliments & Suggestions

1. Policy Statement

- 1.1 The Association aims to deliver excellent standards of service to all its customers. Anyone who uses, seeks to use, or is affected by the services provided by the Association is entitled to make a complaint. This includes residents, applicants for housing, former residents and applicants, neighbours of the Association's residents, contractors working on behalf of the Association, and members of the general public. All are referred to as customers throughout this Policy.
- 1.2 We recognise that sometimes things go wrong or that the services we offer may not always meet customer expectations or the expectations of those affected by the service. We also recognise the benefit of positive feedback and of listening to the views and ideas of our customers.
- 1.3 The purpose of this policy is to:
 - give customers the opportunity to make complaints or comments about service improvement and to have these reviewed promptly
 - give customers the opportunity to compliment the service where it exceeds their expectations
 - highlight any areas of excellence or of common complaint from which the Association can learn and if necessary adapt their behaviour
 - raise overall levels of customer satisfaction
 - to promote a culture that drives continuous improvement

2. Scope of the Policy

- 2.1 What is a complaint?
- 2.2 A complaint is defined as an expression of dissatisfaction by a customer with any aspect of service provision, delivery, the Association's policy or member of staff.
- 2.3 In general terms, staff receiving complaints should bear in mind the distinction between 'complaints' that are actually service requests (e.g. a repair request or a report about an anti-social behaviour incident) and a complaint about a service failure (e.g. a delay in completing a repair or a failure to apply policy). It is the latter to which this policy refers.
- 2.4 A complaint about the performance of a contractor or consultant should be addressed through this policy as it falls within the control of the Association.
- 2.5 Complaints can also be made by a complainant's advocate. This could be a carer, relative, Councillor, Member of Parliament, a representative from Citizens Advice, Solicitor (where a solicitor normally acts on behalf of the complainant – i.e. an appointee/power of attorney etc) and Social Services Department or other such person or agency. Responses to these will in the first instance be addressed back to the complainant unless they provide written permission for a third party to act on their behalf.
- 2.6 If the complainant has instructed a solicitor in a legal capacity, rather than as an advocate, we may also instruct solicitors.

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- 2.7 A complaint will not be considered where more than four months has elapsed between the cause of the complaint and it being brought to the attention of the Association, although the Association has the discretion to accept a complaint outside this time limit.
- 2.8 If the Association believes that a complaint is being pursued unreasonably, we may choose not to handle the complaint. Such decisions should be referred to the relevant manager. Our procedure sets out how we will deal with unreasonable vexatious complaints. We define vexatious as a complaint instituted without sufficient grounds and serving only to cause annoyance to the receiver of the complaint; an oppressive complaint (with unjust severity); or otherwise an abuse of the procedures for dealing with complaints or conduct matters.
- 2.9 We will deal with complaints relating to a Company Secretary, Managing Director or Board members in line with this policy, but may need to change the investigating officer and appeals route. Thus, two other Board members (normally including a departmental manager) will agree who should investigate, review at appeal and whether outsourcing the complaint should be undertaken.

3 Informal Complaints

- 3.1 These should be dealt with at local or departmental level by an appropriate member of staff, usually at the first point of contact (in practice this could be any member of staff below manager level).
- 3.2 An informal complaint is where the customer contacts us to make us aware of their dissatisfaction with an aspect of our service and where a satisfactory remedy can be found on the spot. For instance, where a contractor or member of staff has failed to keep an appointment and the customer merely wants a second appointment to be made. Where this is the case an apology should be offered and the customer advised that a record will be kept of the service failure. In all cases a record of the contact should be made on the complaints database in order for trends to be monitored and lessons learned.
- 3.3 Informal complaints may remain anonymous if the customer so wishes.
- 3.4 Anonymous complaints cannot be formal because they are impossible to respond to.

4 Formal Complaints

- 4.1 A formal complaint is either where the customer makes it clear that they wish to complain, or where a service failure needs to be investigated and cannot be resolved on the spot.
- 4.2 The policy is a staged process. Customers have the opportunity to progress to the next stage if the issue is not resolved to their satisfaction.
- 4.3 The Complaints Procedure document provides more detail on the stages and process involved.
- 4.4 The escalation stages are as follows:
- **Formal Stage 1:** complaint to be dealt with by the Customer and Business Support Manager acting in the role of complaints co-ordinator in conjunction with the appropriate departmental manager.

- **Formal Stage 2.** Internal appeals panel which will comprise of two Board members and where possible we will endeavour to ensure that a tenant is included on the panel.
 - **Formal Stage 3:** a customer making a complaint has the right of appeal to a 'designated person' tier prior to the Ombudsman unless they wait 8 weeks from the end of the internal process before applying to the Ombudsman. A 'designated person' may be a local elected representative or an external complaints panel. The Association does not have a recognised tenant panel; therefore the complaint can be referred to the Local Councillor or MP of the complainant's choice. The Association will provide advice and/or information regarding this if required.
 - **Formal Stage 4:** appeal to the Housing Ombudsman Service.
- 4.6 Throughout the process, a customer's advocate can assist the customer.
- 4.7 Complaints about neighbour nuisance should be dealt with in accordance with the Anti-Social Behaviour Policy. If, however, the complaint relates to the process or our failure to deal with the issues raised it should be dealt with under this policy.

5. Complaints by corporate partners

- 5.1 Complaints by corporate partners (for example local authorities or parish councils) should be dealt with under the same principles applicable to other complaints, except that once they have been logged and acknowledged they should be passed to the relevant departmental manager for investigation and response.

6 Remedies

- 6.1. We have a wide range of remedies to deal with complaints. These include, but are not limited to:
- Written and verbal apologies
 - Putting things right
 - Compensation
 - Mediation

7 Customer Care

- 7.1 A robust complaints policy is essential to put right any failures in service. However, it is not a substitute for getting things right first time. Therefore training of all staff is important, and any complaint made should be assessed by the relevant manager to see if a training issue has arisen and any lessons learnt are incorporated into policy and procedures.

8 Publicity

- 8.1 The policy is publicised in the following ways:
- in the Tenants' and Shared Owners' handbooks
 - in the Association's 'Getting It Right' leaflet
 - in the residents' newsletters
 - on the Association's website

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- 8.2 All publicity should make it clear that the policy is available in translation and other accessible formats on request.
- 8.3 We will publicise our performance information relating to complaints. This will include:
- an annual summary of complaints by type
 - our performance in meeting our timescales for dealing with complaints
 - information on complaints that have led to improved services and any lessons learnt that have resulted in changes to our policy and procedures.

9 Equal opportunities and equality of access

- 9.1 Some individuals may be discouraged from complaining because:
- they have poor communication skills
 - they have poor literacy skills
 - they have a disability which makes it harder for them to communicate
 - English is not their first language
- 9.2 Where an individual has particular communication difficulties it is the responsibility of the Association to ensure that all their customers have equal access to the complaints process. For instance, it may be appropriate to take details by personal interview or by a home visit. If necessary, other forms of communication may also be considered:
- Audio recording (tape or CD)
 - Obtaining written translations
 - Language Line
 - Braille
- 9.3 Where another form of communication is required, there may be an unavoidable delay in responding. For example, it can take up to 10 working days to obtain a translation for a letter.
- 9.4 Some individuals may prefer the support of a third party – this may be a friend or relative or a professional advocacy service such as the Citizens Advice Bureau. For residents of sheltered housing schemes, the use of AIMS (Advice, Information and Mediation Service) should be considered.

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10 Review and Monitoring

- 10.1 The Policy will be reviewed every three years or sooner if regulatory/legislator changes are required. We will also review the Policy if customer/user feedback requires this.
- 10.2 Complaints will be monitored quarterly by departmental managers and by the Board on an annual basis. Residents will monitor complaints through newsletters, the website and Resident Involvement Board scrutiny arrangements.
- 10.3 All complainants will receive a satisfaction survey one month after the complaint has closed. This will assess the satisfaction with the complaints process. The results will be presented to Board on an annual basis.