

---

Policy reference	PO-B-005-H
------------------	------------

---

# COMPLAINTS POLICY

---

Approved	2 February 2023
Published	2 February 2023
Effective	2 February 2023
Review	Triennial

---

## Summary

This policy sets out how Longhurst Group deals with customer complaints. The policy is compliant with the Housing Ombudsman complaint handling code, and outlines our approach to ensuring an accessible, and high quality complaints handling service is delivered to our customers .

## Contents

---

<b>PART ONE</b>	<b>1</b>
About this Policy	1
Summary	2
Policy	3
Intent	3
Principles	3
Scope	3
Policy Details	3
Definition of a Complaint	3
Exclusions	3
Accessing the Complaints Service	4
Fairness in Complaint Handling	4
Reasonable Adjustments	4
Types of Complaints	5
Early Resolution	5
Formal Complaints	5
Putting things right	7
Dissatisfaction with our Decision-Making	7
Managing Unacceptable Actions and Behaviours	7
Learning from Complaints	8
Culture and Training	8
Contractors	8
Roles and Responsibilities	8
Reporting	9
Monitoring, Evaluation and Review	9
<b>PART THREE</b>	<b>10</b>
Appendices	10
A. Policy Approval Control	10
B. Policy Development Plan	10
C. Process map(s)	10

# PART TWO

---

## Policy

### Intent

Longhurst Group is committed to providing excellent customer service, addressing complaints effectively and efficiently, and using the learning and insight to drive service improvement.

This policy ensures we provide a high-quality complaint handling service that meets the Housing Ombudsman's complaint handling code requirements, as well as promoting a positive complaint handling culture across the Group.

### Principles

The Group will provide an effective complaints service that meets both the requirements of the regulatory Tenant Involvement and Empowerment consumer standard and Housing Ombudsman's complaints handling code.

We aim to provide a complaints service that:

- enables customers to be heard and understood
- ensures customers are aware of how to make a complaint and their right to access the Housing Ombudsman service;
- is fair, impartial and easily accessible to all our customers;
- is customer focused and takes account of individual circumstances;
- puts things right (where appropriate) in a timely and effective manner; and
- uses learning and insight to improve and transform services.

### Scope

This policy applies to all parts of the Longhurst Group ('the Group').

It applies to complaints made by any customer, or their representative, and anyone affected by a service we provide, including services provided on our behalf by a contractor.

## Policy Details

### 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 Group, its colleagues or those acting on its behalf, affecting an individual customer or a group of customers (Housing Ombudsman Code 1.2).

A customer does not need to use the word complaint for it to be treated as such

### Exclusions

We will accept a complaint unless there is a valid reason not to do so.

There are circumstances in which a matter will not be considered to be a complaint. For example:

- The issue giving rise to the complaint occurred over six months ago. However we recognise it may not be appropriate to exclude any complaints that concern safeguarding or health and safety concerns.
- Concerns where legal proceedings have commenced. This is defined as details of the claim, such as the Claim Form and Particulars of Claim, having been filed at court.

- Matters that have previously been considered under the complaints policy; however where the problem is a reoccurring issue, we will consider older reports as part of the background to the complaint.

If we do not accept a complaint, a detailed explanation will be provided setting out the reason why the matter is not suitable for the complaints process and the right to take that decision to the Housing Ombudsman

## Accessing the Complaints Service

Complaints may be made:

- by phone;
- online form using our website or social media;
- in person; or
- by letter/completing a complaints form.

Any issues or enquiries received via a MP or local councillor that meet the complaint definition will be resolved using our complaints process.

The customer doesn't have to use the word complaint in order for it to be treated as such. Although, we will always ensure the customer is happy for us to record it as a complaint.

Complaints that are not made directly to an office location (such as those made to an officer on their patch, or to a colleague at a care home or sheltered housing scheme) will be passed on to the relevant team within the Customer Services department. Any complaints made via social media will remain confidential.

## Fairness in Complaint Handling

A complaint investigation will be conducted in an impartial manner. To ensure fairness we will:

- 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; and
- keep the complaint confidential as much as possible, with information only disclosed, if necessary, to investigate the matter.

## Reasonable Adjustments

Complaints may be made with the assistance of a representative acting on the customer's behalf (such as a family member, friend, support worker, MP or local councillor). The customer must provide us with consent to deal with the representative.

On request, we will also provide customers with support to make a complaint. Examples include, helping customers complete forms, write letters on their behalf or accept the complaint verbally with a written statement produced confirming details of the complaint raised. We will update the customer regularly on the progress of their complaint and from the outset ask the customer their preferred method and frequency of communication and adhere to this agreement.

We will give customers the opportunity to have a representative deal with their complaint on their behalf, and to be represented and/or accompanied at any meeting with Longhurst Group upon request, and where this is reasonable.

## Types of Complaints

### Early Resolution

Where possible we will encourage an early and local resolution of concerns and recognise that there will be times where it may be possible to agree and secure resolutions with customers immediately. In these circumstances, in agreement with the customer, a complaint will be designated an informal complaint (early resolution) where:

- the issue has not previously been dealt with as a complaint, and
- the problem can be resolved on the spot or within **2 working days** (or within a timescale that suits the customer better).

If further enquiries are needed to resolve the issue for the customer, or if the customer requests it, the issue will be logged as a formal complaint and progress to Stage 1.

All informal complaints will be managed by our contact centre team.

All informal complaints (early resolution) will be recorded on our contact management system and a full record will be kept of the complaint, any correspondence, reports and communication and a record of the resolution or its escalation to the Stage 1 process.

### Formal Complaints

We have a 2 stage formal complaints process:

#### Stage 1

When a customer makes a formal complaint, a complaint resolution officer will contact them within **5 working days** to acknowledge the complaint and:

- discuss the details of the complaint so there is a clear understanding
- identify what outcomes they are seeking
- advise them of the timescale for resolving the complaint;
- agree the preferred method and frequency of communication; and
- agree when any further feedback will be provided to the customer.

Any action agreed, and the timescale for this, will be confirmed to the customer in a way that suits them.

A dedicated complaint resolution officer will be the single point of contact for the customer and will work closely with the relevant operational manager throughout the complaint case. Our complaint resolution officer will act independently and fulfil an advocacy role for the customer, with the aim of investigating their complaint promptly and to a satisfactory conclusion, where possible.

We will manage customers' expectations from the outset, being clear where a desired outcome is unreasonable or unrealistic

Any remedy offered will reflect the extent of any service failures and the level of detriment caused to the customer as a result. We will carefully manage the expectations of customers and not promise anything that cannot be delivered or would cause unfairness to other customers

Within **10 working days** we will aim to notify the customer of our decision, the remedy offer setting out what will happen and by when in agreement with the customer. Where appropriate, this resolution will include an agreed appointment for repair works to be completed by our contractors (within a reasonable timescale as agreed by Longhurst Group). The complaint resolution officer will monitor the complaint case and promises made until full resolution; with on-going communication to the customer

In exceptional circumstances, where this timescale is not possible, we will provide a valid reason to the customer. We will also regularly communicate with the customer until the complaint is fully resolved. This should not exceed a further 10 working days.

If an extension beyond 20 working days is required to enable Longhurst to respond to the complaint fully, this should be agreed by both parties

All final responses will be sent to the customer in writing. Within the resolution letter we will always make the customer aware of their right to escalate their complaint if they are unhappy with the outcome and how to do this.

Where appropriate, for complex complaints that need a more detailed investigation we may consult with the relevant Director. If during the investigation of a complaint, a serious incident or issue was raised by a customer, we would escalate this through the complaint process to either the Executive Leadership Team or Directors Group (depending upon the nature of the complaint) as a matter of urgency.

The customer, and if applicable any employee who is the subject of the complaint, will be given a fair chance to: set out their position and comment on any adverse findings before a final decision is made.

## Stage 2

Customers who remain unhappy following the outcome of the formal complaint process at stage 1 can request a review of their complaint (known as stage 2).

The customer would need to put their reasons for requesting a review in writing within one month. We will provide support to customers to request a review where this is required - please see reasonable adjustments section. A customer can only use stage 2, if one or more of the following criteria has been evidenced.

- The response received is factually inaccurate;
- Follow on actions have not been completed as agreed;
- The response received does not address the initial complaint; or
- There is evidence that our complaints process was not followed.

Any new complaints or issues not raised during the initial complaint would be dealt with separately and are not grounds for a review..

Where a decision is made to decline a stage 2 review, we will clearly communicate in writing the reasons for not escalating this, as well as the right to approach the Housing Ombudsman about our decision

A stage 2 review will be completed within **20 working days**. The person considering the complaint at stage 2 will not be the same person that considered the complaint at stage 1

The Complaints Team will contact the customer within 2 working days to seek clarification and gain further information and evidence (where appropriate).

If this timescale is not possible due to exceptional circumstances, an explanation and a date of when our stage 2 response will be sent to the customer will be provided. This should not exceed a further 10 working days.

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

All final responses will be sent to the customer in writing.

Within the resolution letter we will always make the customer aware of their right to escalate their complaint if they are still unhappy with the decision and how to do this.

All complaints will be recorded on our contact management system and a full record will be kept of the complaint; including the original complaint details, date received, all correspondence, reports and communication (including third parties), any review and the outcomes at each stage

At each stage of the formal complaints process ( Stage 1 and Stage 2) we will inform the customer of the following:

- the complaint stage;
- the outcome of the complaint;
- the reason for any decisions made;
- the details of any remedy offered to put things right;
- details of any outstanding actions;
- details of changes made, or actions taken to prevent a reoccurrence; and
- details of how to escalate the matter if dissatisfied.

We will address all points raised in the complaint and provide clear reasons for any decisions, referencing the relevant policy, law and good practice where appropriate

### Putting things right

Where it is clear that something has gone wrong, we will acknowledge this and advise on the actions we intend to take to put things right, both for the individual customer, but also wider service improvements to prevent a similar matter arising again.

### Compensation

We have a separate compensation procedure for complaint handling. In awarding compensation we will consider whether any statutory payments are due, if any quantifiable losses have been incurred, the time and trouble a customer has been put to as well as any distress and inconvenience caused

### Dissatisfaction with our Decision-Making

There will be occasions where customers have exhausted our complaints process and remain dissatisfied with the outcome. In these circumstances there are a range of options available for further escalation.

- Any tenants, leaseholders and housing applicants who are unhappy with the outcome of their review (stage 2), can escalate the matter directly with the Housing Ombudsman
- For complaints relating to our care and support services, customers can refer their complaint to the Care Quality Commission.

### Managing Unacceptable Actions and Behaviours

Sometimes customers using our complaints service use behaviour, actions or general conduct that makes it very difficult for us to deal with their complaint effectively. In these instances, we have a separate procedure for colleagues to follow.

In such circumstances we reserve the right to use different communication methods for individual customers, refuse to consider the complaint or to terminate the investigation.

We will confirm this to the person making the complaint in writing, with the reasons for our decision including a review date.

Any restrictions placed on a customer's contact due to unacceptable behaviour will demonstrate regards for the provisions of the Equality Act 2010.

## Learning from Complaints

We will use complaints to drive continuous learning and improvement.

Complaints will be reviewed to identify any common themes and areas for learning. Although, we will actively highlight any major service failures as a matter of urgency and without delay. Any issues identified will be raised with the relevant service area and/or contractor to aid service improvement.

Any themes or trends will be assessed by senior management to identify systemic issues, serious risks, and policies and procedures that require revision. This will also inform training for both colleagues and contractors

We will proactively use learning from complaints to revise policies and procedures, to train colleagues and contractors and to improve communication and record-keeping.

We will report back on wider learning and improvements by publishing information to customers, scrutiny groups, colleagues and stakeholders, as well as providing evidence on our website, annual report and customer magazine

## Culture and Training

We encourage a culture that welcomes complaints and the opportunity they give to help improve our services. We fully recognise that a positive complaint handling culture is integral to the effectiveness of our ability to resolve disputes, improve the quality of the service provided and the relationship with our customers.

Training, communication and awareness will be provided to all relevant colleagues required to implement this policy. This also includes our contractors and involved customers.

## Contractors

All contractors will be expected to provide the relevant information to our complaint resolution officers in a timely manner and to an agreed standard. This includes agreed appointments (kept and made) within the agreed set timescale, from the date of when the complaint was logged by Longhurst Group.

## Roles and Responsibilities

Responsibility for the complaints service is held jointly by:

- Longhurst Group Chief Executive
- Executive Director of Housing, Care and Support Services -

Operational responsibility for the complaints service is held by the Director of Customer Experience and Communities and Head of Customer Voice

Day-to-day responsibility for the complaints service is held by:

- Complaints and Improvement Manager, Complaint Team Leader and Complaint Resolution Officers
- Contact Centre teams

## Equality and Diversity

We will demonstrate regards for the provisions of the Equality Act 2010. The Group is committed to ensuring that no person or group of persons will be treated less favourably than another person or group of persons and will carry out our duty with positive regard for the following protected characteristics, age, disability, race, gender reassignment, sex, sex orientation, religion or belief, marriage and civil partnership and pregnancy and maternity.



The Group is committed to equality, diversity, and inclusion and such will make reasonable adjustments to the policy to recognise, accommodate and support customers' individual needs, where needed

## Reporting

Quarterly performance reports are provided to our Group Board, Directors Group, Heads of Service, Operational Managers and the Customer Forum.

Performance updates include details of complaint volumes, arising issues and trends from complaints handling, outcomes in terms of learning and future improvement plans; as well as updates on compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's orders.

Quarterly performance updates, including insight and learning will be added to our website for customers to view.

The Group Board will receive individual outcomes from Housing Ombudsman's determinations and will be presented on an annual basis with the outcomes from our self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's code.

We will also publish the outcome of our self-assessment on our website. .

The Groups annual report will include complaints performance, trends and wider learning and improvements arising from complaints

## Monitoring, Evaluation and Review

We will monitor the following:

- Volume of complaints received ( Early Resolution, Stage1 and Stage 2)
- Number and % of Early resolution cases escalated to Stage 1 complaints
- Number and % of Stage 1complaints escalated to stage 2 (including refusals)
- The type of complaints received (i.e. service areas) and the root cause
- Performance against our stage 1 response timescale (including any extensions)
- Performance against our stage 2 response timescale (including any extensions)
- Performance against the number of promises made and completed within the agreed timescales
- % of complaints upheld at Stage 1 and Stage 2
- Satisfaction levels – complaint handling and outcome
- The outcome of closed complaint cases
- Number of complaints referred to the Housing Ombudsman, % of referrals completed within the agreed timescale and the outcome
- Goodwill and compensation payments
- Actions taken and changes made resulting in service improvements

In addition, complaints performance is also reviewed:

- By the Head of Customer Voice and Complaint and Improvement Manager, weekly, monthly and quarterly
- With our partner contractors every month as part of their contractual requirements

This policy will be reviewed on a triennial basis , incorporating colleague and customer feedback. In addition, it will be reviewed:

- Following information suggesting that the policy is not effective, or
- Following the introduction of relevant new legislation, regulations or guidance.