

Pioneer Group

Complaints, Compliments & Comments Policy		Version: 2	Ref: 703
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Standard Letters	Reference	Standard Forms	Reference
Acknowledgement letter	Letter 703.1	Verbal complaint report form	Form 703.a
Full response letter	Letter 703.2	Cover sheet	Form 703.b
Extension letter	Letter 703.3	Disclosure of information authorisation form	Form 703.c
Stage 3 panel outcome letter	Letter 703.4	Complaints learning form	

1. Policy Aim

We aim to provide an excellent service to all our customers. However we recognise that sometimes things go wrong, and customers may wish to make a complaint. Our aim is to resolve all problems at the first point of contact. Where this is not possible, the complaints process offers an opportunity for customer complaints to be investigated and resolved within a clear framework. It also provides us with a valuable opportunity to learn from our mistakes, understand our customer requirements and adapt our services to prevent things going wrong in the future.

We welcome all feedback, including complaints, compliments and comments, from our customers and those affected by our services. This policy sets out how we manage complaints, and how we record and act upon comments and compliments to improve our services.

This policy does not apply to Tiggy Winkles, who have their own complaints policy due to their differing regulatory arrangements.

This policy applies to Compass Support, although Compass is not a member of the Housing Ombudsman Service and as such customers may not refer their complaints to this service. In the interests of good service the remainder of this policy will apply to complaints about any Compass Service, including the three stage complaints model.

2. Introduction

We provide services to tenants, residents, leaseholders, housing applicants and service users, referred to in this policy as 'customers'. Although we are committed to providing excellent services to all of these individuals sometimes things may go wrong and a robust complaints policy/procedure is required.

We subscribe to the Housing Ombudsman service and work within their complaints handling code.

We have a number of important legal obligations as a regulated body and are legally obliged to protect any individual who feels that there is a failure in services provided to them and meet the standards expected by our regulator (Regulator of Social Housing – (RSH)). This policy aims to protect and promote the rights of the individuals to whom we provide services. It also identifies our responsibilities as a service provider.

We also want to continually improve and realise some customers may want to give compliments or comments to us about the services we provide, this policy aims to ask for that feedback also.

This policy does not apply to customer appeals about housing management policy or legal decisions – for examples decisions to exclude from the housing register. Appeals regarding these decisions are dealt with under the Customer Appeals Policy, except where a particular policy has its own appeals procedure set out within it. These are usually determined by legal issues and advice.

3. Comments and Compliments

Our customers may wish to comment on a service they have received, or make a suggestion as to how we could improve our offer in the future, or provide better value for money. We will record and reflect on any comments received, particularly when reviewing our policies and procedures.

We are always pleased to receive compliments from customers, and ensure that these are recorded and reported in our staff briefings. As well as recognising the work our staff do, compliments help us to identify best practise and how we can improve our services based on customer feedback. We will collate comments and feedback into a bi-annual report to determine if there are opportunity to identify common themes or shape our services.

4. Legislation

The Housing Act 1996

The Housing Act 1996 requires all Housing Associations (not for profit housing providers) in England to belong to the Independent Housing Ombudsman (now known as the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS)) scheme that deals with disputes between landlords and tenants. We will always adhere to best practice from the HOS and the policy promotes the HOS to the customer.

The Localism Act 2011

The Act provides that social housing tenants will be able to ask for their complaints to be considered by a 'designated person' when their landlord's internal complaints procedure is finished. A 'designated person' can be an MP, a local councilor or a recognised Tenant Panel. Designated persons may refer complaints to the Ombudsman at any time. A social housing tenant may refer their complaint directly to the Ombudsman (i.e. without a referral from a designated person) eight weeks after the exhaustion of the landlord complaints procedure.

We are a resident led organisation, and tenants and residents are actively involved in the Strategic and Operational decision making processes of the association. Therefore, in the interests of providing a truly independent option for complainants we have two stages within our internal processes. In addition to this there is a further optional stage allowing consideration by independent Board members (in CVCH one of whom must be a resident of Castle Vale). If the complainant exhausts all internal stages, contact details will be provided for the local MP and Councilors for customers who wish to contact a designated person at any stage of the complaints process. We will also provide details of the HOS as part of our information to customers about our complaints service.

GDPR

We manage all data referred to in this policy in accordance within the General Data Protection Regulation. For more information on how we handle personal information, please see:

- Data Protection Policy
- Privacy Policy and privacy statement - <https://www.pioneergroup.org.uk/privacy-policy>

5. Definition of a Complaint

A complaint is 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.

Complaints can be made by a customer directly, or may be through an intermediary, organisation, friend, relative or other third party, providing that they have authority from the individual to act.

The following will not be considered as complaints:

- An initial request for information or an explanation of a decision made;
- Requests for a service e.g. a repair
- Anonymous letters, although these may be investigated if they are a cause for concern
- Complaints of neighbour nuisance or disputes between neighbours are usually dealt with separately through our Anti-Social Behaviour Policies, unless these complaints relate to how we have dealt with the matter
- A complaint about a service where we have no responsibility, such as local authority nomination procedures
- A claim for damages that should be handled as an insurance claim
- Anything that will be dealt with by our Appeals Policy & Procedure
- Any matter which has already been dealt with under our complaints procedure
- Complaints that relate to things which happened over six months ago unless the issue has only just been identified
- Where a customer refuses to provide information which is genuinely required to allow us to investigate their concerns, after we have specifically asked for further clarity
- Feedback on our services, such as recommendation for policy change
- Matters which have been, or are due to be, considered by a court, although we will consider complaints about how we have handled a situation not specifically relating to the legal outcome.

6. Complaints Process

As a community led organisation we value the input of our residents into our services. We want to ensure that complaints are dealt with in a timely manner and our complaints process is not seen as a barrier to resolving issues. Our aim will always be to provide a timely response, but also allow thorough investigation of issues so that our customers feel valued and we can genuinely learn from their feedback.

Informal resolution

We recognise that informal resolution is often the most efficient and effective way to resolve most problems. We support the Housing Ombudsman's assertion that our focus should be on resolving issues informally and quickly, but this should not become a barrier to our customers accessing our formal complaints process. Where we are unclear as to the customer's requirements we should offer to try to resolve an issue informally and check that the customer is satisfied with that approach.

If we are unable to make such a determination by asking the customer directly, there is some element of doubt or we feel a more detailed investigation is required then we will use our formal complaints process. Where a customer is explicit that they wish to use our complaints process, then this will always be respected (except for those issues excluded from the complaints process under section 5 of this policy).

We have adopted a three stage process as follows, although the third and final stage is optional for customers:

Stage 1 (Main investigation) – this is likely to be where most complaints are likely to be resolved. We aim to respond in 10 working days at this stage.

Stage 2 (Senior officer review) – where a customer remains dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint they can ask for a senior officer review. A senior officer, who has not previously had involvement with the complaint will review and provide a full response. At this stage it is likely that issues may be more complex and as such we will aim to respond within 20 working days, although much earlier if possible.

We will advise the customer that this would form our final response to the matter and provide them with two options for escalation if they remain dissatisfied:

- Optional stage 3 process
- Details of the Housing Ombudsman service

Stage 3 (optional tenant led panel) – This will involve a customer presenting their case to an independent panel, including at least one board member who should be a customer. We value the opportunity for customers to represent their views to their peers to resolve issues. The panel will be convened and facilitated, but not led, by a Pioneer Group Director. A staff member may be invited to present their case and provide information to the panel. It is recognised that attending a panel meeting can be intimidating, and as such the customer has the opportunity to forgo this stage, or if they prefer present submissions without attending. They may be represented at the meeting by a friend or relative, although they may not attend with legal representatives. We will aim to convene a panel within 20 working days. Where this is not possible, we will keep the customer informed, offer an explanation and agree with the customer whether this stage should be dispensed with.

The stage 3 panel outcome will be communicated to the customer within 5 working days of the panel hearing and will set out that:

- The decision is final and concludes our internal complaints process
- The details of how to contact the Housing Ombudsman Service for advice or to escalate the matter, including details of any democratic filter requirements of the Ombudsman

We will require a customer to notify us within 10 working days of the stage 2 response letter if they wish to use stage 3 of our process. We will not under any circumstances consider convening a stage 3 panel if the matter is referred to the Housing Ombudsman service as we agree to be bound by their decision.

Declining escalation of complaints

We may refuse to escalate a complaint to the next stage where a customer introduces new information. In these circumstances, and where the information changes the nature of the investigation or may have a material effect to the outcome we will reopen the case at the existing stage. Our aim is to resolve the customer's issue wherever possible, rather than needlessly escalating through our process. We will always explain to a customer where we refuse to escalate a complaint in these circumstances, giving the reasons for this.

Where a customer introduces a new issue whilst we are investigating an existing complaint we will normally open a new complaint. We will only combine complaints where they are linked and there is good reason to deal with them together. This gives us the best opportunity to ensure that all issues are investigated thoroughly with the aim of resolving complaints, rather than escalating.

Where a customer is pursuing a complaint unreasonably, we may refuse to escalate a complaint. Details are set out in section 12.

Where a customer commences legal proceedings connected to an open complaint we will not escalate the complaint further, although we may enter into without prejudice discussions to resolve the matter, subject to any legal advice. We will notify the customer of any such decision.

7. Roles and Responsibilities

Our aim is to resolve problems at the first point of contact so our customers receive a timely and efficient response. The staff member receiving the complaint will take immediate action to resolve the complaint to the customer's satisfaction wherever possible. They will establish with the customer what the desired outcome is and whether it is possible for us to achieve this within our current processes. If this is the case we will deal with the matter informally as a request for service. Where the matter is solved informally but still meets the definition of a complaint, as set out in section 5 above, then we will still record the matter as a complaint to ensure we have full visibility of the issue and there is opportunity to reflect and learn from the outcome. In these circumstances it is not normally necessary to refer this matter to an investigating officer.

Logging, acknowledging and allocating complaints

It is the responsibility of all members of staff, board members and those acting on behalf of the Pioneer Group to ensure that complaints are captured and recorded by the Customer 1st team.

The Customer 1st team will manage and monitor the complaints process. Any officer receiving a complaint will report this to the Customer 1st team, whether they have resolved the matter or not, and the Customer 1st team will ensure the complaint is logged.

Where immediate resolution has not been achieved the Customer 1st team will acknowledge the complaint within 5 working days. Where possible, this will be by telephone so that we can confirm with the customer our understanding of the issue and their desired outcome. Where this is not possible, we will acknowledge the complaint through the channel in which it was received, or as a last resort by letter. Any acknowledgement to the customer will be through secure means and not in a public forum (e.g. on a public board on social media) to ensure confidentiality. The acknowledgement will confirm the expected timescales of the investigation, which will normally be within 10 working days of the initial complaint. In the event that the matter has already been considered at stage one of the process, then the matter will be referred to a senior manager who will respond within 20 working days.

The Customer 1st team will identify an investigating officer and will pass full details on, along with details of required timescales. This will normally be within one working day of the complaint being received. They will assist the investigating officer with any requests for internal information during this process. Customer 1st will be responsible for tracking the complaints process and updating our records.

The Customer 1st team will log all enquiries from the Housing Ombudsman Service and will immediately forward these to the Head of Housing & Customer Services, Head of Assets or an appropriate Director for consideration and response. Customer 1st will monitor performance against the required 15 day response timescale.

Investigating Officer

Investigating Officers may or may not be directly connected to the service area to which the complaint relates, however all members of staff are required to cooperate in the investigation to ensure a suitable outcome, in a timely manner, which enables us to meet complaints timescales.

Investigating Officers should ensure that they

- deal with complaints on their merits
- act independently and have an open mind
- take measures to address any actual or perceived conflict of interest
- consider all information and evidence carefully
- keep the complaint confidential as far as possible, with information only disclosed if necessary to properly investigate the matter.

The Investigating Officer will assume responsibility and will be the main point of contact for the customer whilst the complaint is being investigated. Where more information is required from the customer, the Investigating Officer will obtain this directly to prevent multiple contact points for the customer. They will ensure that a timely response is achieved, delivering a full response ahead of our 10 working day response time wherever possible.

A response outside of the required 10 working day response time will be communicated to the customer (by the Investigating Officer) before the target completion date, clearly setting out the reasons why additional time is needed and the new target response date. This new date will be communicated to the Customer 1st team, along with the reason, so that they can update their records and continue to track progress. Complaints response timescales may only be extended with good reason. These reasons may include:

- Where permission for a third party to act on behalf of the customer has been delayed
- A need for additional investigation in complex matters, especially when requiring information from third parties
- A delay on the customer's part in providing clarity or additional information to enable the complaint to be investigated
- Where the customer provides new information during the complaints process that changes the elements of the investigation

Complaints responses may be in a variety of formats, as agreed with the customer, but will always be confirmed in writing. These will include details of how to escalate the complaint if the customer remains dissatisfied and we will make reference to the Ombudsman service (including contact details) in our complaints literature and at the final stages of our complaints processes. Complaints responses will:

- Be written in plain language that is easy to understand
- Address all of the points raised
- Set out the stage of the complaint that it has been investigated under
- Set out the outcome and the reasons for any decisions made
- The details of any remedy offered to put things right
- Details of any outstanding actions
- Details of how to escalate if dissatisfied

Where a service or other failure has been identified, our responses will offer an apology for this and explain the steps we are taking to put the matter right.

Customer withdrawal of complaint

Sometimes a customer will, during the course of an investigation, decide to withdraw their complaint. Where this is the case, we will write to the customer confirming this and our understanding of the situation to ensure that there is no misunderstanding. Even when a complaint has been withdrawn, the investigating officer will still consider if there has been any service failure from which we can consider any learning points.

Post-Response Responsibilities (Satisfaction and Learning)

If there has been no response from the customer to the complaint outcome within 10 working days, then a satisfaction survey will be attempted by the Customer 1st team. Although the customer may not always achieve their desired outcome, we will measure satisfaction with the handling of the complaint and collate feedback to identify if there are any learning points for implementation. These will be collated and reviewed quarterly.

Following the closure of a complaint, the Customer 1st team will request learning points from both the investigating officer and the manager of the business unit(s) that the complaint relates to. This feedback will be collated into a quarterly report on common complaint areas, trends and learning points by the Insight and Engagement Manager. This will be shared with the Executive Leadership Team to inform service delivery.

Outcomes and learning from complaints will be shared with Board members through their board meetings. Residents will also receive an update through the annual report, including any corrective actions taken as a result. Other ad-hoc learning and sharing will also be adopted to demonstrate our commitment to service improvement.

Housing Ombudsman enquiries

All enquiries or requests for information from the Housing Ombudsman service will be dealt with by a Head of Service or Service Director in accordance with the timescales set out by the Ombudsman.

Monitoring

The Customer 1st Team Leader will regularly check that the organisation is adhering to this policy and provide performance information to the Executive Team and to enable reporting to the appropriate board.

8. Compensation

In respect of the Compensation Policy, there will be occasions when a customer makes a complaint about service failure and the investigating officer will find that the customer has also suffered a financial loss. When this happens, the Compensation Policy should be followed alongside the Complaints process. The investigating officer should process the claim for compensation at the same time, and not require the customer to start a new process at the end of the complaint. The Customer 1st team will assist the Investigating Officer with this process.

9. Continuous Improvement

We are fully committed to learning from the feedback we receive. Whilst we may not always be able to identify a service failure, we will also consider the customers perception about the issue in identifying our learning points. There may also be learning points about internal processes and the investigating officer's ability to access information to deal with the complaint effectively. On a bi-annual basis information will be provided to our resident led CVCH or SGOHT Board about the feedback we have received. This Board will then consider if there are any common issues or trends that need to be dealt with. Complaints relating to the Compass service are usually infrequent and will be shared with the Compass Board as and when they occur.

The Customer 1st Team Leader will audit the administration of complaints on a monthly basis and performance will be discussed among Business Unit Managers to ensure targets and the policy are being adhered to.

10. Publicising the process and outcomes

We will promote the complaints process in a positive and fully accessible manner. We will ensure that we publish the outcomes of complaints, including the number we receive, satisfaction with the manner complaints were dealt with and the changes to service delivery as a result.

We will compare our performance annually with other organisations to ensure that we are comparable to others in the way we deal with our complaints.

11. Access for all customers

Anyone wishing to make a complaint, comment or compliment can do so in their preferred way. We will not insist on this in writing and recognise some individuals may prefer not to communicate this way.

We will always ensure we respond to the individual in their preferred method of communication and work with their required representatives if they prefer.

All parts of the process will be available and offered in large print, Braille, audiotape, and other languages upon request. When we communicate in a different way, we will also provide responses in written English language so that it can be understood by third parties such as staff members, legal entities, advice agencies or the Housing Ombudsman.

All feedback received will be monitored in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, disability or other protected characteristic (where known). This will help us consider any gaps in the way complaints are dealt with and identify any potential direct or indirect discrimination.

12. Customer Behaviour

We recognise that the circumstances which lead to customer complaints can be difficult and frustrating. We will always treat our customers with dignity and respect and we ask that our staff are treated likewise.

We will ask customers to provide us with full details of any complaint, to provide us with information, and explain how they would like the complaint to be resolved, in order that we can work towards resolving the problem. However, we will not accept:

- Aggressive or abusive behaviour;
- Unreasonable demands which impact on our staff's time – for example continually making calls or changing the content of the complaint; insisting on only dealing with a particular person; or refusing to respond to contact from staff, which makes it difficult to investigate or resolve a complaint.
- Unreasonable persistence – persistent refusal to accept a decision or explanation, or continuing to pursue a complaint without providing any new information.

Where a complainant's behaviour is considered to be unacceptable, we reserve the right to take appropriate action for that particular situation which may include limiting who the complainant can contact or stopping the investigation into the complaint where the circumstances merit this approach.

Decisions to take action in relation to unacceptable behaviour will only be made after careful consideration by a senior manager. Where possible we will give the customer time to modify their behaviour before such a decision is taken. Customers will be advised in writing of such a decision. Customers may appeal this decision to a Director.

Where a customer's behaviour prevents us from effectively carrying out an investigation into their complaint, or prevents us from fully understanding the issue, we will advise the customer of our requirements which will enable us to do so. Where a customer elects to not cooperate and we are genuinely unable to investigate then we will write to the customer formally closing the complaint and setting out our requirements which would enable us to consider the matter further. Consideration may be given to seeking support from, or advising a customer to seek support from the Ombudsman's dispute resolution service where it is felt that this could be beneficial.

13.Training

All staff, Board members and contractors will receive Complaints training as part of the Corporate Training Programme.

14.Monitor and Review

The Complaints procedure will be monitored on a continuous basis to ensure that the way we deal with your feedback complies with this policy.

The policy will be reviewed regularly to ensure that it is effective and promotes best practice, and responds to statutory requirements, regulatory guidance or particular concerns about customer feedback about its implementation.