

## Complaints Policy and Procedure

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## **Complaints Policy and Procedure**

### **Introduction**

Reliance Housing (Reliance) welcomes all feedback from customers and their representatives and recognises that this feedback provides valuable information that we can use to improve the services we offer.

A key part of this feedback is customer complaints, which allow us to learn from experiences where things may have gone wrong and make amendments to our working practices to ensure that they don't happen again. We encourage feedback by providing different channels through which customers can easily make a complaint.

The Board and Senior Managers at Reliance recognise that complaint handling is an important strategic role, providing vital insight on our performance and reputation.

Performance data on complaint handling will be considered by the Board alongside other key performance indicators to provide assurance, assess any risks, identify emerging trends and learning points to improve services to customers.

Reliance has completed its self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, which promotes the progressive use of complaints and provides a useful framework to support effective handling and prevention of complaints. This will be uploaded onto our website in due course and will be reviewed annually.

The Board has visibility of the volume and type of complaints received and the impact of our complaint handling on customers. In addition, it also considers any improvements made as a result of learning from complaints.

### **What is a Complaint - Definition**

Reliance recognise that effective complaint handling is a customer focused process that enables customer voices to be listened to and understood.

We have used the Housing Ombudsman definition of a complaint which is "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".

### **What is not a complaint - Exclusions**

There are a number of circumstances in which a matter will not be considered a complaint, and which we consider to be fair and reasonable in accordance with the Housing Ombudsman's Code. These are:

- A comment, or series of comments, where the customer is making a suggestion about how we may improve or maintain our service
- A question, or series of questions, where a customer is requesting information about a

service we provide

- A service request, where the customer is letting us know about a particular issue for the first time; for example, reporting a repair or an incident of anti-social behaviour. Service requests will be recorded, monitored and reviewed regularly. A complaint will be raised when the customer raises dissatisfaction with the response to their service request
- The issue giving rise to the complaint occurred over six months ago unless the complaint relates to safeguarding or health and safety issues
- Legal proceedings have been started. 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 already been considered under the Complaints Policy

When we decide not to accept a complaint, we will provide an explanation setting out the reasons why the matter is not suitable for the complaints process.

Customers have the right to challenge this decision by making an approach to the Housing Ombudsman.

### **Reasonable Adjustments**

Reliance will ensure that disabled people are not disadvantaged in accessing our services. To this end we will make reasonable adjustments and will adapt the normal policy and procedure to accommodate an individual's needs. We will respond to reasonable adjustments requests in line with the Equality Act and the Reliance Complaint handlers have had training to deal with such requests. Examples of adjustments we can make include:

- Allowing more time than we would usually for someone to provide information
- Providing additional support such as a sign language interpreter
- Providing a copy of this policy in a clear and accessible format for all customers

### **Making a Complaint**

We will always attempt to resolve a complaint at the first point of contact and empower our staff to resolve any concerns there and then. At this stage we will confirm our understanding of the complaint and the outcomes being sought with the customer.

Reliance also recognises that that every customer interaction represents an opportunity for to gain feedback and insight. We will record all complaints on our system and run regular reports from the system to identify if there are any trends in customer dissatisfaction and any lessons that can be learnt.

When we receive a complaint, we aim to deal with it there and then if we can.

If we are unable to resolve the complaint at the first point of contact, we will investigate under the formal complaints process.

A formal complaint can occur when:

- A customer is unhappy about a service that they have received from Reliance or the attempts that Reliance has made to resolve the issue

- A customer requests that the service they have received be reviewed by a Manager, or the customer has expressly asked for a complaint to enter the formal complaints process
- A member of staff has triggered the formal complaints process with the agreement of the customer to reach a resolution

Complaints are welcomed from all customers, their advocates, representatives or third parties affected by Reliance services.

A full record will be kept of the complaint, any review and the outcomes at each stage, including all correspondence with the customer, correspondence with other parties etc.

At the completion of each stage of the complaints process we will ensure that customers are communicated with and advised of the following information:

- the complaint stage
- the outcome of the complaint
- the reasons for any decisions made
- the details of any remedy offered to put things right
- details of any outstanding actions
- details of how to escalate the matter if dissatisfied

### **Complaint Outcomes**

Complaints can be resolved in a number of ways. Any proposed remedy will reflect the extent of service failure and the level of detriment caused to the customer as a result. Reliance will consider the following actions to put things right:-

- acknowledging where things have gone wrong
- providing an explanation, assistance or reasons
- apologising
- taking action if there has been a delay
- reconsidering or changing a decision
- amending a record
- providing a financial remedy
- changing policies or procedures

Reliance will consider the length of time that a situation has been ongoing, the frequency, the severity of any service failure, how the situation has impacted on the customer and their circumstances or vulnerabilities when considering the complaint remedy. In some cases, a complainant may have a legal entitlement to redress. In such cases, Reliance will offer a resolution where possible, as that may remove the need for the resident to pursue legal remedies.

### **The Complaints Process**

The process has 2 stages and will be co-ordinated by our dedicated Complaints Officer:

### **Stage 1 - Investigation**

We will make it easy for our customers to make a complaint in a way that is the most convenient for them, this could be in writing, over the telephone, via text or email or in person to a member of Reliance staff. The complaint will be acknowledged within two working days. We'll investigate the complaint and then discuss with the customer what needs to be done to resolve the issue.

The Complaints Officer will set out their understanding of issues and the outcomes the customer 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.

We will provide a full written response within ten working days. If this is not possible, an explanation and a date when the stage one response will be received will be communicated. This should not exceed a further 10 working days without good reason.

Where a customer introduces new information or raises additional complaints during the investigation, these will 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 will be logged as a new complaint.

### **Stage 2 – Review**

If all or part the complaint is not resolved to the customer's satisfaction at stage 1, the customer can request a review of the complaint within 10 days of receipt of the outcome unless an exclusion ground applies. If Reliance declines to escalate a complaint based on the exclusions listed above in "What is not a complaint", we will set out the reasons for this in writing and also advise of the customers right to approach the Ombudsman about this decision.

A senior Manager will set out their understanding of issues that have not been resolved and the outcomes the customer 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.

The senior Manager will then consider the initial findings of the complaint investigation and may choose to take further action. The review outcome will be completed within 20 working days of the request. If this is not possible, an explanation and a date when the stage two response will be received will be communicated. This should not exceed a further 10 working days without good reason.

### **Housing Ombudsman**

If the customer remains unhappy or dissatisfied with the response to the complaint, they can appeal to the Housing Ombudsman. Customers also have the right to access the Housing

Ombudsman Service throughout their complaint, not only when the landlord's complaints process is exhausted.

Making a referral to the Ombudsman is free and further details can be found at: <http://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/>

This can either be done by the customer directly or can be co-ordinated through the dedicated Complaints Officer. The Housing Ombudsman Service considers complaints referred to them within 12 months of a landlord's final decision.

#### **Related policy, Documents, Legislation**

Regulator of Social Housing - Consumer Standards - Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard

Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code

Reliance Anti-Social Behaviour Policy

#### **Reporting Structure and Learning Points**

- Quarterly performance reports will be presented to the Board on the volume, category, and outcome of complaints.
- We will continue to monitor and share trends arising from complaint handling and any learning or changes made as a result of complaints.
- The Board will review any orders from the Ombudsman and findings of severe maladministration of the Ombudsman, or any referrals by it to regulatory bodies.
- The Board will review annually the self-assessment to confirm that the Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code is being applied.
- Any themes or trends will be assessed by senior management to identify potential systemic issues, serious risks or policies and procedures that require revision. They will also be used to inform staff and contractor training.