



**How to...**

*learn from complaints to  
improve services*



# How to... learn from complaints to improve services

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Complaints are a valuable source of information about your services, which can help you to identify recurring or underlying problems and potential improvements. Coupled with other performance information, such as the results of satisfaction surveys and the benchmarking of performance indicators with other organisations, they can help you to build up an accurate picture of how your services are performing and to develop improvement plans that are based on sound evidence.

This guide sets out how to ensure that the lessons from complaints are captured, are understood and that action is taken as a result of them. It follows our recent guides on [How to... develop your complaints process](#) and [How to... work with tenant panels to resolve complaints](#).

## Complaints: CIH charter for housing

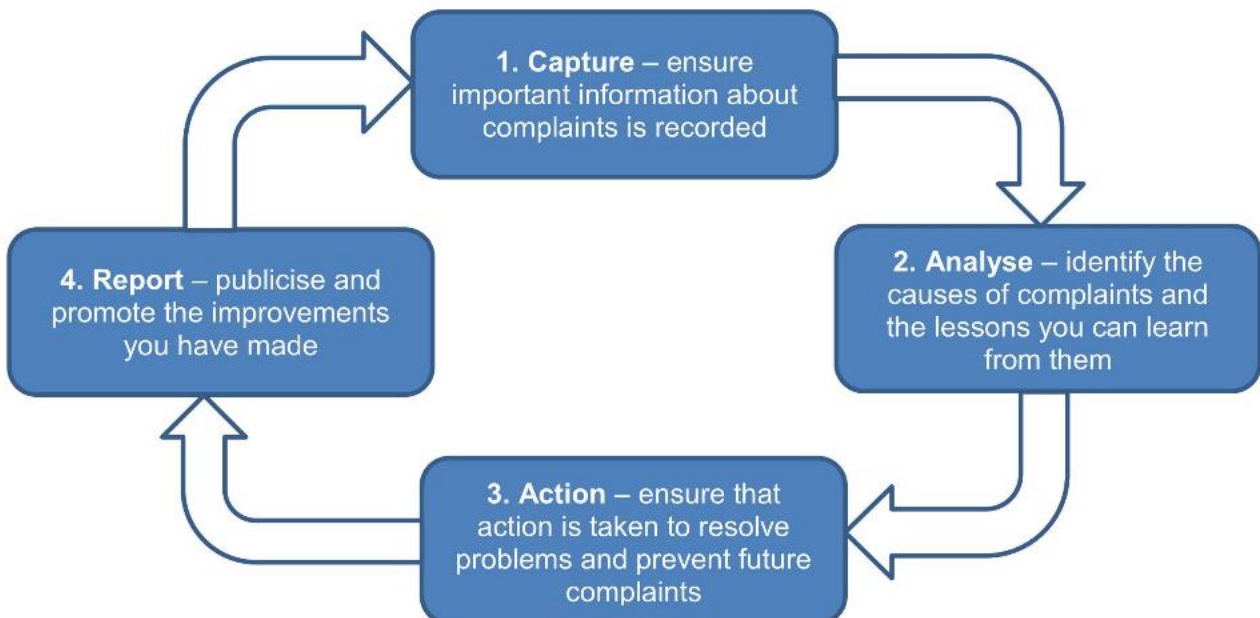
CIH and HouseMark have developed a charter setting out the outcomes that an effective complaints service should be able to achieve. You can sign up to the charter on a voluntary basis and are encouraged to assess your performance against it.

It is built around you signing up to five core commitments, which are focused on the common principles of effective complaints services. One of these is *'we monitor our performance and learn from feedback to continually improve our services'*. This 'how to' guide is intended to help you to work towards that commitment.

To sign up, or for further information, visit [www.cih.org/complaintscharter](http://www.cih.org/complaintscharter). HouseMark also offer a complaints accreditation service which is based around the commitments set out in the charter. For further information, visit [www.housemark.co.uk](http://www.housemark.co.uk)

## So what do you need to know?

Learning from complaints is a continuous process made up of four key stages:



## Capturing information

The first step to learning from complaints is ensuring that they are always recorded on your IT systems.

Having the correct systems in place is important, and not having them is a barrier which limits many organisations ability to learn from complaints. Ideally complaints management should be integrated into your customer relationship management system (your main database, which holds information on all of your tenants), however this is not always possible or straightforward, so some organisations have successfully built bespoke, stand-alone systems to manage the complaints process.

Many organisations already routinely record formal complaints which they receive in writing. However it is recommended that you treat any expression of dissatisfaction about the standard of your service, your actions or your lack of action as a complaint, however it is made. Capturing informal complaints, such as those that are received verbally and those that are not referred to by the tenant as 'a complaint', can be more challenging.

This can be particularly difficult in the case of complaints that are received and then immediately resolved by a front line officer. However, even if no further action is needed to address the tenant's concerns, these 'stage zero' complaints can still be a valuable source of information, especially if front line staff are dealing with the same kinds of issues on a regular basis.

To ensure that all expressions of dissatisfaction are captured, it is a good idea to develop quick and simple mechanisms that enable all staff to record a complaint. This will need to be accompanied by training/briefings to provide staff with a clear understanding of:

- what constitutes a complaint
- how to record a complaint and (if they are not able to resolve it themselves) pass it on to the relevant team
- the importance of recording complaints, even where they have already been resolved. It is important to make clear that these will be used to identify potential improvements, possibly saving staff time in the long run if it means they do not need to deal with similar issues again in the future.

However this is not only a question of systems and processes, culture is also important. It will be difficult to instil the practice of logging all expressions of dissatisfaction unless staff all buy in to the idea that complaints should be welcomed and seen as an opportunity to improve, rather than as an indication of failure. This approach will need to be promoted by senior managers and communicated widely throughout the organisation.

## Learning from others

**Stevenage Borough Council** record complaints about their housing service on a bespoke web based IT system, although they are currently considering whether this should be integrated into their CRM (customer relationship management system) in the future. All staff working in the housing service and with access to a PC can add complaints on to the system easily by completing an online form. A shortcut to the form has been added to the start bar on each of their computers and staff are actively encouraged to log all expressions of dissatisfaction, regardless of whether or not the tenant specifically mentions making a 'complaint'.

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## Analysing data

Once complaints have been recorded on your IT systems, the next step is to interrogate this information to identify the key lessons that you can learn from them.

One approach to this is to identify the lessons that can be learnt from individual complaints. Many organisations require officers who respond to complaints to identify and record learning points at this stage in the process, particularly where complaints are upheld. They are then able to retrieve a log of all of these lessons which can be circulated to relevant service managers, so that they can take corrective action.

Another is to conduct periodic analysis of the trends in both the number and nature of the complaints that you have received, to identify common and recurring causes of complaints. It is valuable to include both complaints that are upheld and those that are not in this analysis, as:

- even a large number of 'rejected' complaints could still highlight the need for you to improve your communications or the way in which you manage tenants' expectations
- you may have rejected complaints on the basis that you have followed your existing policies and procedures correctly. However if you are receiving a large number of complaints relating to the same policy, you might want to consider reviewing it.

It is also worth remembering that complaints are only one source of information about your services. Learning from them does not necessarily have to be a 'stand-alone' activity and you may want to consider this information alongside other data, such as your key performance indicators and the results of satisfaction surveys, to build up a more complete picture of your services.

## Learning from others

**Gedling Homes** complete a learning log when a complaint is upheld. The log identifies the corrective actions that need to be taken to prevent a recurrence, with progress against these being monitored by the customer experience team. This approach enables them to report on the number of corrective actions that are taken as a direct result of complaints, and this is seen as a key indicator of the success of their complaints service.

They also produce a quarterly report for senior managers setting out a breakdown of all of the complaints that they have received, and a more detailed report on request for each individual team.

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**Homes for Haringey** hold monthly learning from complaints meetings, which staff working in complaints, performance, business improvement and other services being discussed that month, attend. The meetings focus on recurring issues and provide an opportunity to talk through the causes of complaints in detail and to agree actions, either to resolve the problem immediately or to carry out further investigation.

Last year Homes for Haringey identified that they were receiving a large number of complaints relating to their repairs service and concerning missed appointments. They found that in many of these cases there was a dispute about whether it was the tenant or the operative who had failed to attend, so to rectify the problem they have now fitted an improved tracking system to their vehicles.

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## Learning from others

**Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust** require staff responding to a complaint at stage one of their process to complete a learning template, this includes details of the lessons that can be learnt from the complaint and the actions that have already been taken, or that could be taken, as a result. This information is circulated to senior managers as a learning log once a quarter.

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At **Wolverhampton Homes** complaints are managed by the central feedback team, who are also responsible for co-ordinating mystery shopping and carrying out satisfaction surveys. There are two strands to their approach to learning from complaints:

- they produce regular reports on the number and nature of complaints received for their business improvement committee (a sub-group of their Board)
- they incorporate information about complaints into their wider approach to internal audit, so that they are considered alongside other information about how services are performing.

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### Ensuring action is taken

Ultimately collecting and analysing information about complaints is only valuable if it leads to action being taken. It is likely that it will be service managers who are responsible for making this happen, however to ensure that it does, it is essential that they are also made accountable in some way.

Once necessary actions have been identified, it is a good idea to put processes in place to monitor progress against them. Many organisations require service managers to report this back to their complaints team, who may in turn report them on to someone who is able to provide a challenge and to hold individual services to account for any lack of progress. This could be, for example:

- your senior management team
- your Board/councillors, or a sub-group of them
- a tenant-led group, such as a tenant scrutiny panel. There may even be potential for a group of tenants to combine this function with the role of acting as a 'designated person'.

## Learning from others

When officers at **Stevenage Borough Council** mark a complaint as closed on their IT system, they are prompted to answer the question 'what did you learn from this complaint?'. If the complaint has been upheld, in full or in part, the system will not allow them to leave this field blank. The customer feedback team then produce a monthly report of all of the lessons learnt and circulate this to service managers.

To ensure these are followed-up, managers are required to notify the customer feedback team of the actions that they have taken to address each learning point. A further report is then produced on a quarterly basis, this time for senior members of housing staff, detailing both the lessons learnt and the actions taken as a result.

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## Learning from others

**Great Places** have established a complaints learning forum comprised of staff from throughout the organisation and tenant representatives. The forum carries out a monitoring and scrutiny role providing a challenge to service managers, who are primarily responsible for ensuring that the learning from complaints is acted on. They meet bi-monthly, with agendas split between their two main areas of focus:

- the complaints process and how the organisation handles complaints
- how the organisation is learning from complaints and using them to improve services.

For the latter they adopt a case study approach, looking at individual complaints and speaking to service managers about the learning points that were identified and the actions that have been taken as a result.

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### Publicising and promoting improvements

It is a good idea to publically celebrate your successes, as this will help other tenants to see that complaints are taken seriously, are acted upon and can lead to real change.

In England, it is also a regulatory requirement that you publish information about complaints and how they are used to improve services. This is set out in the Homes and Communities Agency's (HCA) [tenant involvement and empowerment standard](#), which includes the specific expectation '*providers shall inform tenants how they use complaints to improve their services*'.

It is up to you which channels you use to disseminate this information but you could, for example, do this via your regular newsletter for tenants, your website and your annual report. Many organisations publish this information in the form of regular 'you said, we did' articles, which draw an explicit link between the intelligence gathered from complaints ('you said') and an improvement that has been made to a service as a result ('we did').

## Learning from others

In April 2009, HouseMark in partnership with the Housing Ombudsman Service and the Local Government Ombudsman set up **Ombudsman Says** to give tenants, stakeholders and staff easier access to the complaint outcomes of the most important Ombudsman decisions, this includes real examples of social landlord complaints handling.

For further information, visit [www.ombudsmansays.info](http://www.ombudsmansays.info)

# Five great reasons to be a CIH member



GET THE EDGE IN A  
**COMPETITIVE**  
MARKET

BE EMPOWERED TO  
**INFLUENCE**



BE THE  
**FIRST**



IN THE  
**KNOW**



**BUILD**  
RELATIONSHIPS  
THAT COUNT



VISIBLY **DEMONSTRATE** YOUR  
**PROFESSIONALISM**

## Join today.

We have the advice, support and knowledge to help you be brilliant.

At CIH, we know that housing professionals are on the front line of tackling some of the most important and challenging issues in our society. To do this effectively, you need advice and support from people who understand your role. We're here to help you stay ahead of the game, offering you practical tools, guidance and support at every stage of your career.

## But don't take our word for it.

Find out for yourself by signing up to our member get member scheme.

You'll get the first three months' of your subscription absolutely free, with access to all the great benefits of membership.

**Find out more: [www.cih.org/membergetmembercampaign](http://www.cih.org/membergetmembercampaign)**

## Useful resources and information

How to... develop your complaints process

[www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How\\_to\\_develop\\_your\\_complaints\\_process](http://www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How_to_develop_your_complaints_process)

How to... work with tenant panels to resolve complaints

[www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How\\_to\\_work\\_with\\_tenant\\_panels\\_to\\_resolve\\_complaints](http://www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How_to_work_with_tenant_panels_to_resolve_complaints)

Complaints: CIH charter for housing

[www.cih.org/complaintscharter](http://www.cih.org/complaintscharter)

HouseMark complaints accreditation scheme

[www.housemark.co.uk/hm.nsf/all/complaints+accreditation?opendocument](http://www.housemark.co.uk/hm.nsf/all/complaints+accreditation?opendocument)

Good practice from HouseMark's complaints accreditation scheme

[www.housemark.co.uk/hmresour.nsf/lookup/Complaints\\_CA\\_good\\_practice\\_briefing.pdf/\\$File/Complaints\\_CA\\_good\\_practice\\_briefing.pdf](http://www.housemark.co.uk/hmresour.nsf/lookup/Complaints_CA_good_practice_briefing.pdf/$File/Complaints_CA_good_practice_briefing.pdf)

HouseMark complaints benchmarking

[www.housemark.co.uk/hm.nsf/0/354BDF97FDFB107B802576830036DE97?opendocument](http://www.housemark.co.uk/hm.nsf/0/354BDF97FDFB107B802576830036DE97?opendocument)

HouseMark complaints club

[www.housemark.co.uk/hm.nsf/0/CFF6C0BAC37BD0228025799D004FCAF6?opendocument](http://www.housemark.co.uk/hm.nsf/0/CFF6C0BAC37BD0228025799D004FCAF6?opendocument)

Gripes, grumbles and grievances

[www.nesta.org.uk/home1/assets/features/gripes\\_grumbles\\_and\\_grievances\\_the\\_role\\_of\\_complaints\\_in\\_transforming\\_public\\_services](http://www.nesta.org.uk/home1/assets/features/gripes_grumbles_and_grievances_the_role_of_complaints_in_transforming_public_services)

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