



NORTH & EAST HOUSING ASSOCIATION CLG: COMPLAINTS POLICY

Version History

	Modification	Date modified
1	Initial approval of policy	November 2014
2	Most recent review and approval by Board	February 2022
3	Date of next review by Board	February 2024

Scope

North & East Housing Association aims to ensure that the services we provide meet the needs and expectations of our tenants. However, we recognise that sometimes things go wrong and the services we provide do not meet our tenants' changing needs. It is therefore important that we value all feedback including complaints, compliments and suggestions and use them to direct, or where appropriate, improve service delivery.

Purpose

This policy specifically describes how North & East will deal with all complaints received, irrespective of which service the complaint refers to, and how these will be used to inform future service delivery. In so doing, the policy assists the Association in meeting its corporate and strategic aims and priorities and is consistent with the intention of our Strategic Plan 2020-2024.

Objectives

The overall objective of this complaint policy is to ensure that North & East makes it easy for our tenants to inform us of their views on our actions and service delivery and that the feedback we receive is used positively to deliver services that meet expectations. In particular this policy is designed:

- To ensure that the services we provide meet the requirements of tenants.
- To value the contribution of tenants' feedback; and
- To learn from that feedback (and compliments and suggestions to add perspective) and improve.

Principles

The principles underpinning this complaints policy reflect the organisation's values and are as follows:

1. We will meet and where possible exceed all legal and regulatory requirements.
2. We will be clear and transparent and open about what we can and cannot do.
3. We will communicate with tenants around their complaints using easy to understand language.
4. We will follow up proactively on complaints about contractors or other third parties acting on our behalf

Procedure

We believe that most issues can be resolved informally once we are made aware that a tenant is unhappy with a particular aspect of our service. Therefore, we ask that tenants afford us the opportunity to respond before using the formal procedure set out below. If s/he is not satisfied with the outcome then s/he is, of course, welcome to submit a formal complaint to us.

Wherever possible, our Housing Team will aim to resolve the complaint at the first point of contact. North & East recognises, however, that some complaints may be handled using other processes, and are therefore excluded from this complaints process. These include:

- a complaint that is being dealt with or was previously dealt with by legal proceedings, or where a decision will be decided by a court e.g. re-possession;
- a complaint that has not been raised within three months of the incident occurring;
- a complaint about a service where North and East has no responsibility;
- a complaint about a decision where a statutory appeal body or tribunal has been established to examine the case;
- claims for compensation for property damage or personal injury. (These are liability claims and must be dealt with by our insurers or the relevant contractor's insurance if appropriate);
- anonymous complaints;
- policies that already have a built-in appeal/review process e.g. Rents, Allocations.

Receiving a Complaint

In order to enable tenants to make a complaint, information about how and where to complain will be well publicised through the variety of our service delivery points including our Newsletter, website, at the Association's offices including in our estate offices.

Complaints and all supporting documents provided during the complaints process will be accepted in a number of different ways including in person, over the phone, and in writing via email, fax (although outmoded) and/or letter (with, where appropriate, access to translating and interpreting services for non-English speaking tenants being provided).

The personal information of the complainant and any people who are the subject of a complaint will be kept confidential and only used for the purposes of addressing the complaint and any follow up actions.

Responding to a Complaint

- Complaints will be **acknowledged** promptly. Complainants and, if applicable, the person who is the subject of the complaint, will be kept informed of progress and the outcome of the complaint.
- Complaints will be **addressed** promptly, and staff should make themselves aware of, and adhere to, any target timelines for resolving complaints.
- Complaints will be **handled** objectively and fairly with appropriate confidentiality.
- All finalised complaints will be **reviewed** for lessons learned and service improvement.

Handling a Complaint

Where possible complaints are best handled by person/s at the point of service delivery (front-line). In North & East this most obviously in the first instance is the Tenant Support Desk (TSD) . Our TSD staff are best positioned to talk through complaints at first contact with tenants and also best positioned to log complaint details as CRM cases on Cx for further analysis. More serious complaints, or complaints that cannot be satisfactorily closed by the TSD, will be escalated to the Tenant Support Officer (TSO) (see below) for other appropriate action.

The Tenant Services Officer (TSO) has designated responsibility for complaint co-ordination and complaint response, either facilitating resolution of tenant complaints informally or escalating to a person who has the authority to do so formally. In taking on this responsibility, the TSO:

- Will ensure the complainant and, if applicable, the person who is the subject of the complaint, is given sufficient opportunity to explain their position and engage with each other as appropriate.
- Will ensure that the outcome of the complaint is reviewed by the Tenant Services and Engagement Manager (TSEM) before the complaint process draws to conclusion.
- Will provide the complainant and the person who is the subject of the complaint with reasons for decisions on the outcome of the complaint.
- Will co-ordinate any appeals process.

Complaint Management System

North and East has developed a 'fit for purpose' centralised system for recording and tracking complaints, along with logging the reasons for any decisions on the outcome of the complaint

Under this system the TSO:

- Uses gathered data to identify the root cause of complaints.
- Recommends action to reduce the risk of recurrence where complaints are received.
- Records details of any corrective action in a complaint file;
- Manages all correspondence relating to feedback and complaints in accordance with North and East's Data Protection Policy record keeping policies and procedures

Equally, under this structure, the Tenant Services and Engagement Manager has responsibility to ensure a thorough and effective recording and reporting of complaints that reflect a true picture of complaints. This includes:

- Supporting all front-line staff in resolving complaints locally, quickly and effectively, to reduce the potential for a complaint to escalate.
- Encouraging front-line staff to be 'active listeners' and to understand and act on the information they receive.
- Supporting the TSO and setting out how complaints data will be reported and used to promote continual improvement.
- Ensuring that our tenants are kept informed about how we have used feedback to improve services.
- Systematically reviewing performance reports to recommend improvements in service delivery.

Complaints and actual or proposed improvements to services form part of our existing internal reporting structures (e.g. for CEO review in first instance, and thereafter as agenda items at management meetings and input to quarterly performance management reports).

All proposed improvements to service provision are followed up and followed through i.e. acted upon. Embedding as a clearly defined business objective will facilitate this.

Complaints Process

We have a three stage complaints process. When we receive a complaint, the tenant is asked if s/he has already attempted to resolve the issue through informal contact with us.

Stage 1 (Front-line resolution)

When dealing with a complaint at front line stage, three key questions will be considered:

- What exactly is the tenant's complaint (or complaints)?
- What does the tenant want to achieve by complaining?
- Can this be achieved, or an explanation given as to why not?

For every complaint raised, a CRM case # will be allocated. Front-line resolution should be completed within three working days. Only in exceptional circumstances will this be extended and only if an extension is likely to result in front-line resolution. The maximum extension will be another three working days and must be approved by the TSEM or other manager if not available. The tenant will be advised of the extension and the reasons for it.

Complaints resolved at front-line stage must be conveyed to the tenant/s and recorded but written notification to the tenant/s is not an absolute requirement. However, a full and accurate record of the decision reached and given to the tenant will be maintained at all times.

Stage 2 (Informal investigation)

Complaints will be referred to the TSO and escalated to informal investigation stage where:

- Front-line resolution was tried but the tenant remains dissatisfied and requests an investigation into the complaint.
- The tenant refuses to take part in the front-line resolution stage.
- The issues raised are complex and will require more detailed exploration.

Where appropriate this will be a continuation of the front-line resolution action. All case notes and associated information will be handed over to the TSO (whether hard or soft copy) and recorded on the originally assigned CRM case #.

When a complaint is received by the TSO for informal investigation, three similar key questions will be considered:

- What specifically is the tenant's complaint(s)?
- What does the tenant want to achieve by complaining?
- Are the tenant's expectations realistic and achievable?

The TSO will co-ordinate an informal investigation (exploration) to establish all the facts relevant to the points made in the complaint and give the tenant a full, objective, and proportionate response that represents North and East's position. If the tenant expects more than North and East can provide this will be made clear to them at the earliest opportunity, and they will be advised to seek independent third-party advice.

When a previously closed complaint is escalated from the front-line stage to the TSO, it will be reopened on Cx under the relevant CRM case #.

Stage 3 (Formal investigation)

Complaints referred to the CEO involve serious, high risk or high-profile issues that may:

- Involve a senior member of staff.
- Involve a serious service failure, for example allegation of significant misconduct, major delays in providing, or repeated failures to provide, a service.
- Constitute a serious breach of health and safety.
- Pose a serious risk to North and East's operations.
- Present issues of a highly sensitive nature, for example concerning:
 - A particularly vulnerable person
 - Child protection

The CEO has sole discretion how best to action formal investigation as this may have resource implication.

Timelines

The following timelines apply to all cases escalated to Stages 2 & 3:

- Acknowledgement be sent within three working days.
- Full response to the complaint be given as soon as possible but no later than 20 working days from the date the complaint is received for investigation at the appropriate level.

Any extension to the above timelines should be by exception and there must be clear and justifiable reasons for any extension. An extension will be approved in advance by the TSEM or other member of the management team (or in the case of Stage 3 referrals, by the CEO) so long as the tenant agrees. Tenant updates will be given as well as a revised timescale for completion. If the tenant does not agree to the extension but it is unavoidable and reasonable, then the TSEM or other member of the management team (or in the case of Stage 3 referrals, the CEO) will consider the matter and confirm the extension.

At Stages 2 & 3 tenants should be advised of the outcome of investigations in writing. All areas of the complaint that North and East has responsibility for should be addressed and reasons for the decisions made will be provided.

At Stages 2 & 3 all decisions should be recorded on Cx under the appropriate CRM case # along with details of how and when they were communicated to the tenant. Tenants should be fully advised of their rights following the investigation stage. This will include full information on how to escalate a complaint internally or to a third-party, the information required by the relevant body, the relevant contact details and the timescales for doing so.

Unreasonable Complaints

Most complainants act responsibly. However, some complainants are difficult to satisfy and occasionally the conduct of some complainants can be challenging because of unreasonable persistence, demands, lack of co-operation, arguments and/or behaviour. In these circumstances, while fair consideration must be given to the complainant, North & East reserves the right to exclude some complaints from the standard complaints process. Equally, where complaints are complex or when tenants have become entrenched, North & East reserves the right to engage third party support, including mediation or conciliation services where appropriate, using suitably trained and qualified mentors to try to resolve matters and avoid escalated action.

Amendments to policy

Old version number	Reason for updating	New version number & date of issue
001	Recommendations following review of the handling of a tenant complaint, September 2021	002 February 2022