



How to...
*develop your complaints
process*



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What is a complaint?

Determining what should be treated and logged as a complaint can be more difficult than you might expect. Essentially **any expression of dissatisfaction where the complainant requests a response** is a complaint and should be treated as such.

Why is effective complaints handling so important?

Your approach to complaints handling can have a major impact on the quality of all of your services and on the satisfaction of your tenants because:

- an effective complaints service provides an opportunity to put right any service failures and a well handled complaint can turn a dissatisfied tenant into a satisfied one
- for tenants, making a complaint is the simplest and most straightforward way of holding their landlord to account and letting them know when they perceive that services need to be improved
- complaints are a vital source of information about your service delivery which can help you to identify recurring or underlying serious problems and make improvements.

What are the regulatory requirements?

The regulatory standard on tenant involvement and empowerment sets out the minimum requirements for a housing organisation's handling of complaints. It sets out the following **required outcome**:

Registered providers shall have an approach to complaints that is clear, simple and accessible that ensures that complaints are resolved promptly, politely and fairly.

And the following **specific expectations**:

Providers shall offer a range of ways for tenants to express a complaint and set out clear service standards for responding to complaints, including complaints about performance against the standards, and details of what to do if they are unhappy with the outcome of a complaint. Providers shall inform tenants how they use complaints to improve their services. Registered providers shall publish information about complaints each year, including their number and nature, and the outcome of the complaints. Providers shall accept complaints made by advocates authorised to act on a tenant's/tenants' behalf.

From April 2012 a new regulatory framework will take effect and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) will take over responsibility for regulation from the Tenant Services Authority (TSA). The regulatory requirements around complaints are likely to be unchanged. However the HCA's priority will be to ensure that housing providers are well governed, financially viable and achieving value for money. They will not be actively monitoring the standard of services that landlords provide and so it will become even more important that landlords use their own complaints service to help monitor and improve the quality of services.

For more information on these changes, CIH has published a briefing on [How to... prepare for regulation reform: Tenant engagement and scrutiny](#).

Key principles of an effective complaints process

The specific processes used to handle complaints vary from one organisation to another, particularly in the number of stages used and in whether complaints are initially handled by the service area that the complaint relates to or by a central team. This briefing is not intended to prescribe a particular process, however there are some key principles which are common to effective complaints services:

Be positive about complaints

Ensuring your complaints service is effective is as much about culture as it is about process. It is essential that complaints are seen as a form of feedback and therefore an opportunity for the organisation to learn and to improve, and not just as an indication of failure. Success should not be measured purely in terms of the volume of complaints received - where the fewer complaints there are, the better the service is assumed to be – but by the extent to which complaints are leading to demonstrable improvements.

While housing organisations should naturally strive to deliver services ‘right first time’, in practice no organisation can deliver a perfect service every time and receiving a certain number of complaints is an inevitable part of delivering any service. Aspiring to receive no complaints at all is neither realistic nor desirable, it is much better to accept that occasionally things will go wrong and to commit to learning from your mistakes and to using them to improve.

All of your staff need to ‘buy in’ to this approach and so it is essential that this vision of complaints as a form of feedback is promoted widely throughout the organisation.

Ensure the process is easy to access

An easy to access complaints process is essential for any organisation that aspires to learn from complaints. This means enabling tenants to register a complaint in a variety of ways, including through informal channels, ensuring that no individual or group of tenants are excluded from accessing the process.

To ensure this, you should:

- make clear to staff that everyone is responsible for accepting a complaint, even if it relates to a different service from the one they work in. This means making sure that all members of staff have been briefed on how to take down the details of a complaint, how to record it and who to pass it on to for resolution
- not require tenants to make their complaint in writing, especially at the first stage of a complaints process. Adding unnecessary formality to the process runs the risk of making it inaccessible to some tenants, such as those with literacy problems or language requirements. Tenants should be able to make their complaint by telephone, email or face-to-face with any member of staff. While there is a need to retain an audit trail, the onus should be on the member of staff receiving the complaint, not the complainant, to record it
- make sure that any correspondence is in Plain English; publicise that large print and translation services are available for tenants who require them.

- widely publicise details of how to make a complaint, service standards relating to how complaints will be handled and details of how complaints are used to improve services, including specific examples, to demonstrate that the organisation welcomes and acts on complaints.

Get the basics right

Above all, tenants want to see their complaint handled in a timely and effective manner. There are some straight-forward principles which landlords can apply that will make a big difference to tenants' experience of the complaints process:

- focus on trying to resolve complaints at stage one – keep complaints procedures simple, with as few stages as possible and focus on trying to resolve complaints effectively as early as possible
- keep complainants informed – ensure tenants always know which stage of the process their complaint is at and when they can expect a response
- publicise clear service standards for how quickly complaints will be responded to – where there are complex cases that cannot be resolved within published timescales keep the tenant informed of progress
- demonstrate that the tenant's complaint is important to you - where demands on staff time allow for it, many tenants will appreciate receiving a phone call to discuss their complaint
- allow staff to use their discretion – every complaint is different, so ensure that officers are able to consider the individual circumstances of each case, while working within a set of overall guidelines
- keep good records – maintain a clear, chronological record of the key decisions made in handling each complaint. Include details of who made the decision and why.

Tackle the causes of complaints

It is not enough to just handle each individual complaint separately. An effective complaints service should also identify the causes of complaints so that this information can be used to improve services.

To achieve this you will need to record all complaints and carry out regular analysis to track their causes over time. This will provide valuable data for service managers which should be considered alongside other information when reviewing performance and planning service improvements.

Headline data should also be widely publicised and made available to your scrutiny panel, to enable tenants to also use this information to hold the organisation to account and to recommend improvements.

Bear in mind that even where complaints are ultimately not justified they can still lead to improvements in the way that expectations are managed in the future. Even when a complaint can be resolved immediately or has already been resolved, it is still important to record it so that the organisation can identify recurring complaints of this nature.

Learning from others

HouseMark, in partnership with the ombudsman schemes that deal with housing complaints, set up **Ombudsman Says** - www.ombudsmansays.info – in April 2009 to give tenants, stakeholders and staff easier access to the complaint outcomes of the most important Ombudsman decisions.

Here you can learn from real examples of social landlord complaints handling.

Monitor your performance in complaints handling and continually strive for improvement

Your complaint handling should be subject to continual performance monitoring. A simple count of the number of complaints received is not, on its own, sufficient data to make a robust judgement about your performance, you should also collect and analyse data on:

- the time taken to respond to complaints – including the proportion of complaints that are resolved within your published timescales
- tenants' satisfaction - both with the way their complaint was handled and with the outcome of their complaint
- the number of services that have been changed, improved or withdrawn as a result of information collected from complaints
- the cost of complaints handling – demonstrate value for money and have an evidence based approach to budget setting to manage complaints.

This data should be used to set and monitor progress against targets, to ensure the organisation is continually striving for improvement in the way complaints are handled. It is also good practice to benchmark your performance against other organisations, one way to do this is through HouseMark's [complaints benchmarking service](#) .

HouseMark also offer a [complaints accreditation service](#) that enables all housing providers to demonstrate to their tenants and partners how they are responding to customer complaints and run a [complaints club](#) , which meets three times a year to share and discuss good practice.

Learning from others

Following a comprehensive review in collaboration with customers and staff, **Helena Partnerships** has made some significant changes to the way it handles customer complaints. The housing association's complaints service is now more accessible, allowing unhappy customers the opportunity to deal with the right person from the very beginning.

Key features of Helena's complaints service include:

- managers make personal contact with the complainant wherever possible, often visiting tenants at home when they have indicated that is their preference
- a bespoke complaints management and reporting system was introduced to allow Helena to deal with 100% of complaints within target
- Helena's Customer Excellence Panel, a group of tenants involved in scrutinising the association's service delivery, monitors complaints performance to provide feedback on the quality of service being offered.

A more detailed case study is available on HouseMark's website at:

www.housemark.co.uk/hmkb2.nsf/1/96AD9CD0C0813166802578C60059C09B?OpenDocument

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Future changes to the ombudsman service

The government is introducing measures through the Localism Act which will affect the way that unresolved complaints are escalated in the future. The changes are intended to ensure that more complaints are dealt with at a local level and to reduce the number that are ultimately escalated to the ombudsman.

These measures mean that from April 2013 tenants who have exhausted their landlord's complaints procedure will have the choice either to approach a 'designated person' for help or to contact the Housing Ombudsman Service directly when eight weeks have elapsed. The designated person could be either an MP, a local councillor or a 'tenant panel'.

The Housing Ombudsman will become the sole ombudsman for all complaints relating to the management of social housing, including leasehold and other forms of tenure. The Local Government Ombudsman will continue to deal with complaints regarding the local authority homelessness duty.

Some housing providers have begun preparing for these changes by supporting mechanisms for panels of tenants to begin reviewing complaints now.

Learning from others

Welwyn Hatfield Community Housing Trust (the Trust), working with the council and other partners has established a borough wide, cross-landlord Resident Scrutiny Panel. The panel meets every two months to compare and scrutinise services, and is currently developing a complaints review function.

Initially, this will operate as a voluntary alternative to immediate recourse to the Housing Ombudsman, with tenants being offered both options once they have exhausted the Trust's internal complaints process. From April 2013, it is anticipated that it will form part of Welwyn Hatfield's designated person arrangements.

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The 'National Tenant Organisations' (CCH, NFTMO, TPAS and TAROE), funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government are developing a framework for tenant panels. It will provide information to tenants and landlords that may help in the setting up and development of tenant panels. For more information visit www.cch.coop/tenantpanels/

Future CIH work on complaints

CIH will be carrying out further work throughout 2012 to support the sector to achieve excellence in complaints handling to implement the changes required by the introduction of the 'designated person'.

We will be working with HouseMark and other partners to develop a complaints charter, which will set out a series of commitments based on established good practice. Housing providers will be encouraged to sign up to the charter to demonstrate their commitment to effective complaint handling. More information about this work, and how you can be involved in shaping the charter, will be available on [our website](#) later in the year.



Complaints handling at Affinity Sutton

Affinity Sutton operate a two-stage complaints process. Complaints are accepted in any format and logged on the organisation's contact manager system. At the first stage complaints are currently handled by the relevant service area and the organisation has set a target of resolving 85% of stage one complaints within 10 days of receipt. They have installed a strong focus on resolving complaints at stage one and encourage teams to phone complainants to discuss their concerns wherever possible.

Those complaints that do reach stage two are considered by a review panel consisting of a senior manager, not directly involved in the first instance, and two committee members, who could be a resident or independent board member or an involved resident who has received training in complaint resolution.

A Complaints Coordinator analyses the handling of complaints and produces monthly reports for business managers and the Executive Team. Tenants' satisfaction with the complaints process is also routinely monitored and the causes of complaints are summarised in a quarterly 'what residents have said' report.

Resident involvement is an important aspect of Affinity Sutton's approach to complaint handling. They have recently identified a resident board member to act as a complaints champion and to work with other residents and staff to develop a Complaints Service Task Team. This team will monitor the complaints process and periodically review the policy and procedure to ensure that lessons learned from complaints are implemented within the business.

Affinity Sutton identified an issue in the way complaints relating to the work of repairs contractors were being handled. To rectify this they have created a new Customer Relations Team to handle escalated repairs complaints, which has led to a rise in satisfaction levels of nearly 20%. They have also provided guidelines for their partner responsive repair contractors to enable them to adopt the same approach to complaint handling and their monthly contract review meetings include a regular agenda item on complaint performance where they identify common issues, discuss caseloads and agree action plans for improvements.

In the pursuit of continuous improvement and adopting learning outcomes Affinity Sutton, through regular quality monitoring, have identified that a more centralised approach to complaint handling will achieve even greater benefits. The objectives of this new approach, due to be launched in June 2012 are to:

- improve further the customer experience and satisfaction
- ensure consistent application of good practice
- deliver better control of complaint handling quality and timeliness
- improve their ability to identify trends and common issues.

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Useful resources and information

HouseMark complaints benchmarking –

www.housemark.co.uk/hm.nsf/0/354BDF97FDFB107B802576830036DE97?openDocument

HouseMark complaints accreditation service –

www.housemark.co.uk/hm.nsf/0/0EEB3A7FDB8EC37C8025775100545EBD?openDocument

HouseMark complaints club -

www.housemark.co.uk/hm.nsf/0/CFF6C0BAC37BD0228025799D004FCAF6?openDocument

HouseMark complaints guide –

[www.housemark.co.uk/hmresour.nsf/lookup/HM_GP_in_Complaints_FINAL_Jan10.pdf/\\$File/HM_GP_in_Complaints_FINAL_Jan10.pdf](http://www.housemark.co.uk/hmresour.nsf/lookup/HM_GP_in_Complaints_FINAL_Jan10.pdf/$File/HM_GP_in_Complaints_FINAL_Jan10.pdf)

Ombudsman says - www.ombudsmansays.info

How to... prepare for regulation reform: Tenant engagement and scrutiny –

www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How_to._prepare_for_regulatory_reform_Tenant_engagement_and_scrutiny

CIH events: including 'the future of social housing regulation' and 'tenant scrutiny in practice' (various dates and locations) - www.cih.org/eventsfinder

National Tenant Organisations' work on developing a framework for tenant panels - www.cch.coop/tenantpanels/



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