



## **Complaints and Compliments Policy**

### **Compliments**

1. Positive comments (compliments) are valuable feedback and learning opportunities. Compliments will be recorded and the details where appropriate publicised, mainly within the organisation. This helps to reinforce positive behaviour and compliance with the organisation's service standards.
2. Although we recognise the valuable contribution made by colleagues this is not always recognised by way of a written compliment. Managers will therefore make time to recognise good work, especially if feedback is received directly from a customer; encouraging the customer to submit a written compliment if appropriate.
3. Praising staff, recognising good work and providing positive feedback is just as important as responding to complaints.
4. All compliments will be acknowledged and the customer thanked for taking the time to contact us.

### **Complaints**

5. Northwards Housing welcomes complaints so that we can learn lessons and improve our performance. We will provide feedback to customers about the outcomes of different types of complaints and how we use that information to drive improvement of services.
6. This policy is designed to make the process simple and accessible to all; aiming to make the overall process a positive experience for the customer.
7. We will investigate any complaint where it is alleged that Northwards Housing is:
  - Failing to fulfil its responsibilities, carry out a policy or provide a service in line with the Tenants Services Authority (TSA) standards,
  - Failing to achieve the stated local standards of service offered to customers,
  - Failing to take into account matters that ought to have been considered when coming to, or implementing a decision,
  - Acted unfairly or with bias
  - Not performing against the regulatory standards set by the TSA

8. All complaints will be considered in a fair and impartial manner. Managers have a responsibility to seek advice if needed before responding to a complaint and if appropriate will consider asking a colleague, not directly responsible for the service area that is being complained about, or at a different work location, to investigate a complaint. This could be particularly helpful if impartiality or bias is being alleged, or if the complaint is about the person who would normally respond to the complaint.
9. The person responding to the complaint will be responsive, approachable and helpful at all stages of the process, making time where appropriate to contact the complainant personally by telephone or face to face to discuss their concerns prior to, or as part of their investigation.
10. Northwards Housing's close working relationships with its partnering contractors means that when a complaint is received involving their performance, we will work together to produce a response so that all parties agree and learn lessons from the complaint. We will make sure that any complaint involving compensation is resolved quickly between all parties.
11. Northwards Housing does not distinguish between formal and informal complaints. All complaints will be taken seriously and acted upon regardless of perceived severity. We will also carry out periodic analysis of the reasons customers contact us and monitor this information for any trends in dissatisfaction with the service.
12. We will accept complaints from advocates acting on behalf of customers providing they are authorised to act on the tenant's or tenants' behalf.
13. It is not necessary for complaints to be made in writing, although the person listening to the complaint may choose to keep a written record of the complaint in addition to recording this on the central logging system. All responses will be made in writing, which could include email, using plain language and avoiding the use of technical jargon wherever possible. Responses will be concise. If appropriate, especially where complex issues need to be explained, we will talk directly to the complainant about the outcome of the investigation prior to sending a written response.
14. Whilst we aim to make sure that satisfaction with the complaints process is high, we recognise that not all complaints are upheld. This can have an impact upon the customer's overall perception of the way they feel their complaint has been handled. We will take this into account when reviewing satisfaction.
15. Northwards Housing recognises that it can be a daunting experience for some customers to pursue a complaint, especially if they are worried about how it will be received, or if they feel anxious about the potential outcome. We will approach complaints in a positive and proactive manner, communicating empathy and concern to the complainant. We will treat complainants with respect, taking into account customers' individual communication needs.

We will consider where possible the capacity of the customer to understand the process and / or the outcome of the investigation; and if necessary seek additional support for the customer to support communication e.g. working in partnership with interpreters, carers or support agencies.

16. Where complaints are received relating to the services of Manchester City Council or a third party, we will actively assist the customer and direct them to the relevant person who can deal with their complaint. We will do this by liaising with Manchester City Council or the third party and informing the customer of the action that we have taken to assist them. In the case of dealing with a particularly vulnerable customer we will take steps to ensure that the customer is provided with appropriate assistance throughout the process.
17. The person responding to the complaint will take ownership of all aspects of the complaint and generally co-ordinate a single response for the customer, agreeing with them what remedial action needs to be taken within an agreed timescale. Where agreement cannot be reached this needs to be explained and full reasons given.
18. Where it is decided that different and distinct elements of the complaint dealt with by way of separate resources, this should be clearly communicated to the customer.
19. Complaints are treated as a valuable source of feedback and will be used to make sure lessons are learned from mistakes or omissions. We will provide explanations when something goes wrong and offer an apology if appropriate; and if necessary compensation or reimbursement in line with Northwards' policy. The numbers and type of complaints will be publicised on our website and in local offices and we will monitor trends in complaints to make sure overall performance, including the work that our contractors and sub contractors carry out, continually improves, ensuring a 'right first time' approach.
20. We will advise our customers of their right of appeal when informing them of the outcome of their complaint.
21. Occasionally a complaint or contact with a customer arises from a series of recent contacts initiated by the customer expressing dissatisfaction with a "live" situation that is still unresolved. In situations like this, where despite the best efforts of front facing staff the issue is proving difficult to resolve, staff are empowered to escalate the issue. Northwards Housing has its own fast track procedure for escalating such complaints to the highest level.
22. Complaints made via the Board or Chief Executive will be recorded on the central complaints logging system and investigated in line with this policy.
23. The quality of our complaints handling is important and a sample of complaints will be monitored regularly by a Complaints Panel made up of managers from each area of the service, tenant representatives, the Customer Service Centre and our responsive repairs contractor. The panel will feedback to line managers their findings so that lessons can be learned and, if necessary, training needs identified. Feedback will also be used to inform the policy and procedure planning and review process. The panel will also monitor trends and track the

outcome of complaints to ensure lessons learned are shared across the organisation and with partners, and that improvements are embedded.

24. Complaints received via Manchester City Council, will be dealt with according to Northwards' Complaints Policy and Procedure; and will also be subject to any additional requirements in place at the time, such as responses being copied to a designated officer in the Council.
25. Ombudsman complaints will be dealt with according to separate arrangements agreed with Manchester City Council. Responses will always be signed off by the relevant Director.
26. We will not normally investigate complaints where the matter being complained about is or has been the subject of legal proceedings.

### **Vexatious Complaints**

27. From time to time we receive complaints from people who are dissatisfied or unwilling to accept the outcome of an investigation even after that decision has been reviewed and appealed. There are also some customers who persistently make complaints which are malicious and/or without foundation. In cases where people continue to complain without reasonable cause, Northwards Housing has a procedure to ensure fairness and consistency is applied across the organisation and to make sure resources are appropriately directed to dealing with genuine complaints.

### **Anonymous Complaints**

28. It is good practice to investigate and respond to all complaints even if the source of the complaint is unknown. Therefore anonymous complaints must be dealt with using the normal complaints process and the manager involved in responding must keep a copy of the complaint on file together with details of the action taken. This is in case the complainant comes forward at a later date or a similar complaint is made by another customer.

### **Performance Standards**

- We aim to resolve all complaints at the earliest possible stage.
- Complaints will be processed wherever possible within 10 working days.
- The overall service standard for responding to complaints places emphasis on doing what is right, such as reaching a mutually agreed timescale with the complainant for providing a full response where necessary, rather than providing a poor quality response to a complex complaint within 10 working days. Quality as well as time is an important issue.
- We will communicate with complainants face to face or by telephone in all cases where it is appropriate and practicable to do so.
- We will publicise the numbers of complaints we receive as well as the nature and outcomes of complaints that we receive on at least an annual basis. on our website and in our annual report to tenants

- All compliments and complaints will be recorded and we will monitor lessons learned to ensure they are embedded in the organisation.
- The Complaints Panel will review a sample of complaints and provide feedback on the quality of the responses direct to the author and their line manager to improve performance and customer satisfaction with the outcome of the process. The panel will also monitor trends to ensure that lessons are learned and ensure this is communicated across the organisation.
- The Customer and Communities Sub Committee will receive a quarterly report, summarising all compliments and complaints received.
- We will benchmark our performance with other housing providers to better understand the effectiveness of our policy and procedure and how this can be improved.
- On an annual basis we will map the journey experience of a sample of customers who choose to use our complaints procedure and use this information to continually improve the experience of future customers who choose to make a complaint.

## **Appendix A            Complaints Procedure and Guidance**

This procedure should be read in conjunction with the Compliments and Complaints Policy.

Our procedure is a clear step-by-step system that lays down what we must do at each stage, and when we will do it. Appendix B illustrates the whole process.

### **Stage 1 Complaint**

This can take the form of a verbal or written complaint. Attempts should be made to sort out the problem informally and straight away, but if this is not possible the complaint needs to be logged on the central logging system and a written response will need to be sent to the customer.

Complaints can be made online via the website, using the ‘unhappy with our service?’ form issued in the Tenant Handbook, by collecting a form from a local office or by telephoning and asking for a form to be sent in the post. We can also receive complaints by letter.

Complaints will be

- acknowledged within 5 working days
- a final written response will be provided within 10 working days.
- if a response within 10 working days is not possible the customer should be contacted to explain the reason for the delay and be given a date when they can expect a final response.

### **Stage 2 Review**

If a customer remains unhappy with the response they can ask for a review within 28 days of the decision. This review must be carried out by a senior manager.

The timescale for a response is the same at stage 1.

### **Stage 3 Appeal**

If a customer remains unhappy with the response they can appeal against the decision or the way their complaint has been handled to a Director.

The timescales for a response are the same as stage 1 and 2. A copy of the letter will be sent to Manchester City Council Chief Executive Department.

If a customer is still unhappy after Stage 3 they can complain further to the Local Government Ombudsman.

## Personal Contact with the Complainant

1. Customers have told us that they appreciate a personal contact when making a complaint. **Therefore the presumption is that the officer investigating the complaint will speak to the complainant, either face to face or by telephone.** Exceptions to this would be where such contact would be inappropriate for health and safety, legal or operational reasons; or, in the case of Stage 3 complaints, where the complainant has already had an opportunity to put their case in person and in the view of the relevant Director a further discussion is unwarranted. A discussion might also be deemed unnecessary in the case of a vexatious complaint.
2. When acknowledging a complaint it is important to read it first; check if the complaint is still a live issue (e.g. no heat or hot water) and if necessary check to see if the issue is being dealt with before acknowledging it. If it is already being dealt with, then it is good practice to recognise this and make very brief reference to it in the acknowledgment. If however there is no action being taken then sending an acknowledgement may be inappropriate. Fast tracking the complaint or contacting the complainant directly to clarify the issue and then arranging access to a service would be the most helpful response in this instance, prior to sending an acknowledgment letter.
3. The initial contact should be used to clarify the complaint, but if appropriate can be used as part of the investigation, for example if it is necessary to visit the customer at home to carry out an inspection.
4. All contacts must be recorded on the central log within 10 working days. This includes where unsuccessful attempts have been made to contact the complainant.
5. Standard template letterheads must always be used because they also contain statements that are consistent with good practice.
6. It is important that a complainant knows the name of the person who will be dealing with their complaint, including their direct telephone number and email address. The investigating manager will be their main contact for dealing with all elements of the complaint and they will act as a co-ordinator with other service areas to obtain information to provide one response that addresses all of the issues. The main issue of a complaint is usually a good indicator for deciding which manager is best placed to investigate and coordinate a response.
7. Where it is decided that different and distinct elements of the complaint dealt with by way of separate resources, this should be clearly communicated to the customer.
8. If the complaint involves services delivered by an agency, we will take ownership of the complaint and co-ordinate a response. Where a different approach is adopted this will be clearly communicated to the complainant.

9. If the complaint involves the services delivered by Manchester City Council or a third party, we will assist the customer and direct them to the relevant person. We will do this by keeping a record of the complaint and details of the action we have taken to support the customer. This might involve contacting the Council or third party agency to handover helpful information to avoid the customer having to repeat them. It might also include communicating specific details to the customer about who is going to be dealing with their complaint, when and how, as well as the contact details for the person who is going to be investigating their complaint.
10. Where we receive a relevant complaint forwarded from Manchester City Council or a third party agency, we will deal with it in accordance of Northwards Complaints and Compliments Policy.
11. If all or part of the complaint relates to an agency not providing services on behalf of Northwards, the investigating officer will need to decide whether to refer the complainant to that agency. If so, this needs to be clearly communicated to the complainant.
12. When a complaint is acknowledged the name of the person leading the investigation and providing the substantive response, usually the manager of that particular service area, should be clearly indicated. This name should not generally be changed as it can be confusing and misleading to the customer or may be interpreted as the complaint not being taken seriously by the manager responsible. If at a later stage it is decided that someone else is going to carry out the investigation and write a response this needs to be clearly communicated to the complainant.
13. All responses to complaints should be concise and consistent with the good practice in communication contained in the Northwards Communications Handbook.

## **Analysis of Contacts**

In addition to complaints logged on the central system, twice a year Northwards will undertake an analysis of the reasons customers contact us to assess if there are any underlying issues with the service that have not been identified and addressed within the formal complaints process.

A report of the findings will be considered by the complaints panel which will make recommendations regarding any action that is required to EMT and / or the Neighbourhood and Quality Services Sub Committee.

## **Fast Tracking of Complaints**

Some complaints refer to live service failure and the problem that led to the complaint being made is still unresolved. Although rare, they can have a serious impact on the perception of the overall service, and in serious cases where customers have experienced multiple failures the complaint should be escalated immediately without a detailed investigation at stage 1 of the procedure. This must be done within 24 hours of receiving the complaint, after which it is unlikely to be deemed urgent and therefore unlikely to meet the criteria.

Similarly, if an attempt is made at stage 1 of the procedure to resolve the problem without success, this should be escalated straight away. We will not wait for the customer to complain under stage 2 of the procedure.

All managers are empowered to escalate the issue to a higher level for urgent action if they are unable to resolve the problem locally within a reasonable timescale. This could include escalating the issue to Director level.

The key here is not to delay escalation but to escalate the matter immediately. The types of cases that might fall into this category are where 2 or more of the following apply:

- Multiple failure of a contractor or sub-contractor to complete a and the problem is still unresolved, and where this is having a seriously detrimental impact
- Where particularly vulnerable customers are involved
- Where multiple households are affected
- Where there is a current risk to health and safety

The number of fast track complaints will be monitored so that serious service failure can be addressed to prevent a reoccurrence.

### **Vexatious Complaints**

False allegations should be dealt with firmly. If a complaint is found to be malicious then action against the complainant should be considered.

Complainants who remain dissatisfied after stage 3 but persist in complaining, should be advised to contact the Local Government Ombudsman. Equally if it is apparent after stage 1 that a resolution is unlikely to be achieved then the complainant be advised to refer their complaint directly to the Local Government Ombudsman rather than be expected to go through stage 2 and 3 of the procedure. This approach is unusual and therefore needs to be authorised by the appropriate Director.

Some complainants persist in making complaints which are malicious and/or without foundation. If the persistence is unreasonable and frequent then a written warning can be authorised and issued by a senior manager. The warning should state the reasons why it is being issued and advise of the consequences if the behaviour continues. If the situation persists then appropriate and proportionate sanctions can be imposed.

Options available include:

- Insisting upon contact in a particular form (for example, letters only);
- requiring contact to take place with a named officer;
- restricting telephone calls to specified days and times;
- asking the complainant to enter into an agreement about their future contact.

In all cases we will write to the complainant to tell them our decision, why we believe their behaviour falls into this category, what action we are taking and the duration of the action (normally six months, after which a review will be carried out).

There is a right of appeal against the decision to impose sanctions to the Director of the service area imposing the sanction. The Director will review and make their decision based on the evidence already available i.e. there is no requirement for an investigation at this stage to collect further evidence to support a decision.

### **Anonymous Complaints**

From time to time we will receive anonymous complaints which will make it impossible to respond to the complainant. However any anonymous complaint received by Northwards should be investigated using the normal complaints process and a response recorded of the action taken.

The original complaint and a copy of the response should be kept on a file by the relevant manager. The reason for keeping and responding to anonymous complaints is in case the complainant comes forward at a later date or a similar complaint is made by another customer.

### **The role of the Complaints Panel**

The complaints panel will meet approximately every six weeks to review the quality of complaints handling and the overall performance on complaints. The Panel will be chaired by a tenant or leaseholder living in the Northwards Housing area and supported by the Business Improvement Team . Its role is:

1. To oversee the complaints process and ensure customer complaints are handled effectively.
2. To review performance against targets and recommend action for improvement to Northwards and its partner organisations and contractors.
3. To review a sample of complaints each month (at stages 1 and 2) to ensure that the root causes of problems have been identified, that action is taken to tackle any underlying issues and the quality of the response meets with the policy and customer service standards (see quality checklist appendix a).
4. To identify any trends or patterns and ensure action is taken to address any weaknesses to improve processes and provide better outcomes for the customer.
5. To review compliments to see what is going well.

The composition of the panel includes managers representing Business Services, Neighbourhood Services, Home Improvements, Responsive Repairs, Manchester Working Ltd and On Call. There will also be at least three tenant representatives on the panel. Full training will be provided to panel members and, although complaints will be anonymous, all members are expected to sign and uphold a confidentiality agreement.

## **Learning Lessons from Complaints**

The investigating manager is responsible for updating the central complaints log with the outcome of the complaint once it has closed and this includes updating the lessons learned section.

Every upheld complaint upheld must be updated with an outcome of the lessons learned. There may also be examples of complaints that are not upheld that still involve learning, especially around areas of communication. These should capture lessons learned to ensure the root cause of the issue is identified and addressed so we avoid merely responding to a single occurrence or worse a series of similar complaints.

Whether we can learn lessons from complaints may not always be immediately apparent. Managers should empathise with the customer and ask themselves the following questions:

- What was the underlying cause of the complaint?
- Was it avoidable? If so, how?
- Was the complaint caused by a failure in a process or system or by the behaviour of an individual?
- What motivated the complainant to go to the trouble of making a complaint? What were they most upset by and could this aspect of their complaint have been avoided?
- When the customer complained informally was the problem dealt with at the first point of contact and did we get it 'right first time'? If not, why?
- Is this a failure of another party?
- Is this the first time a complaint of this nature has been received?
- What could be changed to prevent a reoccurrence?

It doesn't matter that the change required is so big that a manager cannot implement it alone. It is however essential that the issue is identified and logged, irrespective of any personal feelings a manager has that something cannot be changed or improved. It is for the organisation as a whole to decide what it can change from lessons learned, not just the individual manager, and this can range from modest improvements such as changes in policy, practice and procedure to more radical changes such as reviewing and implementing a new service.

Sharing lessons learned is also an important mechanism for improving performance. Opportunities for raising awareness and sharing information can be built into team meetings, cascade briefings, training and featured in employee newsletters such 'Sty News' and 'Fairground.'

## **Support for complainants**

At all stages the complainant must be informed of their right to take the complaint further if they remain dissatisfied with the response. They should be provided with the name of the person to contact if they wish to take the matter further.

When dealing with complaints we must be aware of individual customer needs. Wherever reasonably practicable, adjustments should be made regarding complainants communication needs, for example:

- offering home visits where appropriate, especially for elderly, disabled or vulnerable customers;
- engaging and working with support or care workers, especially when meeting with customers or arranging home visits;
- offering the services of the translation and interpretation services as per Northwards policy, including the use of a BSL signer.
- offering a choice of male or female investigating officer where this is practicable and the circumstances warrant it.

When dealing with complaints from someone advocating on behalf of a tenant (this could be a solicitor, a friend, a family member, or a neighbour, we need to make absolutely sure that the advocate has the authority to act on behalf of the complainant. We must take reasonable steps to verify the identity of the advocate and check with the complainant that the advocate has the authority to act for them. Whilst it is generally safe to assume people in official positions who write to Northwards will have the authority to act, it may not be the case, especially for relatives or others claiming to be associates. Staff should make a judgement, on a case by case basis; whether to seek clarification by contacting the complainant directly or act if they are satisfied that it is reasonable to act on the advocate's request.

Sometimes customers are reluctant to complain, fearful perhaps of being seen to cause trouble. Equally family members may be upset if someone close to them, someone for whom they may be a carer, for example, has experienced a poor service. Family and friends might also want to avoid further unnecessary distress to the complainant which is why they are advocating on their behalf. All these reasons are perfectly reasonable and whilst caution must still be exercised, achieving the most satisfactory outcome for the customer is the main priority. At this stage both therefore both the complainant and the advocate are customers. Providing it does not involve the release of sensitive information, there should not be a significant delay when seeking to verify a particular advocate's authority to act, and it will very much depend on the urgency of the situation. If the advocate is acting without the complainants knowledge a similar judgement needs to be taken on whether this is reasonable given the personal circumstances of the complainant e.g. if the customer is vulnerable for example and or unable to complain directly.

## Appendix B

### The Complaints Process

