

Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code: Self-assessment

Background

In September 2020 the Housing Ombudsman launched a new code for the way landlords treat complaints.

The purpose of the Code is to enable landlords to resolve complaints raised by their residents quickly and to learn from complaints to drive service improvements. It will also help to create a positive complaint handling culture amongst staff and residents.



The Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code sets out requirements for landlords that will allow them to respond to complaints effectively and fairly. Southampton City Council do not have to apply all elements of the code as these may differ from our corporate complaints policy. The council has carefully considered each element of the code to ensure we provide the best service possible to residents. Where we feel that our approach is more in line with our residents' requirements we will identify where we differ from the Ombudsman's suggestions.






The council is required to publish this self-assessment of our current performance against the code. Where improvements are necessary to be in line with the code, the authority has until 31st March 2021 to make them.






For more information about the code or to read it in full, please visit the Housing Ombudsman website, <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/landlords/complaint-handling-code/>





Self-assessment form

Compliance with the Complaint Handling Code


Compliance with the Complaint Handling Code				
1	Definition of a complaint	Yes	No	SCC Comments
1.1	<p>Does the complaints process use the following definition of a complaint?</p> <p><i>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.</i></p>			<p>The definition of a complaint within the Southampton City Council corporate complaint policy is “<i>Any expression of dissatisfaction with our services</i>”. This is in line with recommendations from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. The intention of this definition is the same as expressed in the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code. Therefore, the Housing Service will not adopt a separate definition.</p> <p>The Housing Ombudsman has confirmed that it is acceptable to use a different definition to fit with a corporate policy.</p>
1.2	<p>Does the policy have exclusions where a complaint will not be considered?</p>			<p>The Southampton City Council complaints policy confirms that complaints cannot be considered in the following circumstances:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The complaint is about services or matters which fall outside the control of the Council • Complaint by another professional body or organisation • Complaints which relate to contractual arrangements or other business arrangements made with the Local Authority • Complaints where the subject matter has previously been investigated under these procedures or previous procedures prior to this one • Any complaint which is being or has been investigated by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman or Housing Ombudsman • Where a court has made, is making, or is about to make, a determination on the specifics of the complaint (please consult with the Complaints Resolution Manager and/or legal team)

1.3	Are these exclusions reasonable and fair to residents? Evidence relied upon			Neither the Housing Ombudsman or Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman have specified what exclusions local government should include. The exclusions set out above are in line with statutory duties and do not unfairly prevent a resident from making a complaint.
2	Accessibility			
2.1	Are multiple accessibility routes available for residents to make a complaint?			<p>Southampton City Council complaints policy sets out the following ways a resident can submit a complaint:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By using the form with a leaflet or factsheet • By using the online forms found on the Council's website http://www.southampton.gov.uk/council-democracy/have-your-say/comments-complaints/complaints.aspx • By letter • By Telephone (written confirmation will be required) • E-mail (complaints.review@southampton.gov.uk) • In person <p>Though it is not explicitly set out in the policy, complaints can also be made via social media such as Facebook and Twitter.</p>
2.2	Is the complaints policy and procedure available on-line?			The complaints procedure can be found on our website . This page can be easily accessed by searching for 'complaints'
2.3	Do we have a reasonable adjustments policy?			Southampton City Council does not have a specific Reasonable Adjustment Policy, this is instead covered by our Equality Policy which can be found on our website . The Housing Ombudsman has confirmed that this meets the requirement of the code
2.4	Do we regularly advise residents about our complaints process?			<p>Information about our complaints process is available on our website and in the tenant handbook. Information about the policy is also included in the tenants' welcome pack.</p> <p>In addition to this, going forward we will be promoting the value of complaints quarterly, in our online tenants' magazine (Tenants Link) and in our Housing Annual Report.</p>

3	Complaints team and process			
3.1	Is there a complaint officer or equivalent in post?			<p>There is no specific person within the Housing Service who deals with complaints. At stage one, complaints are responded to by a senior member of staff within the relevant team.</p> <p>The Head of Housing has overall responsibility for stage 1 complaints.</p> <p>Stage two complaints are responded to by the corporate complaints team.</p>
3.2	Does the complaint officer have autonomy to resolve complaints?			
3.3	Does the complaint officer have authority to compel engagement from other services to resolve disputes?			
3.4	If there is a third stage to the complaint procedure - are residents involved in the decision making?	N/A		
3.5	Is any third stage optional for residents?	N/A		
3.6	Does the final stage response set out residents' right to refer the matter to the Housing Ombudsman Service?			
3.7	Do we keep a record of complaint correspondence including correspondence from the resident?			Officers do keep a record of complaints. However, we are currently working on a system to ensure that all complaints are also kept in a central location so that we can assess trends and identify areas we need to learn and improve.
3.8	At what stage are most complaints resolved?			<p>The overwhelming majority of complaints are resolved at stage one.</p> <p>For the purpose of this self-assessment 'resolved' is taken to mean that the complainant did not escalate their complaint to the next stage of the process.</p>

4	Communication			
4.1	Are residents kept informed and updated during the complaints process?			Residents are sent confirmation that their complaint has been received and may be contacted if further information or clarification is required. For complicated complaints we will inform the complainant if we require additional time to investigate and resolve their complaint. However, we aim to resolve complaints as quickly as possible and the authority does not generally provide ongoing updates on the progress of their complaint.
4.2	Are residents informed of the landlord's position and given a chance to respond and challenge any area of dispute before the final decision?			Residents are not informed of the landlord's position before the response is set. This is in line with guidance from the Local Government Ombudsman. If the resident is not satisfied with the response, details are provided on how to escalate their complaint.
4.3	Are all complaints acknowledged and logged within five days?			Southampton City Council complaint policy requires that an acknowledgement of any complaint is sent within three days. This is the expectation within the policy and work is ongoing to ensure that this standard is consistently upheld.
4.4	Are residents advised of how to escalate at the end of each stage?			
4.5	What proportion of complaints are resolved at stage one?			Over the last year there have been some operational and IT issues which has impacted our ability to analyse stage 1 complaints. This will be resolved by March 2021.
4.6	What proportion of complaints are resolved at stage two?			In 2019/20 29 stage two complaints were received. Of these, 23 were resolved. Six complainants asked for their complaints to be reviewed by the Housing Ombudsman.
4.7	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) 			Information is not consistently recorded on the response times for stage one complaints. This has been identified as an area requiring improvement for the authority and steps are in place to correct this before 31 st March 2021. Of the 29 stage two complaints received in 2019/20 all but one was responded to within the required twenty working days target.

4.8	Where timescales have been extended did we have good reason?	✓		The stage two complaint which was not responded to within twenty days was due to a member of staff being on annual leave. This delayed the response by two days.
4.9	Where timescales have been extended did we keep the resident informed?	✓		The resident was contacted and advised prior to the twenty-day deadline that the response would be delayed.
4.10	What proportion of complaints do we resolve to residents' satisfaction?			Southampton City Council do not collect feedback from residents on the handling of complaints. Therefore, we are unable to provide any meaningful data on whether they are resolved to residents' satisfaction.
5	Cooperation with the Housing Ombudsman Service			
5.1	Were all requests for evidence responded to within 15 days?	✓		
5.2	Where the timescale was extended did we keep the Ombudsman informed?			Not Applicable
6	Fairness in complaint handling			
6.1	Are residents able to complain via a representative throughout?	✓		
6.2	If advice was given, was this accurate and easy to understand?	✓		
6.3	How many cases did we refuse to escalate? What was the reason for the refusal?			Zero
6.4	Did we explain our decision to the resident?			Not applicable
7	Outcomes and remedies			
7.1	Where something has gone wrong are we taking appropriate steps to put things right?	✓		The Repairs team can show that we are able to learn from complaints to improve the service. This approach is now being adopted by the rest of the Housing Service. We will begin quarterly review meetings to ensure that these are acted upon. Tenant involvement will be used where appropriate.

8	Continuous learning and improvement			
8.1	What improvements have we made as a result of learning from complaints?			We will share this information each year with our tenants in our Annual Report.
8.2	How do we share these lessons with: a) residents? b) the board/governing body? c) In the Annual Report? Please see explanation on page 8			a) From April 2021, the housing service will publish lessons learned from complaints quarterly via the Tenants Link publication. This will also be discussed with the Tenant Scrutiny Panel. b) The Cabinet Member for Housing will receive regular updates. c) The Southampton City Council Annual Report is sent to all tenants and contains information about our services and what is happening to improve them. From 2021 we will ensure this includes an emphasis on what we have learned from complaints.
8.3	Has the Code made a difference to how we respond to complaints?			The Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code has identified areas of good practice along with some areas where improvement is required. Work has already begun on improving these areas.
8.4	What changes have we made? Please see explanation on page 8			As detailed throughout this document several changes have been identified and work has begun to implement these. The key changes we have, or are in the process of making are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring relevant staff have access to a central complaint managing system so number of complaints and timescales are accurately monitored. • Increase the frequency that residents are informed of our complaint's procedure • Introduce quarterly complaint review meetings to ensure we are learning from complaints and mistakes are not repeated.