

Complaints policy

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Complaints policy

Why we have this policy

Sometimes things go wrong and customers don't get the service they expect or we fall short of the standards we've promised.

We use the Housing Ombudsman definition of a complaint: '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 resident or group of residents.'

While customers may not use the word 'complaint', if it's evident that they're dissatisfied, we'll always give them the option to make a complaint.

Building and maintaining our customers' trust is at the heart of our approach and we'll make sure customers feel we're taking their issues seriously.

This policy explains how we'll make it easy for customers to tell us when things have gone wrong and how we'll try to resolve them.

Our approach when something goes wrong...

We hope that a customer never has to let us know something hasn't gone well or that they've been let down by us. But if it happens, we need to make it right.

- When a customer tells us about an issue, we'll try to sort it out there and then.
- If we can't resolve problems there and then, we'll agree what actions need to be taken, and by when. We'll keep customers updated on what we are doing using a communication method that best suits them.
- We expect, and empower, everyone to do what they can to prioritise the issues our customers face and to fix them as quickly as possible.
- We'll also look at the cause of the issue so we can stop it happening again.
- If we receive a complaint relating to safeguarding, we'll follow the steps set out in our safeguarding policy to address it.
- We won't close a complaint until we've tried everything that we believe we could reasonably have done to resolve it, or if we have an agreed action plan in place.
- When we know the outcome or have an agreed plan in place, we'll send customers a letter addressing all the issues that have been raised.

Resolving complaints as quickly as we can

Raising complaints in good time

We ask for complaints to be made within six months of the matter arising and, unless there is a good reason for doing so, may not be able to consider complaints made after this time.

Stage 1 complaints

When we first receive a complaint, it is known as a 'stage 1'. We aim to agree a solution with the customer within ten working days. If this isn't possible (for example, if the complaint is complicated), we may need a further 10 days. If we need to do this, we'll let the customer know why.

Stage 2 complaints

If a customer is unhappy with the decision they've received at stage 1, they have the right to have the decision reviewed. This is known as a 'stage 2' complaint.

A senior manager (overseen by a director) will review how the complaint was handled and the decision(s) made. A complaint can only be taken to stage 2 after it has received a stage 1 response.

If a customer would like their stage 1 complaint reviewed, they need to request this. They should request this within one year of our stage 1 response.

Although we wouldn't usually refuse a request to a stage 2 review, there are exceptions, and these are covered later in this policy.

We aim to have a decision on stage 2 complaints within 20 working days. As with stage 1 complaints, we sometimes need extra time to make the right decision, so we may take up to a further 10 days. If we need to do this, we will let the customer know why.

The availability of employees and customers, the nature and complexity of the case, and the number of agencies involved will all affect the speed at which we can resolve a complaint. So, while we aim to respond in these timescales, it may not always be possible. The most important thing is to reach a resolution that's satisfactory and fair to everyone involved.

Building trust with our customers is important to us

If we can't agree on a solution with a customer, we'll be very clear and honest about what we can and will do – and what we won't do.

Being accessible

We have a 'reasonable adjustments' policy that describes how we can give extra support to those customers who need it. Customers can get a copy of this by contacting our Complaints team (sovereignresolutionteam@sovereign.org.uk) or calling 0300 5000 926.

Adjustments may include letters or information in another format or language. For example, recordings of complaint letters to listen to instead of reading. Making sure customers are not excluded is important to us. Find out more about [Sovereign's commitment to inclusivity](#).

When someone makes a complaint

Using a third party or representative to raise a complaint

We understand that some customers may want someone else to make the complaint for them and we support this. We will still handle these complaints in line with our policy.

To make sure we protect our customers' best interests, we need them to complete a letter of authority telling us who can act on their behalf. A template for this is available by contacting our Complaints team (sovereignresolutionteam@sovereign.org.uk) or calling 0300 5000 926.

Anonymous complaints

If a customer makes a complaint in confidence, only the person(s) who received the complaint and a member of the Complaints team will know their identity.

If it's not possible to fully investigate a complaint without disclosing the identity of the complainant, we'll ask their permission to do this. While we respect our customers' right to anonymity, if we don't have this permission we may not be able to investigate fully. However, we'll still record and monitor anonymous complaints.

How we'll try to put things right

We'll always try to put things right and that usually means getting the customer back to where they should have been before they had a problem.

For most problems, a genuine apology and putting things right straight away is where it ends.

Sometimes, if it's taken us longer than it should have to get something sorted out or if the problem keeps happening, we may offer a small gesture of goodwill.

As a charitable organisation, we rarely offer compensation unless the customer has suffered financial loss, such as damage to their personal belongings or paying for a service they didn't have.

Our Complaints team is fully trained and is supported by experts from across Sovereign. Our training makes sure that we are best placed to manage our customers' complaints in an impartial way and with empathy. The things we'll look at will be:

- how much the customer has been disrupted
- how long it's taken to put right
- if there's been significant distress.

These are our customer commitments:

- We make it easy
- We take responsibility
- We get it done
- We keep in touch

This is how we apply our customer commitments if a service goes wrong

- We'll make it easy to tell us when something's gone wrong.
- We'll make sure that we understand what's happened from the customer's viewpoint and look for a solution that works for them.
- We'll be clear about what we can and will do, and then do it.
- We'll tell the customer who will help them if the issue is complex.
- We'll keep in touch until everything is sorted out.

When we can't reach an agreement

When we've done all we reasonably can to resolve a complaint but a customer is still unhappy, they can refer the matter to the Housing Ombudsman Service. Customers have one year from the date of our stage 2 response to raise the matter with the Ombudsman.

They can also ask a designated person, such as a councillor or MP, to act on their behalf. We will still handle these complaints in line with our policy.

Housing Ombudsman Service

The Housing Ombudsman Service is a free and independent dispute resolution service.

Customers can contact the Ombudsman service at any point during the complaints procedure. The Ombudsman can't formally investigate while complaints are going through our internal process but they may be able to give advice and support to help reach a resolution.

The Ombudsman will contact us to get the facts of the case from our point of view. The Ombudsman will then make a final decision and inform us and the customer.

(If you have purchased a home from us and remain unhappy, you will need to contact the Consumer Code for Home Builders rather than the Housing Ombudsman Service.)

Housing Ombudsman Service

- Housing Ombudsman Service, PO Box 152, Liverpool L33 7WQ
- Email: info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk
- Phone: 0300 111 3000

Consumer Code for Home Builders

- Consumer Code for Home Builders Limited, Westgate House, Royland Road, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 2EH
- Email: enquiries@consumercode.co.uk
- Phone: 0345 608 9797

First Tier Tribunal (property Chamber) Southern region

For shared owners and long leaseholders who have complaints about service charges and the terms of their leases

- Residential Property, Havant Justice Centre, The Court House, Elmleigh Road, Havant, Hampshire PO9 2AL
- Email: rpsouthern@hmcts.gsi.gov.uk
- Phone: 01243 779394

Financial Ombudsman Service

Complaints over debt advice for third party creditors only

- Make a complaint on the [Financial Ombudsman Service website](#)
- Financial Ombudsman Service, Exchange Tower, London E14 9SR
- Email: complaint.info@financial-ombudsman.org.uk
- Phone: 020 7964 1000

Complaints we may not consider or escalate

We welcome complaints and we don't normally restrict the number of complaints or level of contact made by any of our customers.

Unreasonable customer behaviour

We may occasionally receive complaints from customers whose behaviour and/or frequent contact prevents us resolving the complaint or adversely affects the ability of our teams to help other customers.

In these cases, we'll speak with them to understand why they keep contacting us. We'll also liaise with external agencies to find out if they need support.

We'll explain clearly what we've done to resolve the complaint and decide what we'll do the next time they contact us about the same issue.

This could be to:

- acknowledge the contact but not offer any additional responses
- ask them to only contact one named employee
- ask them to only contact us using a channel of our choice
- ask them to contact us at mutually agreed times.

We'll review customers we manage this way each year. If a customer wants to challenge the way they're managed, they can ask us to review it. The Head of Customer Specialist Support Services will do this review and we will only do this once.

Service requests

We make a distinction between contacting us to make us aware of something, asking for something to be done, and logging a complaint.

Unless a customer asks us to, we won't register a service request as a complaint in the first instance. If the customer is unhappy with how we dealt with the matter, we will log this as a complaint. In line with our definition, the customer does not have to use the word 'complaint'.

Court proceedings

If the complaint concerns matters that are, or were, subject to court proceedings we will not be able to investigate.

Outside Sovereign's control

Usually, if the complaint concerns matters outside Sovereign's control, such as a Local Authority responsibility, we will not be able to investigate.

Your rights when we won't consider or escalate a complaint

When we won't consider or escalate a complaint, including for the reasons above, customers will be informed of their right to take their complaint to the Ombudsman.

Working with our involved residents to shape our services

Complaints highlight to us which services are working well and which need a closer look. The residents in our Scrutiny Coordination Group play an important role in this. They:

- consider feedback from our customers
- help us learn from what's gone wrong
- complete scrutiny activities
- make sure that we put measures in place to fix things
- check that we act on recommendations that come out of a scrutiny.

Working with residents in the scrutiny group allows us to hear first-hand about our customers' experiences. As a result, our residents' views are the starting point for any changes we make. Find out more about [how we engage with customers this way](#).

Working this closely with our residents makes sure that the way we handle complaints is fair and transparent to all.

Our commitment to residents and employees

We'll be transparent about our responsibilities around equality. We'll treat everyone fairly and respectfully, regardless of their:

- age
- gender
- marital status
- sexual orientation
- disability
- religion
- race
- nationality
- ethnicity or national origin.

We'll make sure our services and workplaces are as inclusive and accessible as possible.

We'll take seriously any concerns that we've not acted in a fair way, dealing with them as quickly as we can.