

HOW DO I HANDLE COMPLAINTS EFFECTIVELY?

Most people are likely to need to handle complaints at some point in their day-to-day work. This 'how do I' briefing offers some tips for CIH members on how to do this effectively.

Resolving complaints is as much about your organisation's culture and attitude as it is about correctly following your processes and procedures. However hard you try, no organisation will not get everything right first time, every time. It is best to accept that dealing with complaints is an integral part of providing any service and to see them as an opportunity to put things right, when they do go wrong, and as a valuable form of feedback that can help you to improve in the future.

TOP TIPS – IF YOU ARE THE PERSON RECEIVING THE COMPLAINT

Every front line officer is likely to receive complaints from tenants from time to time.

- Know how to recognise a complaint. The Housing Ombudsman Service recommend that you treat any expression of dissatisfaction about the standard of your service, your actions or your lack of action in this way. Don't wait for tenants to explicitly describe their issue as 'a complaint'
- Take ownership. Even if the complaint is not about your service or department, take down the necessary details and commit to passing them on to the appropriate person. Don't ask the tenant to phone the office or to put their complaint in writing
- Keep a record of the complaint, even if you are able to resolve it immediately. Complaints are a valuable source of information for your organisation, which can help you to identify where improvements could be made to your services. It's great if you are able to resolve a complaint there and then but you should still record it and pass the details on, otherwise you are more likely to have to deal with a similar issue again in the future.

TOP TIPS – IF YOU ARE RESPONDING TO THE COMPLAINT

Depending on the nature of your role, you may also be tasked with responding to complaints about your service in the first instance.

- Keep complainants informed. Make sure they always know who is dealing with their complaint and when they can expect to receive a response
- Where possible, pick up the phone. Tenants want to know that you care about their complaint and that you are taking it seriously. Many will appreciate a phone call to discuss it
- Don't be afraid to ask complainants what they want. Once you know the outcome that they are hoping for, you have something to work with
- Consider complaints (and what tenants want you to do to put them right) with an open mind. Effective complaints handling is not all about defending your service, it's about doing all that you can to reach a satisfactory conclusion with the tenant. Sometimes this will mean saying sorry, sometimes it will mean taking action to correct a mistake and sometimes it will mean explaining why you can't do something more clearly than you may have done in the first instance
- Focus on putting things right, rather than carrying out a lengthy investigation into what went wrong
- If you are going to send a response in writing, make sure that you address all of the points that have been raised and that you do so in a way that is clear and concise. Always use plain English.

IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

- A number of organisations, including **Sentinel Housing Association** and **Radian**, allow staff responding to complaints at stage one of their process to make an offer of up to £50 in compensation, if they are satisfied that the organisation have failed to meet one of their published service standards. As they do not need to seek approval from a senior member of staff before making the offer, this really helps front line staff to get complaints resolved quickly and to tenants' satisfaction
- **Homes for Haringey** offer a 'quick fix' approach to complaints handling. Where tenants opt for the quick fix, they try to resolve problems through prompt action (within five working days) rather than by carrying out a more formal investigation and sending a full, written response
- **Stevenage Borough Council** encourage staff to record all expressions of dissatisfaction. They have developed a web based form for this purpose and all members of staff in their housing department have a shortcut to it on their desktop.

RESOURCES TO HELP YOU

This is the first of three 'how do I' briefings focused on different elements of complaints handling. Look out for further briefings in the coming weeks on:

- How do I deal with vexatious complainants?
- How do I use complaints to improve my service?

CIH have also produced a range of other useful resources to help your organisation develop your approach to complaints handling. For more information visit www.cih.org/complaints