

# Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code

## Our self-assessment April 2022

This self-assessment form should be completed by the complaints officer and discussed at the landlord's governing body annually.

Evidence should be included to support all statements with additional commentary as necessary.

Explanations must also be provided where a mandatory 'must' requirement is not met to set out the rationale for the alternative approach adopted and why this delivers a better outcome.

### Section 1 - Definition of a complaint

#### Mandatory 'must' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary, and any explanations
1.2	A complaint must be defined as: <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>	YES	The Policy includes this definition.
1.3	The resident does not have to use the word 'complaint' for it to be treated as such. A complaint that is submitted via a third party or representative must still be handled in line with the landlord's complaints policy.	YES	This was covered in the training sessions.
1.6	... if further enquiries are needed to resolve the matter, or if the resident requests it, the issue must be logged as a complaint.	YES	This was covered in the training sessions.
1.7	A landlord must accept a complaint unless there is a valid reason not to do so.	YES	The reasons not to accept a complaint are set out in the Policy.

1.8	A complaints policy must clearly set out the circumstances in which a matter will not be considered, and these circumstances should be fair and reasonable to residents.	YES	The reasons not to accept a complaint are set out in the Policy.
1.9	If a landlord decides not to accept a complaint, a detailed explanation must be provided to the resident setting out the reasons why the matter is not suitable for the complaints process and the right to take that decision to the Ombudsman.	YES	A complaint has not been refused but if it didn't meet the criteria an explanation would be provided.

#### Best practice 'should' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary, and any explanations
1.4	Landlords should recognise the difference between a <b>service request</b> , where a resident may be unhappy with a <b>situation</b> that they wish to have rectified, and a <b>complaint</b> about the <b>service</b> they have/have not received.	YES	This was covered in the training session.
1.5	Survey feedback may not necessarily need to be treated as a complaint, though, where possible, the person completing the survey should be made aware of how they can pursue their dissatisfaction as a complaint if they wish to.	YES	At the end of all satisfaction surveys a link to pursue a complaint should they wish has been added.

## Section 2 - Accessibility and awareness

### Mandatory 'must' requirements

<b>Code section</b>	<b>Code requirement</b>	<b>Comply: Yes/No</b>	<b>Evidence, commentary and any explanations</b>
2.1	Landlords must make it easy for residents to complain by providing different channels through which residents can make a complaint such as in person, over the telephone, in writing, by email and digitally. While the Ombudsman recognises that it may not be feasible for a landlord to use all of the potential channels, there must be more than one route of access into the complaints system.	YES	Various channels to raise a complaint. Detailed in 6.1 of the policy
2.3	Landlords must make their complaint policy available in a clear and accessible format for all residents. This will detail the number of stages involved, what will happen at each stage and the timeframes for responding.	YES	A dedicated page on the website which information, including the Policy and flowchart procedure.
2.4	Landlord websites, if they exist, must include information on how to raise a complaint. The complaints policy and process must be easy to find on the website.	YES	A dedicated page on the website which information, including the Policy and flowchart procedure.
2.5	Landlords must comply with the Equality Act 2010 and may need to adapt normal policies, procedures, or processes to accommodate an individual's needs. Landlords must satisfy themselves that their policy sets out how they will respond to reasonable adjustments requests in line with the Equality Act and that complaints handlers have had appropriate training to deal with such requests.	YES	Section 10 of the Policy. Reasonable adjustments will be considered in line with the Diversity Action Plan Policy and Procedure Statement.
2.6	Landlords must publicise the complaints policy and process, the Complaint Handling Code and the Housing Ombudsman Scheme in leaflets, posters, newsletters, online and as part of regular correspondence with residents.	YES	A dedicated page on the website which information, including the Policy, procedure, and links to the Ombudsman documents. It is also published in the resident's newsletter and Facebook.

<b>2.7</b>	Landlords must provide residents with contact information for the Ombudsman as part of its regular correspondence with residents.	YES	This is provided on the website; in newsletters and on Facebook
<b>2.8</b>	Landlords must provide early advice to residents regarding their right to access the Housing Ombudsman Service throughout their complaint, not only when the landlord's complaints process is exhausted.	YES	This is provided on all communication; on the procedure workflow; website; and complaints form.

### Best practice 'should' requirements

<b>Code section</b>	<b>Code requirement</b>	<b>Comply: Yes/No</b>	<b>Evidence, commentary, and any explanations</b>
<b>2.2</b>	Where a landlord has set up channels to communicate with its residents via social media, then it should expect to receive complaints via those channels. Policies should contain details of the steps that will be taken when a complaint is received via social media and how confidentiality and privacy will be maintained.	YES	Policy includes: "To protect confidentiality and privacy the Association may choose to respond using a different method to that used to contact us"

### Section 3 - Complaint handling personnel

#### Mandatory 'must' requirements

<b>Code section</b>	<b>Code requirement</b>	<b>Comply: Yes/No</b>	<b>Evidence, commentary, and any explanations</b>
<b>3.1</b>	Landlords must have a person or team assigned to take responsibility for complaint handling to ensure complaints receive the necessary attention, and that these are reported to the governing body. This Code will refer to that person or team as the "complaints officer".	YES	The Customer & Business Support Team
<b>3.2</b>	...the complaint handler appointed must have appropriate complaint handling skills and no conflicts of interest.	YES	Trained and attend Housing Ombudsman workshops etc when necessary.

## Best practice 'should' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary, and any explanations
3.3	<p>Complaint handlers should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• be able to act sensitively and fairly</li> <li>• be trained to handle complaints and deal with distressed and upset residents</li> <li>• have access to staff at all levels to facilitate quick resolution of complaints</li> <li>• have the authority and autonomy to act to resolve disputes quickly and fairly.</li> </ul>	YES	

## Section 4 - Complaint handling principles

### Mandatory 'must' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary, and any explanations
4.1	<p>Any decision to try and resolve a concern must be taken in agreement with the resident and a landlord's audit trail/records should be able to demonstrate this. Landlords must ensure that efforts to resolve a resident's concerns do not obstruct access to the complaints procedure or result in any unreasonable delay. It is not appropriate to have extra named stages (such as 'stage 0' or 'pre-complaint stage') as this causes unnecessary confusion for residents. When a complaint is made, it must be acknowledged and logged at stage one of the complaints procedure <b>within five days of receipt</b>.</p>	YES	Our Policy is the logged a complaint within 3 working days.

<b>4.2</b>	Within the complaint acknowledgement, landlords must set out their understanding of the complaint and the outcomes the resident is seeking. If any aspect of the complaint is unclear, the resident must be asked for clarification and the full definition agreed between both parties.	YES	Acknowledgement letter/email was changed to clearly set out the understanding of the complaint and the requested outcomes.
<b>4.6</b>	A complaint investigation must be conducted in an impartial manner.	YES	
<b>4.7</b>	The complaint handler must: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• deal with complaints on their merits</li> <li>• act independently and have an open mind</li> <li>• take measures to address any actual or perceived conflict of interest</li> <li>• consider all information and evidence carefully</li> <li>• keep the complaint confidential as far as possible, with information only disclosed if necessary to properly investigate the matter.</li> </ul>	YES	
<b>4.11</b>	Landlords must adhere to any reasonable arrangements agreed with residents in terms of frequency and method of communication	YES	
<b>4.12</b>	The resident, and if applicable any staff member who is the subject of the complaint, must also be given a fair chance to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• set out their position</li> <li>• comment on any adverse findings before a final decision is made.</li> </ul>	YES	
<b>4.13</b>	A landlord must include in its complaints policy its timescales for a resident to request escalation of a complaint	YES	7.6.1 of the Policy refers
<b>4.14</b>	A landlord must not unreasonably refuse to escalate a complaint through all stages of the complaints	YES	7.6.2 of the Policy refers

	procedure and must have clear and valid reasons for taking that course of action. Reasons for declining to escalate a complaint must be clearly set out in a landlord's complaints policy and must be the same as the reasons for not accepting a complaint.		
4.15	A full record must be kept of the complaint, any review, and the outcomes at each stage. This must include the original complaint and the date received, all correspondence with the resident, correspondence with other parties and any reports or surveys prepared.	YES	A chronology is recorded with all supporting documentation.
4.18	Landlords must have policies and procedures in place for managing unacceptable behaviour from residents and/or their representatives when pursuing a complaint.	YES	Acceptable Behaviour Policy was reviewed in March 2022

#### Best practice 'should' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary, and any explanations
4.3	Landlords should manage residents' expectations from the outset, being clear where a desired outcome is unreasonable or unrealistic	YES	Communication is made at an early stage.
4.4	A complaint should be resolved at the earliest possible opportunity, having assessed what evidence is needed to fully consider the issues, what outcome would resolve the matter for the resident and whether there are any urgent actions required.	YES	Always try and resolve complaints at the first point of contact in line with our procedures for immediate resolution.
4.5	Landlords should give residents the opportunity to have a representative deal with their complaint on their behalf, and to be represented or accompanied at any meeting with the landlord where this is reasonable.	YES	This has happened with consent from the resident.
4.8	Where a key issue of a complaint relates to the parties' legal obligations landlords should clearly set out their understanding of the obligations of both parties.	YES	This has been done when dealing with gas servicing complaints.

4.9	Communication with the resident should not generally identify individual members of staff or contractors.	YES	No individual names have been identified unless it was necessary in the explanation. Reference to contractor company is sometimes made especially when more than one contractor has been involved.
4.10	Landlords should keep residents regularly updated about the progress of the investigation.	YES	
4.16	Landlords should seek feedback from residents in relation to the landlord's complaint handling as part of the drive to encourage a positive complaint and learning culture.	YES	A satisfaction survey is sent out after the complaint is closed. Very low response rate.
4.17	Landlords should recognise the impact that being complained about can have on future service delivery. Landlords should ensure that staff are supported and engaged in the complaints process, including the learning that can be gained	YES	Monthly Operational meeting take place to review and monitor actions.
4.19	Any restrictions placed on a resident's contact due to unacceptable behaviour should be appropriate to their needs and should demonstrate regard for the provisions of the Equality Act 2010.	YES	Refer to the Acceptable Behaviour Policy

## Section 5 - Complaint stages

### Mandatory 'must' requirements

#### Stage 1

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary, and any explanations
5.1	Landlords must respond to the complaint <u>within 10 working days</u> of the complaint being logged. Exceptionally, landlords may provide an explanation to the resident containing a clear timeframe for when the response will be received. This should not exceed a further 10 days without good reason.	YES	5 out of 5 complaints were responded within 10 days..
5.5	A complaint response must be sent to the resident when the answer to the complaint is known, not when the outstanding actions required to address the issue, are completed. Outstanding actions must still be tracked and actioned expeditiously with regular updates provided to the resident.	YES	Actions are clearly set out in the Stage 1 response and monitored thereafter,

<b>5.6</b>	Landlords must address all points raised in the complaint and provide clear reasons for any decisions, referencing the relevant policy, law, and good practice where appropriate.	YES	When complaints include a number of issues, these are addressed separately in the response.
<b>5.8</b>	Landlords must confirm the following in writing to the resident at the completion of stage one in clear, plain language: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the complaint stage</li> <li>• the decision on the complaint</li> <li>• the reasons for any decisions made</li> <li>• the details of any remedy offered to put things right</li> <li>• details of any outstanding actions</li> <li>• details of how to escalate the matter to stage two if the resident is not satisfied with the answer</li> </ul>	YES	A template is used to ensure these points are covered.

## Stage 2

<b>Code section</b>	<b>Code requirement</b>	<b>Comply: Yes/No</b>	<b>Evidence, commentary, and any explanations</b>
<b>5.9</b>	If all or part of the complaint is not resolved to the resident's satisfaction at stage one it must be progressed to stage two of the landlord's procedure, unless an exclusion ground now applies. In instances where a landlord declines to escalate a complaint it must clearly communicate in writing its reasons for not escalating as well as the resident's right to approach the Ombudsman about its decision.	YES	
<b>5.10</b>	On receipt of the escalation request, landlords must set out their understanding of issues outstanding and the outcomes the resident is seeking. If any aspect of the complaint is unclear, the resident must be asked for clarification and the full definition agreed between both parties.	YES	Another member of the C&BST confirms this with the resident once an escalation request has been received.
<b>5.11</b>	Landlords must only escalate a complaint to stage two once it has completed stage one and at the request of the resident.	YES	1 out of 5 complaints was escalated to Stage 2.

5.12	The person considering the complaint at stage two, must not be the same person that considered the complaint at stage one.	YES	Another member of the C&BST and the Company Secretary consider Stage 2 requests.
5.13	Landlords must respond to the stage two complaint <u>within 20 working days</u> of the complaint being escalated. Exceptionally, landlords may provide an explanation to the resident containing a clear timeframe for when the response will be received. This should not exceed a further 10 days without good reason.	YES	100% compliant
5.16	<p>Landlords must confirm the following in writing to the resident at the completion of stage two in clear, plain language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the complaint stage</li> <li>• the complaint definition</li> <li>• the decision on the complaint</li> <li>• the reasons for any decisions made</li> <li>• the details of any remedy offered to put things right</li> <li>• details of any outstanding actions</li> </ul> <p><b>and</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• if the landlord has a third stage, details of how to escalate the matter to stage three</li> <li>• if this was the final stage, details of how to escalate the matter to the Housing Ombudsman Service if the resident remains dissatisfied.</li> </ul>	YES	

### Stage 3

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary, and any explanations
5.17	Two stage landlord complaint procedures are ideal. This ensures that the complaint process is not unduly long. If landlords strongly believe a third stage is necessary, they must set out their reasons for this as part of their self-assessment. A process with more than three stages is not acceptable under any circumstances.	YES	The Association has a two staged procedure.

5.20	<p>Landlords must confirm the following in writing to the resident at the completion of stage three in clear, plain language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the complaint stage</li> <li>• the complaint definition</li> <li>• the decision on the complaint</li> <li>• the reasons for any decisions made</li> <li>• the details of any remedy offered to put things right</li> <li>• details of any outstanding actions</li> <li>• details of how to escalate the matter to the Housing Ombudsman Service if the resident remains dissatisfied</li> </ul>	N/A	No Stage 3
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## Best practice ‘should’ requirements

### Stage 1

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary, and any explanations
5.2	If an extension beyond 20 working days is required to enable the landlord to respond to the complaint fully, this should be agreed by both parties.	YES	No extension beyond 20 days have occurred to date.
5.3	Where agreement over an extension period cannot be reached, landlords should provide the Housing Ombudsman’s contact details so the resident can challenge the landlord’s plan for responding and/or the proposed timeliness of a landlord’s response.	YES	No extension beyond 20 days have occurred to date. Should this happen the Association will provide the Housing Ombudsman’s contact details if an agreed time period cannot be reached.
5.4	Where the problem is a recurring issue, the landlord should consider any older reports as part of the background to the complaint if this will help to resolve the issue for the resident.	YES	As part of the investigation this would be looked into and considered, if appropriate to the complaint
5.7	Where residents raise additional complaints during the investigation, these should be incorporated into the stage one response if they are relevant and the stage one response has not been issued. Where the stage one response has been issued, or it would unreasonably delay the response, the complaint should be logged as a new complaint.	YES	Generally additional complaints are added between Stage 1 and 2, if appropriate these are incorporated into the Stage 2 response.

## Stage 2

<b>Code section</b>	<b>Code requirement</b>	<b>Comply: Yes/No</b>	<b>Evidence, commentary, and any explanations</b>
<b>5.14</b>	If an extension beyond 10 working days is required to enable the landlord to respond to the complaint fully, this should be agreed by both parties.	YES	No extension beyond 10 days have occurred to date.
<b>5.15</b>	Where agreement over an extension period cannot be reached, landlords should provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details so the resident can challenge the landlord's plan for responding and/or the proposed timeliness of a landlord's response		No extension beyond 10 days have occurred to date. Should this happen the Association will provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details if an agreed time period cannot be reached.

## Stage 3

<b>Code section</b>	<b>Code requirement</b>	<b>Comply: Yes/No</b>	<b>Evidence, commentary, and any explanations</b>
<b>5.18</b>	Complaints should only go to a third stage if the resident has actively requested a third stage review of their complaint. Where a third stage is in place and has been requested, landlords must respond to the stage three complaint <b><u>within 20 working days</u></b> of the complaint being escalated. Additional time will only be justified if related to convening a panel. An explanation and a date for when the stage three response will be received should be provided to the resident.	N/A	
<b>5.19</b>	Where agreement over an extension period cannot be reached, landlords should provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details so the resident can challenge the landlord's plan for responding and/or the proposed timeliness of a landlord's response.	N/A	

## Section 6 - Putting things right

### Mandatory 'must' requirements

<b>Code section</b>	<b>Code requirement</b>	<b>Comply: Yes/No</b>	<b>Evidence, commentary, and any explanations</b>
<b>6.1</b>	Effective dispute resolution requires a process designed to resolve complaints. Where something has gone wrong a landlord must acknowledge this and set out the actions it has already taken, or intends to take, to put things right.	YES	The Association uses the lessons learned framework: lessons learned/root cause/action. These are monitored at the Operational Meetings.
<b>6.2</b>	Any remedy offered must reflect the extent of any service failures and the level of detriment caused to the resident as a result. A landlord must carefully manage the expectations of residents and not promise anything that cannot be delivered or would cause unfairness to other residents.	YES	Remedies are offered in line with the Association's compensation policy.
<b>6.5</b>	The remedy offer must clearly set out what will happen and by when, in agreement with the resident where appropriate. Any remedy proposed must be followed through to completion.	YES	This is set out in the Stage 1 and/or Stage 2 response.
<b>6.6</b>	In awarding compensation, a landlord must consider whether any statutory payments are due, if any quantifiable losses have been incurred, the time and trouble a resident has been put to	YES	Remedies are offered in line with the Association's compensation policy.

### Best practice 'should' requirements

<b>Code section</b>	<b>Code requirement</b>	<b>Comply: Yes/No</b>	<b>Evidence, commentary, and any explanations</b>
<b>6.3</b>	Landlords should look beyond the circumstances of the individual complaint and consider whether anything need to be 'put right' in terms of process or systems to the benefit of all residents.	YES	Considered as part of the lessons learned framework
<b>6.7</b>	In some cases, a resident may have a legal entitlement to redress. The landlord should still offer a resolution where possible, obtaining legal advice as to how any offer of resolution should be worded.	YES	A resolution would always be offered in accordance with our Policy.

## Section 7 - Continuous learning and improvement

### Mandatory 'must' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary, and any explanations
7.2	Accountability and transparency are integral to a positive complaint handling culture. Landlords must report back on wider learning and improvements from complaints in their annual report and more frequently to their residents, staff, and scrutiny panels.	YES	Quarterly reported includes lessons learned and actions are presented to the Board; included on the website; residents' newsletter; annual report and internally to staff via team meetings. The Association doesn't currently have a scrutiny panel.

### Best practice 'should' requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary, and any explanations
7.3	A member of the governing body should be appointed to have lead responsibility for complaints to support a positive complaint handling culture. This role will be responsible for ensuring the governing body receives regular information on complaints that provides insight to the governing body on the landlord's complaint handling performance.	YES	The Company Secretary
7.4	As a minimum, governing bodies should receive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular updates on the volume, categories, and outcome of complaints, alongside complaint handling performance including compliance with the Ombudsman's orders</li> <li>• Regular reviews of issues and trends arising from complaint handling,</li> <li>• The annual performance report produced by the Ombudsman, where applicable</li> <li>• Individual complaint outcomes where necessary, including where the Ombudsman made findings of severe maladministration or referrals to regulatory bodies. The implementation of management responses should be tracked to ensure they are delivered to agreed timescales.</li> </ul> The annual self-assessment against the Complaint Handling Code for scrutiny and challenge.	YES	Detailed Quarterly Reports are presented to Board and an annual overview.

7.5	Any themes or trends should be assessed by senior management to identify potential systemic issues, serious risks or policies and procedures that require revision. They should also be used to inform staff and contractor training.	YES	This is undertaken by each Departmental Manager
7.6	<p>Landlords should have a standard objective in relation to complaint handling for all employees that reflects the need to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have a collaborative and co-operative approach towards resolving complaints, working with colleagues across teams and departments</li> <li>• take collective responsibility for any shortfalls identified through complaints rather than blaming others</li> <li>• act within the Professional Standards for engaging with complaints as set by the Chartered Institute of Housing.</li> </ul>	YES	This was covered in the training sessions.

## Section 8 - Self-assessment and compliance

### Mandatory ‘must’ requirements

Code section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary, and any explanations
8.1	Landlords must carry out an annual self-assessment against the Code to ensure their complaint handling remains in line with its requirements.	YES	Carried out after the year end and presented to the Board and onto the Association’s website.
8.2	Landlords must also carry out a self-assessment following a significant restructure and/or change in procedures.	YES	This was carried out following the amendments to the Code.
8.3	<p>Following each self-assessment, a landlord must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• report the outcome of their self-assessment to their governing body. In the case of local authorities, self-assessment outcomes should be reported to elected members</li> <li>• publish the outcome of their assessment on their website if they have one, or otherwise make accessible to residents</li> <li>• include the self-assessment in their annual report section on complaints handling performance</li> </ul>	YES	The self-assessment is presented to the Board and onto the Association’s website. A link to the assessment will be included in the Annual Report.