



Halton
Housing

Policy

Title:	Talk To Us Policy
Date of Issue:	December 2022
Issue Number:	8.0
Date of next review:	December 2025
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Service Area applies to:	All
Approved by:	Board
Electronic Storage:	SharePoint Published Documents



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1. Introduction

- 1.1 We are committed to continually improving the services we provide to customers. We therefore welcome any views or feedback on service delivery, whether good or bad.
- 1.2 Enquiries, compliments and complaints are a valuable source of feedback, which helps us to improve and provide better services. The process of registering an enquiry, compliment or complaint is collectively referred to as 'Talk to Us.'

2. Policy Statement

- 2.1 We have developed this Talk to Us Policy, which is designed to be accessible, fair to customers and easy to understand.
- 2.2 In implementing the Policy, we will have due regard to any relevant regulatory standards, as well as our own policies on Diversity and Customer Care.

3. Definition of a Complaint

- 3.1 A complaint is: 'an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by Halton Housing, our colleagues, or those acting on our behalf, affecting an individual customer or group of customers'.
- 3.2 A customer 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 will still be handled in line with this policy.
- 3.3 Except for MP's and elected members of the Council (due to the legal position on their advocacy role¹); anybody complaining on behalf of a customer will be asked to provide us with a signed declaration from the customer providing permission for them to act on the customers behalf. An example of a third-party declaration form is given here [3rd Party Declaration Form.docx](#)
- 3.4 MP's and Councillors may make enquiries on behalf of their constituents. To comply with GDPR provisions and guidance, we will only disclose/provide access to the part of the customer's personal information that is required to

¹ By virtue of the *Data Protection (Processing of Sensitive Personal Data) (Elected Representatives) Order 2002 SI 2002/2905*

enable them to fulfil their duties in this role without the need of the customer's express written consent.

- 3.5 We recognise the difference between a service request, whereby a customer may be unhappy with a situation that they wish to have rectified or make a request requiring action to be taken, and a complaint about the service they have/have not received.
- 3.6. Service requests are recorded, monitored, and reviewed regularly. A complaint may be raised if the customer is dissatisfied with the response to their service request.
- 3.7 Following up on a service request, such as a missed appointment, will often be resolved with an apology and the provision of another appointment and may not need to enter the formal complaint process.
- 3.8 However, if further enquiries are needed to resolve the matter, or if the customer requests it, the issue will be logged as a complaint.

4. Exclusions

- 4.1 We will accept a complaint unless there is a valid reason not to do, we may not accept a complaint when:
- The issue is more than six months old, or the customer had been aware of it for more than six months and has not contacted us. The customer will be informed in writing that the issue(s) raised cannot be dealt with under the complaints procedure because it is time-barred.
 - It relates to a first-time request for a service
 - The complaint or formal enquiry is relating to any active legal proceedings
 - The complaint has already been considered under a previous complaint and the issues are the same
 - The complaint is considered to be vexatious (a vexatious complaint is one that is pursued without merit, persistently or deliberately to cause annoyance or frustration, guidelines on this can be found in our vexatious complaints procedure)

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- 4.2 If we decide not to accept a complaint, we will write to the customer with a detailed explanation as to the reasons why and explain the customer's option to contact the Housing Ombudsman.
 - 4.3 Any customers whose behaviour is not in the spirit of our Customer Code of Conduct may be deemed to be unacceptable and may be excluded or have conditions placed on the complaint being pursued through the complaints process.
 - 4.4 We will only ever take such action(s) as a last resort but we may need to take a firm but fair approach in order to support our colleagues. .

5. Accessibility and Awareness

- 5.1 Customers can raise an enquiry, compliment or complaint using our online form, customer app and portal, in person by visiting Waterfront Point, or by telephone.
- 5.2 If we receive a complaint via social media, our Brand and Reputation team will advise the customer of the correct channels to use to log a complaint to ensure the process is followed correctly with confidentiality and privacy.
- 5.3 Our complaint policy and process is in a clear and accessible format for all customers on our website. This details the number of stages involved, what will happen at each stage and the timeframes for responding to customers.
<https://www.haltonhousing.co.uk/contact-us/complaints-and-feedback>
- 5.4 Our website includes information on how to raise a complaint, the process and our complaints policy and supporting documentation
<https://www.haltonhousing.co.uk/contact-us/complaints-and-feedback>
- 5.5 We are committed to making sure that our complaints process is accessible to all customers and that no customers are disadvantaged in accessing it. As a result, we will make reasonable adjustments to our policies for customers with disabilities. This policy does not seek to explain how we will approach every situation, it is intended as a general statement of our policy.
- 5.6 Many of the arrangements that we offer can also be made available for customers that do not have disabilities, but the adjustment would make the process easier for them. For example, provision of documents in larger font.
- 5.7 We will let customers know that we can provide reasonable adjustments in the following ways.

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- Option to request reasonable adjustments when submitting a request using our online form.
 - In written communications (e.g. acknowledgement letters).
 - Asking whether any reasonable adjustment is required when making a complaint via the telephone.
 - Including notes on our published documents.
 - Publishing our policy on our website.
- 5.7 There is no prescribed list of reasonable adjustments that we can offer, the adjustment will depend on the individual's needs. We will discuss the requirements with the customer and look to reach agreement on what may be reasonable in the circumstances. We will not make assumptions about whether a disabled person requires any reasonable adjustments or about what those adjustments should be.
- 5.8 Some examples of the adjustments that we can make include are:
- Provision of information in appropriate alternative formats (e.g. large print, Braille)
 - Provision of language interpreter including British Sign Language
 - Extension of time limits (where it is lawful to do so)
 - Use of email or telephone in preference to hard copy letters
 - Communication through a representative or intermediary
 - Rest or comfort breaks in meetings
- 5.9 All our complaint handlers have had appropriate training to deal with such requests.
- 5.10 We publicise our complaints policy and process, the Complaint Handling Code and the Housing Ombudsman Scheme on our website in leaflets, posters, magazines and as part of regular correspondence with customers.
- 5.11 We provide early advice to customers regarding their right to access the Housing Ombudsman Service throughout their complaint, not only when the complaints process is exhausted. This affords the customer the opportunity to engage with the Ombudsman's dispute support advisors for impartial advice.
- 5.12 Customers can contact the Independent Housing Ombudsman at: Housing Ombudsman Service, PO Box 152, Liverpool, L33 7WQ. Telephone: 0300 111 3000 Email: info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk

6. Complaint Handling Personnel

- 6.1 A Resolution Coordinator is dedicated to coordinating the complaints process within the organisation ensuring that complaints are dealt with appropriately and in a timely manner. The Resolution Coordinator is also responsible for liaising with the Housing Ombudsman.
- 6.2 We also have complaint handlers across the organisation, who have responsibility for complaint investigation and responding to customers in line with the Complaint Policy and Procedure.
- 6.3 Complaint handlers are trained in the policy and procedure and have the appropriate skills and experience. Any conflict of interest is passed to the complaint handlers line manager for review.
- 6.4 Complaint handlers will:
- be able to act sensitively and fairly
 - be trained to handle complaints and deal with customers that may be or upset
 - have access to colleagues at all levels to facilitate quick resolution of complaints
 - have the authority and autonomy to act to resolve disputes quickly and fairly

7. Complaint Handling Principles

- 7.1 We try hard to resolve any customer concerns informally with the agreement of the customer; all concerns are recorded and managed on our complaint system. If we are unable to informally resolve the concern within 5 days, or if the customer requests it sooner, the complaint will proceed to stage one with agreement from customer.
- 7.2 We will manage the customers' expectations from the outset, by being clear where a desired outcome is unreasonable or unrealistic.
- 7.3 We will try to resolve complaints as quickly as possible; we will assess what evidence is needed to fully consider the issues, what outcome would resolve the matter for the customer and whether there are any urgent actions required.
- 7.4 We give customers the opportunity to have a representative deal with their complaint on their behalf, and to be represented or accompanied at any meeting with us where this is reasonable.

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- 7.5 A complaint investigation will be conducted in an impartial manner. The complaint handler will:
- Listen and take time to understand the merits of the complaint
 - Act independently and have an open mind
 - Deal with any actual or perceived conflict of interest
 - Consider all issues, information and evidence carefully
 - Keep the complaint confidential as far as possible, with information only disclosed if necessary to properly investigate the matter
- 7.6 Where a key issue of a complaint relates to the parties' legal obligations, we will clearly explain this and provide copies of any relevant policies or documents that help customers to understand our decisions.
- 7.7 Any communication with the customer will not generally identify individual members of staff or contractors.
- 7.8 The Resolutions Coordinator and Complaint Handler will keep customers regularly updated about the progress of their complaint. We will adhere to any reasonable arrangements agreed with customers in terms of frequency and method of communication.
- 7.9 The customer, and if applicable any colleague who is the subject of the complaint, will also be given a fair chance to set out their position and comment on any findings before a final decision is made.
- 7.10 A full record of the complaint is kept in our complaints system. This will include the original complaint, date received, all correspondence with the customer, correspondence with other parties, any reports or surveys prepared, the complaint investigation and any outcomes at each stage.
- 7.11 Our Customer Code of Conduct and Vexatious Customer Policy sets out how we will manage unacceptable behaviour from customers and/or their representatives when pursuing a complaint.
- 7.12 Any restrictions placed on a customer's contact due to unacceptable behaviour will be appropriate to their needs and demonstrate regard for the provisions of the Equality Act 2010.

8. Complaints Stage One

- 8.1 When a formal complaint is made, it is acknowledged and logged at stage one of the complaints procedure within five days of receipt. The Resolution Coordinator will acknowledge all complaints and set out our understanding of the complaint and the outcomes the customer is seeking. If any part of the complaint is unclear, we will ask for further information from the customer to ensure all elements of the complaint are clear and understood by both parties.
- 8.2 The Complaint Handler will contact the customer within three working days of the complaint being formally logged to discuss the issues raised unless the customer states this part of the procedure is not required.
- 8.3 We will respond to a complaint within ten working days of it being logged. On occasion we may require more time to full investigate the complaint; if we require an extension beyond ten days, we will provide an explanation to the customer containing a clear timeframe and reasons for the extension. This should not exceed a further ten days without good reason.
- 8.4 If an extension beyond twenty working days is required to enable us to respond to the complaint fully, this will be agreed with the customer.
- 8.5 Where agreement over an extension period cannot be reached, we will provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details so the customer can challenge our plan for responding and/or the proposed timeliness of our response.
- 8.6 Where the problem is a recurring issue, we will consider any older reports as part of the background to the complaint if this helps to resolve the issue for the customer.
- 8.7 When the complaint investigation is complete, we will send a response to the customer addressing all points raised, providing clear reasons for any decisions, outlining any actions taken or required and referencing any relevant policy, law and good practice where appropriate.
- 8.8 Actions required will be tracked and actioned with regular updates provided to the customer.
- 8.9 Where customers raise additional issues 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 may be logged as a new complaint.

8.10 We will confirm the following in writing to the customer at the completion of stage one

- The complaint stage
- The decision on 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 to stage two if the resident is not satisfied with the answer

8.11 At any time, we may offer or agree to a request from the customer to refer the matter to mediation.

9. Complaints Stage Two

9.1 If all or part of the complaint is not resolved to the customer's satisfaction at stage one, customers can progress to stage two of our complaints process unless an exclusion applies.

9.2 Customers wishing to progress to stage two of the formal complaint's procedure must make a request within twenty working days of receiving the stage one decision letter. The request must clearly outline why they believe their complaint has not been investigated and resolved.

9.3 In instances where we decline to escalate a complaint, we will clearly communicate in writing our reasons for not escalating as well as the customer's right to approach the Ombudsman about our decision.

9.4 We may refuse to escalate a complaint if:

- The stage two complaint is outside of the 20-day time period outlined in the stage one response
- The complaint relates to any active legal proceedings

9.5 When we receive a request to progress to stage two, we will set out our understanding of issues outstanding and the outcomes the customer is seeking. If we are unsure about any aspect of the complaint, we will ask the customer for

further information to ensure all elements of the complaint are agreed by both parties.

- 9.6 We will only escalate a complaint to stage two once it has completed stage one and at the request of the customer.
- 9.7 The person considering the complaint at stage two, will not be the same person that considered the complaint at stage one.
- 9.8 Notification of any complaint review meetings will be made within ten working days of the escalation to stage two. We will give the customer at least ten working days' notice of the date, time and venue of the meeting and every attempt will be made to meet the customer's preferences in setting these dates.
- 9.9 We will respond to the stage two complaint within twenty working days of the complaint being escalated. On occasion, we may need an extension to this timeframe to fully investigate the complaint; if this is the case, we provide a clear explanation to the customer with clear timeframes for the extension. This will not exceed a further 10 days without good reason.
- 9.10 If an extension beyond ten working days is required to enable us to respond to the complaint fully, this will be agreed by both parties.
- 9.11 Where agreement over an extension period cannot be reached, we will provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details so the customer can challenge our plan for responding and/or the proposed timeliness of our response.
- 9.12 We will confirm the following in writing to the customer at the completion of stage two
- The complaint stage
 - The details of the complaint
 - The decision on the complaint
 - A clear explanation of how that decision has been reached
 - The details of any remedy offered to put things right
 - Details of any outstanding actions
- 9.13 At any time, we may offer or agree to a request from the customer to refer the matter to mediation.

10. Putting Things Right

- 10.1 Where something has gone wrong, we will acknowledge this and set out the actions we have already taken, or intend to take, to put things right.
- 10.2 When offering a remedy, we will consider the extent of any service failures and the level of detriment caused to the customer as a result.
- 10.3 We will address any failure of system or process to benefit all customers.
- 10.4 Factors we may consider in formulating a remedy can include, but are not limited to, the:
- Length of time that a situation has been ongoing
 - Frequency with which something has occurred
 - Severity of any service failure or omission
 - Number of different failures
 - Cumulative impact on the resident
 - Resident's particular circumstances or vulnerabilities
- 10.5 Any remedy offer will clearly set out what will happen and by when, in agreement with the customer where appropriate. Any remedy proposed will be followed through to completion.
- 10.6 If awarding compensation, we will consider whether any statutory payments are due, if any quantifiable losses have been incurred and any time, trouble, distress or inconvenience the customer may have experienced.
- 10.7 In some cases, a customer may have a legal entitlement to redress. We will still offer a resolution where possible, obtaining legal advice where appropriate.

11. Continuous Learning and Improvement

- 11.1 Accountability and transparency are integral to our complaint handling. We report back on wider learning and improvements from complaints in our annual report, to our customers and colleagues.
- 11.2 We follow a Listen, Learn and Act complaint framework. Senior management meet monthly to review learnings from complaints and identify improvement opportunities.

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- 11.3 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 training.

12. Self-Assessment and Compliance

- 12.1 We will conduct an annual self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman Code to ensure our complaint handling remains in line with its requirements.
- 12.2 We will also conduct a self-assessment following a significant restructure and/or change in procedures.
- 12.3 Following each self-assessment, we will:
- Report the outcome of our self-assessment to the governing body
 - Publish the outcome of our assessment on our website
 - Include the self-assessment in our annual report section on complaints handling performance

13. Responsibility

- 13.1 The Governing Body is responsible for the effective implementation of this Policy.
- 13.2 Senior Management will be responsible for ensuring that all employees within their teams are aware of and are appropriately trained in our Policy and Procedures for dealing with enquiries and complaints.
- 13.3 The Customer Contact Manager is responsible for ensuring any requests for training on the complaint's procedure are actioned and delivered as required.
- 13.4 The day-to-day administration of issues raised under this policy will be conducted by the Resolutions Coordinator and the Complaint Handler.

14. Service Standards

- 14.1 When customers Talk to Us, we promise we will:
- Keep them informed at all stages
 - Aim to resolve their complaint as effectively as possible
 - Provide them with a clear explanation of how the complaint will be dealt with
 - Keep to the set timescales as outlined in the procedure

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- Ensure the complaint is dealt with in accordance with the Protection and Retention Policy

14.2 We will acknowledge the request within three working days by telephone or email to advise the customer what will happen next. We will confirm our understanding of the complaint and the outcome the customer is seeking for full clarification.

14.3 Working days are classed as weekdays, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday 09:00 to 17:00. Bank Holidays and weekends are not classed as working days.

15. Formal Enquiries

15.1 Responses to any formal enquiry received as part of the formal procedure should be made within ten working days. This should not exceed a further ten days without good reason.

16. Informal Complaints

16.1 Responses to any informal complaint received as part of the informal procedure should be made within five working days. If the customer is dissatisfied with the outcome, then this shall progress to a stage one complaint.

17. Compliments

17.1 Wherever appropriate, we will ensure that any positive feedback on an individual's or team's performance is relayed to both the customer and relevant employees.

17.2 Compliments regarding employees will be forwarded to HR within ten working days of receipt.

18. Performance Measures / Monitoring

18.1 Complaints are measured and reported on monthly to the senior management team. We measure total number of informal and formal complaints received and dealt with within timescale, including learning outcomes as well as action to drive service improvement.

19. Consultation Arrangements

19.1 The Customer Forum has reviewed the Talk to Us Policy.

20. Benchmark Analysis

20.1 In addition to internal performance monitoring, Talk to Us data will be shared with our Customer Forum quarterly. We benchmark and share best practice with members of the Northwest regional complaint forum.

21. Regulatory and/or Legal Compliance

21.1 This Complaints Policy ensures compliance with The Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code 1st April 2022. This policy complies with the Regulator of Social Housing's 'Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard' which states:

21.2 *"Registered providers shall... have an approach to complaints that is clear, simple and accessible that ensures that complaints are resolved promptly, politely and fairly."*

21.3 We will continue to be mindful of and look to comply with the requirements of this and any other related standard as it implements this policy.

22. Diversity Considerations

22.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been conducted on the Talk to Us Policy, Procedure and Leaflet. It concluded that the Policy is not directly or indirectly discriminatory.

23. Business Impact

23.1 Should this policy not be correctly followed, we could after investigation, be found maladministration by the Housing Ombudsman, which would have a detrimental impact on our reputation.

24. Link to Policy

24.1 This is an operational procedure overarching all services provided by Halton Housing.

24.2 The following documents are linked to this Policy.

- Talk to Us Procedure

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- Asset Management Strategy
 - Compensation Policy
 - Customer Code of Conduct
 - Employee Code of Conduct
 - Equality & Diversity in Employment Policy
 - Absence Management Policy
 - Adaptations Policy
 - Anti-Social Behaviour & Hate Crime Policy
 - Customer Engagement Policy
 - Data Protection Policy
 - Domestic Abuse Policy
 - Learning and Development Policy
 - Property Pool Plus (Allocations) Policy
 - Rent Collection, Payments and Debt Recovery Policy
 - Diversity Policy
 - Single Equality Scheme
 - Use of Warning Markers Policy
 - Repairs Policy
 - Vexatious Customer Procedure
 - Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code & self-assessment form
 - Translation & Interpretation Services – Briefing Note



Translations available on request by phoning 0303 333 0101 or
via email at info@haltonhousing.org

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