

SOVEREIGN



Our response to the Housing Ombudsman's new complaints code

December 2020



Introduction

The Housing Ombudsman Service has created a new Code that defines best practice for handling complaints.

We've consulted with the Ombudsman and completed a self-assessment against the Code. This has allowed us to see what we're doing well and identify areas where we can make improvements.

Please read the following pages for more information on our response to each point in the Code.

Housing Ombudsman (HO) code guidelines / best practice	Sovereign Housing Association's response
Does the complaints process use the HO definition of a complaint?	The Housing Ombudsman's definition of a 'complaint' has been added to our complaints policy – we've substituted the word 'customer' for 'resident'. "An expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the organisation, its own staff, or those acting on its behalf, affecting an individual customer or group of customers. "
Does the complaints policy have exclusions where a complaint will not be considered?	We welcome complaints and don't normally restrict the number of complaints or the level of contact a customer can have with us. However, we do occasionally receive complaints from customers whose behaviour and/or frequent contact affects how quickly we can respond to them. It can also reduce our Resolutions team's ability to help other customers. In these cases, we'll speak with the customer to understand why they keep contacting us and liaise with external agencies to find out if they need support.
Are these exclusions reasonable and fair to residents? Evidence relied upon	No response is required as we don't exclude complaints.
Are multiple accessibility routes available for residents to make a complaint?	Yes , complaints can be made by phone, email, letter, through our website, social media channels and in person.
Is the complaints policy and procedure available online?	Yes , you can find it here . We review it annually to make sure it's up to date.
Do we have a reasonable adjustments policy?	We do have a reasonable adjustments policy that states how we can give extra support to those customers that need it. It's not published on our website but customers can receive a copy by contacting our Resolutions team (sovereignresolutionteam@sovereign.org.uk).
Do we regularly advise residents about our complaints process?	Yes, our Resolutions Advisors explain our policy whenever they receive a new complaint. We also explain it again during the complaints process, if needed. Our process (and an option to lodge a complaint) can be found here .
Is there a complaint officer or equivalent in post?	Yes, our team is made up of a Resolutions Team Manager, Senior Resolutions Advisors and Resolutions Advisors. We also believe that resolving complaints is everyone's responsibility and, as an organisation, we're making sure all our employees understand this.
Does the complaint officer have autonomy to resolve complaints?	Yes, our Resolutions team members are able to resolve complaints. Front line officers – for example, Housing Officers – are also able to resolve complaints.
Does the complaint officer have authority to compel engagement from other departments to resolve disputes?	Resolutions team members work closely with colleagues in other service areas to resolve complaints. We're also implementing a new complaints process that will give the Resolutions team greater powers to act on behalf of our customers. But, most importantly, we're working hard to ensure that all our employees deal with complaints promptly and fairly.

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If there is a third stage to the complaints procedure are residents involved in the decision making?	We have a two-stage complaints process, which aligns to the new HO code.
Is any third stage optional for residents?	No response is required as we have a two-stage complaints process.
Does the final stage response set out residents' right to refer the matter to the Housing Ombudsman Service?	Yes, this is included in every Stage 2 closure and is referenced in all closure letters.
Do we keep a record of complaint correspondence including correspondence from the resident?	Yes, we attach all correspondence to the relevant complaint record.
At what stage are most complaints resolved?	Over 90% of complaints we receive are resolved at Stage 1.
Are residents kept informed and updated during the complaints process?	<p>We try to keep customers updated whilst their complaint is being handled.</p> <p>For Stage 2 complaints, we write to customers to explain our decision. We also tell them what the next steps are if they're unhappy with our response and want to take the matter further.</p> <p>However, we've recognised that this is an area where we can be more consistent, so we've have made this is one of the key objectives of our complaints improvement programme, which we're now implementing.</p>
Are residents informed of the landlord's position and given a chance to respond and challenge any area of dispute before the final decision?	Yes, we aim to do this wherever possible and appropriate.
Are all complaints acknowledged and logged within five days?	Yes, we log all complaints within 24 hours.
Are residents advised of how to escalate at the end of each stage?	Yes, we tell customers that they have the right to escalate their complaint if they're unhappy with the outcome of Stage 1 and always make them aware of the next steps open to them when we close Stage 2 complaints.
What proportion of complaints are resolved at stage one?	Around 91% of our complaints are resolved at Stage 1.

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What proportion of complaints are resolved at stage two?	Around 9% of all complaints we receive are resolved at Stage 2.
What proportion of complaint responses are sent within Code timescales? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stage one • Stage one (with extension) • Stage two • Stage two (with extension) 	<p>The Code recommends that responses on Stage 1 complaints are sent within 10 working days, but that this can be extended to 20 days if there's a good reason for doing so. Similarly, the Code recommends that Stage 2 responses are sent within 20 working days, with the option to extend to 30 days if necessary.</p> <p>However, the Housing Ombudsman does recognise that meeting these timescales is not always possible and that landlords will need to make assessments on a case-by-case basis. The availability of employees and customers, the nature and complexity of the case, and the number of agencies involved will all determine the speed resolutions can be achieved.</p> <p>For this reason, we know that there will be cases where we need more time to reach a resolution that's satisfactory for everyone involved. However, we'll always aim to resolve complaints as soon as possible and keep our customers informed throughout the process.</p>
Where timescales have been extended did we have good reason?	As above, we will only extend the timescales if there is a good reason to do so.
Where timescales have been extended did we keep the resident informed?	As above, we will keep customers informed if we need to extend the timescales.
What proportion of complaints do we resolve to residents' satisfaction	We regularly monitor how satisfied our customers are with the way their complaint was handled. We recognise that there's an opportunity to improve satisfaction and are using our customers' feedback to inform our improvement programme.
Were all HO requests for evidence responded to within 15 days?	Yes, all requests for evidence were responded to within 15 days. All requests are monitored by the Resolutions Team Manager and/or a Senior Resolutions Advisor.
Where the timescale was extended did we keep the HO informed?	If a timescale needs to be extended, the Resolutions Team Manager will work with the Housing Ombudsman to agree one that's appropriate.
Are residents able to complain via a representative throughout?	<p>Yes, Resolutions Team Advisors are completely impartial and can act on behalf of the customer. Complaints are also accepted from third parties, with the customer's authority.</p> <p>If a customer is vulnerable or has additional needs, we can set up a single point of contact if required.</p>
If advice was given, was this accurate and easy to understand?	Yes, we have a quality assessment process that regularly reviews our complaint handling process to ensure compliance, accuracy and the quality of the customer experience.
How many cases did we refuse to escalate? What was the reason for the refusal?	We haven't refused to escalate any complaint cases to the Housing Ombudsman in the last 12 months.

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Did we explain our decision to the resident?	No response is required as we haven't refused to escalate any complaints to the Housing Ombudsman.
Where something has gone wrong are we taking appropriate steps to put things right?	In addition to our quality assessment process, we carry out monthly customer complaint handling surveys. These allow us to identify things that may be going wrong and take steps to fix them - for example, putting additional training in place for our employees or taking remedial action on behalf of our customers.
What improvements have we made as a result of learning from complaints?	<p>Complaints are a valuable source of information and we use them to make improvements to the services we provide for our customers. Some examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving our online complaints process to make it easier for customers to complain. • Coaching and mentoring employees in complaint management. • Implementing a new process to resolve more complaints at first contact. • Implementing a new Service Improvement Framework, to ensure we learn from our customers' complaints. • Regular reviews of any outstanding complaints by service areas. • Informing customers if there's something that's preventing us from resolving complaints (for example, our systems going down).
How do we share these lessons with: a. residents? b. the board/governing body? c. in the Annual Report?	<p>We send a report to our Executive Board every month, detailing performance, satisfaction and actions we're taking to improve. In addition to complaints handling, we report on other service areas, too.</p> <p>We also collaborate with our resident Scrutiny Coordination Group and share complaints reporting with the Resident and Board Partnership.</p> <p>We're now thinking about how best to report on an annual basis.</p>
Has the Code made a difference to how we respond to complaints?	The new Code has helped us focus on key areas that need improvement.
What changes have we made?	<p>As we've mentioned, we're:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementing a new process to resolve more complaints at first contact. • Implementing a new Service Improvement Framework.

**If you have any questions about
our response, please get in touch.**

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