

Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions Policy

Policy statement

One of our key strategic aims is to deliver an excellent customer service. However sometimes things can go wrong and customers may choose to raise a complaint.

This policy explains how we deal with complaints, compliments and suggestions. At 54North, we recognise all customer feedback as valuable insight. This enables us to understand where we're doing well and where there is opportunity for improvement.

Definitions

A '**customer**' can be a tenant, leaseholder or any person, group or organisation who has reason to make a complaint, compliment or suggestion.

An '**advocate**' is customer's designated representative. This could be an MP, Councillor, third party or a family member

A '**service request**' is a request for one of the services we offer customers, such as a request for a repair or reporting antisocial behaviour. It may also be a query for information or an explanation, or a request to put something right. Service requests are not complaints. Where a customer is dissatisfied with our approach to resolve the issue, or the outcome, they will be given the opportunity to make a complaint.

A '**complaint**' 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".

'**Stage 1**' is the entry point to our complaints service. The emphasis is on resolving problems and putting things right with the minimum of delay. If a customer is unsatisfied with the response provided at stage 1, they may request that their complaint is escalated to '**Stage 2**' of our process.

A '**compliment**' is an expression of satisfaction with a service that we have provided, or regarding an individual colleague or team. A '**suggestion**' is an idea to change the way we deliver our services for the benefit of all customers.

1.0 Purpose of policy

1.1 The purpose of this policy is to set out how 54North Homes deals with complaints, compliments and suggestions.

1.0 Objectives of policy

1.2 54North is committed to providing an excellent customer service, through the effective handling and learning from complaints, compliments and suggestions.

1.3 The policy aims to provide an accessible, clear, consistent, fair and customer focused complaint experience, enabled through a positive complaint handling culture. We'll seek to listen, act, and make appropriate remedies in a timely fashion, which may include adapting to the individual customer or case.

1.4 To assure compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.

2.0 Complaints

How we communicate how to make a complaint

2.1 We want to ensure all customers can raise a complaint when they want to and the process is clear and easy to follow. To do this we:

- Provide information in our starter packs for new tenancies.
- Have a dedicated section on our website.
- Have a customer leaflet on how to make a complaint, including an easy read format and this is available in other formats on request.
- We have a customer audio video, to explain how to make a complaint.

How customers raise a complaint

2.2 We offer a range of ways for customers to express a complaint:

- By telephone on 0345 521 1997, between 8.30am and 5pm, Monday to Friday
- By email at hello@54northhomes.co.uk
- In writing to our Head Office address: Alpha Court, Monks Cross Drive, Huntington, York, YO32 9WN
- With any 54North colleague, who will pass this to the appropriate person
- Direct messaging via 54North's social media pages, using X (formerly Twitter) Direct Message and Facebook Messenger
- Via a Councillor, MP or other relevant third party (e.g., Housing Ombudsman or consumer rights organisation) or advocate

2.3 Customers are asked to explain; what they are unhappy with, the reasons for this and what they would like us to do about it. If they are unable to do this, we will use the information available to us.

The Housing Ombudsman

- 2.4 Customers can obtain advice from the Ombudsman throughout a complaint. Acknowledgement, extension and response letters contain their contact details.
- 2.5 Customers can escalate a complaint to the Ombudsman for investigation if they have completed stage 2 of our complaint process and the issues have not been resolved to their satisfaction.
- 2.6 The Ombudsman can be contacted by calling 0300 111 3000, emailing info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk, online at www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk or in writing to Housing Ombudsman Service, PO Box 152, Liverpool, L33 7WQ.

Who can complain to 54North

- 2.7 Anyone who receives a product or service from us, or anyone affected by a service that we provide.
- 2.8 A complaint made on behalf of multiple customers can be treated as one complaint. Communications will be directed to the nominated representative. We will seek permission from all customers in a group issue before we employ this approach.
- 2.9 Customers may have an advocate or representative complain their behalf.

Complaints we will investigate

- 2.10 In line with the Complaint Handling Code, we recognise complaints as:
- “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.”
- 2.11 This is a non-exhaustive list, illustrating the types of complaints we will consider:
- We fail to provide a service
 - We fail to deliver a service on time
 - We fail to achieve the required standards or quality of a service
 - A colleague/s attitudes, actions or lack of actions relating to a service.
- 2.12 A customer does not have to use the word ‘complaint’ for it to be treated as one. If a customer expresses dissatisfaction, we will give them the option to make complaint.
- 2.13 A complaint will be raised at the customer’s request, even if the handling of the service request remains ongoing. We will not stop acting on a service request if the customer complains.

- 2.14 Complaints must be raised within 12 months, as close as possible to when the issue first arose or when the customer first became aware of the problem.
- 2.15 If a customer wishes to proceed to the next stage, we ask them to do this as close as possible of receiving the stage 1 decision or within 12 months.

What is excluded by this policy?

- 2.16 Complaints will be considered in it's individual circumstances and will only be excluded if there is a valid reason to do so. If we decide not to accept a complaint, we will record our reasoning, explain these to the customer and their right to take that decision to the Ombudsman.
- 2.17 Unless there is good reason, complaints excluded from our complaints process are:
- A request for a service, which is deemed to be a 'Service Request'
 - The issue giving rise to the complaint occurred over twelve months ago
 - Legal proceedings have started. This is defined as details of the claim, such as the Claim Form and Particulars of Claim, having been filed at court
 - Issues that have previously been considered under the complaints policy
 - Concerns regarding annual rent and service charge increases, which must be escalated through the First Tier Tribunal.
 - Services not within our control e.g. Utility Companies, Local Authorities
 - Complaints about our money advice service. Customers who wish to complain about this service must follow the separate guidance in Appendix 1.

The complaints process has two stages

- 2.18 Stage 1 is the entry point to our complaints process. The emphasis is on resolving problems and putting things right as quickly as possible.
- 2.19 If all or part of the complaint is not resolved to the customer's satisfaction at stage 1, it will be escalated to stage 2. Customers can request for their complaint to be escalated to stage 2 with the person hearing their stage 1, or by any of the other contact methods listed in section 2.2. Stage 2 is our final response.

The role of the complaint handler

- 2.20 A different complaint handler is allocated at each stage, to investigate and respond.
- 2.21 The complaint handler must:
- deal with complaints on their merits, act independently, and have an open mind
 - give the customer a fair chance to set out their position
 - take measures to address any actual or perceived conflict of interest
 - consider all relevant information and evidence carefully
 - treat all customers with fairness, empathy and respect

- support vulnerable customers through identification of their needs and agreement on reasonable adjustments.
- 2.22 Engaging with the customer as appropriate, they will clarify, record and act on:
- What the complaint is about – the complaint definition
 - If appropriate, what elements we are not responsible for
 - The evidence needed to fully consider the issues
 - Any risks the complaint raises
 - What outcome/s would resolve the matter for the customer
 - Any customer vulnerabilities and any agreed reasonable adjustments for the complaint, including an explanation for adjustments we cannot make
 - Any urgent action/s that need to be taken.
- 2.23 They will consider the context of the complaint including factors in 2.21 and 2.22, and the customer’s preferences, to consider which complaints can be responded to as early as possible, and which require further investigation.
- 2.24 Appropriate remedies can be provided at any stage of the complaint and we will continue to resolve issues alongside any necessary investigation. This is without prejudicing consideration of the complaint or delaying the response timescales.
- 2.25 They will agree with the customer the frequency and method of communication and then maintain contact as agreed. Where a response will fall outside original timescales, they will agree with the customer how they will keep them informed.
- 2.26 The complaint handler will ensure a full record of the complaint is maintained on our system. This will include the original complaint, date received, all correspondence with the customer and relevant parties, any supporting documentation such as reports or surveys, outcomes at each stage and any learnings.
- 2.27 The complaint handler will oversee all remaining actions, including any remedies, closing the complaint once these have been completed.

Complaint handling standards

- 2.28 We will comply with the following standards at **stage 1**:
- Complaints are defined, logged and acknowledged within five working days of being raised.
 - Stage 1 cases are heard by a Team Leader or Manager.
 - We offer to speak to the customer to assist in investigating their concerns.
 - We give the customer a chance to comment on any adverse findings before a final decision is made.
 - We respond to stage 1 complaints in writing within ten working days of acknowledgement.
 - With good reason, the complaint can be extended up to another ten working days by 54North and the complaint lead will inform the customer of why this is.

- 2.29 We will comply with the following standards at **stage 2**:
- Complaints are defined, logged and acknowledged within five working days of being raised.
 - Stage 2 cases are heard by Assistant Director, or Director. This hearing will also include a customer member of the Customer Experience Committee.
 - We offer to speak to the customer to assist in investigating their concerns.
 - We give the customer a chance to comment on any adverse findings before a final decision is made.
 - We respond to stage 2 complaints in writing within twenty working days of acknowledgement.
 - With good reason, the complaint can be extended up to another twenty working days by 54North, the complaint lead will inform the customer of why this is.

Responding to a complaint – at both stages

- 2.30 We will provide a complaint response when this is known, in line with our published timescales. Complaints will be responded to, where rectification plans are in place but may not have been concluded. This means not waiting for the completion of outstanding actions (e.g. outstanding repairs), so that reasonable complaint process timescales are achieved. Cases are closed once all actions are completed.
- 2.31 Where a customer raises additional issues during the investigation, these will be incorporated into the response if they are related and the response has not been issued. Where the response has been issued, the new issues are unrelated to the issues already being investigated or it would unreasonably delay the response, the new issues will be logged as a new complaint.
- 2.32 We categorise final decisions about complaints as one of three outcomes:
- Upheld – we agree the complaint was justified, in its entirety.
 - Partly upheld – we agree the complaint was justified in at least one element.
 - Not upheld – we do not agree that the complaint was justified.
- 2.33 Where something has gone wrong, any remedy reflects the impact of all failures on the customer. This may include apologising, acknowledging, explaining, taking action, changing something and compensation.

Escalating a stage 1 complaint to stage 2

- 2.34 Customers can ask to escalate their complaint when stage 1 concludes if all or part of the complaint is not resolved to their satisfaction.
- 2.35 We will escalate a complaint unless there is a valid reason not to do so. Each case will be considered on its own merits.
- 2.36 Customers are asked, but not required to explain their reasons for requesting escalation to stage 2, so the investigation can address these concerns.

Escalating a complaint after stage 2

- 2.37 After conclusion of stage 2, the customer can ask the Ombudsman to consider investigating the complaint if they remain dissatisfied.
- 2.38 Leaseholders may refer their complaint to the First Tier Property Tribunal in cases of lease or service charge disputes.
- 2.39 For complaints about a high-rise residential building, relating to structural failure and spread of fire (building safety risks) or the performance of an accountable person, can be referred to the Building Safety Regulator.

Handling a complaint differently

- 2.40 We may deal with a complaint differently (outside this policy). This would be if circumstances required us to act in the customer's best interests.
- 2.41 If there is a need to deal with a complaint differently, we will agree this with the customer, record why this is, and confirm this in writing or in an appropriate way.
- 2.42 If a complaint is raised or escalated outside of the 12 months, we apply discretion to accept those outside this time limit, where there are good reasons to do so.
- 2.43 For customers requiring adjustments, together we will consider options and agree what is reasonable in the circumstances, keeping this under review, examples are:
- Adding more ways to raise a complaint
 - Pausing a complaint
 - Allowing more time at each stage of the complaint for customers to respond
 - Allowing customers to communicate in ways as they need to
 - Providing replies and information in a different format
 - Providing translation services for documents and discussions
 - Allowing complaints raised or supported through a customer's designated advocate. This could be an MP, Councillor, third party or a family member. Support may include representing or accompanying customers in meetings.
- 2.44 Our Unacceptable Customer Behaviour Policy sets out our approach to managing the very few customers whose actions or behaviour are considered unacceptable. If a customer's behaviour is hampering the progress of the complaint, this will be explained to them, to get to a position to respond to their complaint. Where this persists, we will conclude the complaint based on available information.

If we are unable to comply with the Code due to exceptional circumstances, such as a cyber incident, we will inform the Ombudsman, provide information to customers who may be affected and publish this on our website. This includes sharing a timescale for returning to compliance with the Code.

3.0 Continuous Learning and Improvement

- 3.1 Annually we will self-assess our complaint handling against the Code, submitting this to the Ombudsman. It will also be completed following a significant restructure, merger, change in procedures, or following an Ombudsman investigation if asked.
- 3.2 On a quarterly basis, information will be reported to the Executive Leadership Team and Customer Experience Committee. The report will include all complaints, compliments and suggestion performance outlined in 'Key performance measures'.
- 3.3 Annually, information will also be shared with 54North's Board. The report will include all complaints, compliments and suggestion performance outlined in 'Key performance measures'. The board response will be published on our website alongside the report.
- 3.4 The Chair of the 54North Customer Experience Committee, as a member of our Board, is appointed to have lead responsibility for complaints to support a positive complaint handling culture. This 'Member Responsible for Complaints' oversees the complaints performance and leads on the board's response.

4.0 Compliments

- 4.1 Compliments can be made by any of the methods outlined in section 2.2.
- 4.2 A record of all reported compliments will be held on our computer system.

5.0 Suggestions

- 5.1 Suggestions can be made by any of the methods outlined in section 2.2.
- 5.2 A record of all reported suggestions will be held on our computer system.

6.0 Policy Monitoring and Review

- 6.1 This policy will be reviewed every three years, by Karbon's Assistant Director of Customer Experience, delegated by the Executive Director of Customer Service. The review will be brought forward if there are significant changes to the Complaint Handling Code, or to comply with regulatory or legislative requirements.
- 6.2 The Executive Director for Customer Services is responsible for delegating the monitoring, review and implementation of this policy.

7.0 Equality and Diversity

- 7.1 This policy is applied in line with our Equality and Diversity Policy and the associated legislation including the Public Sector Equality Duty and Equality Act 2010. At 54North we aim to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, foster good relations and define the nine protected characteristics of age, disability, gender

reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation.

- 7.2 However, we like to go even further. Beyond these protected characteristics we also take into consideration additional factors such as socio-economic status and language barriers which may also play a part. Our vision is for everyone to be treated fairly, have equality of opportunities, freedom, respect and access to our services.
- 7.3 To help us achieve this, we will work to improve accessibility for all, offering reasonable adjustments, adaptations and discussing ways that we can work to remove any barriers. A reasonable adjustment involves making a change to the way that we usually do things.
- 7.4 All of our customer policies and key information are made available on the 54North Homes website. Reasonable adjustments that can help, for example to make our information and services more accessible, are sign language and language interpreters. We will work to improve accessibility for everybody that we deal with offering reasonable adjustments, adaptations and discussing ways that we can work to remove barriers that you may experience.
- 7.5 We work together to look at options and agree what adjustments would be reasonable in our customer's individual circumstances.

8.0 Data Protection and Privacy

- 8.1 We have a clear policy on data protection and sharing data with other partners/third parties under the requirements of the UK General Data Protection Regulation, the Data Protection Act 2018 and other associated legislation. This is clearly set out in the Data Protection Policy for the 54North Homes which, along with its associated procedures, must be followed throughout the operation of this policy.