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**Comments, Compliments and Complaints**

**(Feedback) Policy**

1. **Introduction**

Our clients' opinions truly matter to us as well as those of individuals who interact with our organisation. If we've made a mistake, we're committed to making it right. Conversely, when we deliver exceptional customer service, we want to acknowledge and celebrate that achievement. Through this process, we continuously learn and strive for improvement.

This policy outlines our approach to receiving, addressing, and resolving comments, compliments, and most specifically complaints within our organisation and applies to all stakeholders, including but not limited to clients, tenants, contractors, and any other individuals or entities engaging with our organisation.

1. **Policy Aims**

The aims of this policy are to:

* foster a culture of transparency and accountability within our organisation by providing clear guidelines for stakeholders to submit feedback and ensuring that all feedback is handled promptly, impartially, and with accountability.
* ensure that all comments, compliments, and complaints are addressed in a fair, objective, and effective manner, with appropriate actions taken to resolve issues, address grievances, prevent recurrence and share best practice.
* identify areas for improvement in practices, and policies, facilitating continuous improvement and enhancing stakeholder satisfaction.
* ensure compliance with regulatory requirements and best practices in complaint handling.

1. **Statutory and Regulatory Responsibility**

This policy ensures that our organisation recognises and meets the regulatory and statutory obligations as set out in the:

* Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023
* Regulator of Social Housing’s Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard
* Housing Ombudsman and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code April 2024.
* Data Protection Act 2018
* Equality Act 2010

We’ll deliver these codes by:

* Having a consistent and impartial framework for dealing with complaints,

compliments and feedback.

* Encouraging client feedback both great and not so great.
* Resolving service issues at the first point of contact where possible.
* Giving colleagues and clients clear guidance, on how complaints, compliments and feedback will be dealt with.
* Using complaints as an opportunity to rebuild trust with our clients.
* Training colleagues to ensure fair complaint handling and investigation.
* Using insight and learning from complaints, compliments and feedback to shape and improve our service.
* Making literature available in various alternative formats, such as large print and other languages.

1. **Policy Details and Definitions**
   1. **What is a Complaint?**

In line with the Housing Ombudsman Service Complaints Handling Code, we define a complaint as, *‘an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the landlord, its own staff, or those acting on its behalf, affecting a resident or group of residents.’*

The above description aligns with the definition of a complaint outlined by the Housing Ombudsman Service, which is imperative for ensuring compliance with the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.

Where the term "resident" is used by the Housing Ombudsman, in our policy, it encompasses any stakeholder. Specifically, we refer to the individual lodging the complaint, addressed as the "complainant" within our context.

An individual does not have to use the word “complaint” for us to act, any expression of dissatisfaction will be considered a complaint, even if the individual does not explicitly use the term ‘complaint’.

Complaints made to us through a third party or representative, such as an MP, on behalf of our clients will also be managed under this policy.

* 1. **What is a Service Request?**

As detailed in Section 1.4 of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code 2024, we acknowledge the distinction between a service request and a complaint.

We define a service request as a call to action from a client for us to put something right. Service requests are not complaints. Service requests typically involve request for repairs, maintenance, inspections, safety, and security such as installing smoke alarms, the key element is that they are all related to maintaining the habitability, safety, and functionality of the customer’s home.

We will only log a client complaint when the client expresses dissatisfaction with a service request, at the same time we will continue to action the service request.

* 1. **What is a Compliment?**

A compliment is an expression of praise or admiration; this can be expressed towards an individual or service.

Compliments make our day, who doesn't appreciate receiving positive feedback! They do not require a formal response and we’ll pass on any compliments we receive to the colleague and their manager. We’ll record these for sharing more widely and use them to identify areas of good practice that our organisation can learn from.

* 1. **What are Comments and Concerns?**

There may be times when individuals don’t want to make a complaint but want to comment and make suggestions about how our organisation could do things differently or better.

Concerns are issues which may require further enquiry, advice, or information to resolve them. These are often best dealt with by the service in which the concern originated.

When a concern is raised which cannot be satisfactorily resolved without an investigation, it will be processed as a complaint. An individual has the option to turn their concern into a formal complaint at any point, and we will pro-actively give guidance on how best to do this.

Comments and concerns will be shared with service teams and recorded so that we can learn and improve.

1. **Making a Complaint**

We recognise that there are times when we may make mistakes or fail to meet the high standards of service our clients and stakeholders anticipate. In such instances, we aim to address these issues or complaints promptly and efficiently, with straightforward and transparent procedures in place.

We maintain a standard objective concerning complaint handling for all relevant employees or third parties, that reflects the need to:

* have a collaborative and co-operative approach towards resolving complaints, working with colleagues across teams and departments.
* take collective responsibility for any shortfalls identified through complaints, rather than blaming others; and
* act within the professional standards for engaging with complaints as set by any relevant professional body.

Individuals can make a complaint (or share a compliment or comment):

* In person to any colleague
* By letter sent direct to the service or to our Head Office: Inspire North, 3 Limewood Way, Leeds, LS14 1AB
* By completing our Feedback Form (seeappendix A) which is also available to download or print off from our websites
* By telephone (see websites for service phone numbers)
* By email [info@inspirenorth.co.uk](mailto:info@inspirenorth.co.uk)
* By using the electronic complaints forms on our websites:
  + [www.communitylinks.co.uk](http://www.communitylinks.co.uk)
  + [www.foundationuk.org](http://www.foundationuk.org)
  + [www.inspirenorth.co.uk](http://www.inspirenorth.co.uk)

When making a complaint we recommend including the following information:

* Name (we can accept anonymous complaints however this removes the ability for us to respond directly to the complainant).
* Contact details including address, email, and phone number.
* The service, employee and/or issue the complaint relates to.
* The details of the complaint, including any supporting documents. If there are several issues it is useful to list these so we can ensure we investigate each issue raised.
* The preferred outcome to the complaint.
* The preferred way to contact the complainant.

We have a feedback form (see appendix A) which can be used and helps ensure we capture all the information required.

At any stage, an individual can have a representative to deal with their complaint on their behalf and to be represented or accompanied at a meeting we may arrange.

This support could be from a friend, carer or agency (e.g. advocate). If the complainant requires support to arrange this, we can provide details of advocacy organisations. We can also arrange interpreters if required.

At each stage of the complaints process, we will:

* deal with complaints on their merits, act independently, and have an open mind.
* give the complainant a fair chance to set out their position.
* take measures to address any actual or perceived conflict of interest; and
* consider all relevant information and evidence carefully.

If a complaint involves a third party, we may need to share details for investigation, and if sensitive, we'll consult with the complainant before disclosure.

* 1. **The Complaints Resolution Process**

We will accept complaints referred to us within 12 months of the issue occurring or the individual becoming aware of the issue.

If a complaint alleges harassment or abuse, we will follow the procedures outlined in our safeguarding policies. We'll promptly assess if there are any immediate safeguarding concerns raised and take immediate action if needed.

We will always accept a complaint unless there is a valid reason not to do so.

Each complaint will be assessed independently, considering its unique circumstances. Acceptable exclusions include situations where:

* the matter prompting the complaint occurred more than twelve months ago.
* legal proceedings have commenced, which is defined as the filing of details of the claim, such as the Claim Form and Particulars of Claim, at court.
* the issue have been previously addressed under the complaints policy; these will not be revisited.

If we decide not to accept a complaint, an explanation will be provided to the complainant setting out the reasons why the matter is not suitable for the complaints process and the right to take that decision to the Ombudsman.

Individuals have the right to access the services of both the Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman at all stages of their complaint.

A full record will be kept of the complaint, and the outcomes at each stage. This will include the original complaint and the date received, all correspondence with the complainant, correspondence with other parties, and any relevant supporting documentation.

We operate a **two-stage** complaint resolution process:

* + 1. **Stage 1 Complaint Investigation and Resolution**

An Investigating Officer, typically a Project or Service Manager, will be assigned to investigate and address the complaint. In cases where the complaint involves a Project or Service Manager, it will be assigned to a more senior manager at Stage 1.

The Investigating Officer will acknowledge the complaint in writing **within 5 working days** from the day the complaint is received.

The acknowledgement will include:

* The name and contact details of the investigating officer.
* The timescale and deadline for a full response.
* An offer to meet or speak by telephone.
* Outline the ‘complaint definition’, this is an outline of our understanding of the complaint and the outcomes the individual is seeking.
* A copy of the complaints leaflet.

If the complainant wishes to meet, or speak, with the Investigating Officer this will be arranged as soon as practicable, considering the deadline for a full response.

The Investigating Officer will carefully review each issue raised within the complaint and collaborate with the complainant to establish a clear "complaint definition," ensuring mutual agreement. This process involves:

* Reviewing and acknowledging the preferred outcome expressed by the complainant.
* Planning the scope of the investigation to address all relevant aspects of the complaint.
* Obtaining and assessing any pertinent evidence or documentation to inform the investigation.
* Conducting interviews with other parties involved, such as employees or witnesses, to gather additional insights.
* Maintaining a thorough record of each action taken and meeting conducted as part of the investigation process.

We aim to deal with Stage 1 complaints within **10 working days of the complaint being acknowledged**.

We will assess each complaint and aim to respond to them as early as possible. If this isn’t possible, we’ll extend the complaint giving a clear explanation to the complainant and details of when a response will be received. We will also include the relevant Ombudsman’s contact details.

This will not exceed **10 working days** without good reason. The Investigating Officer will agree with the complainant suitable intervals for keeping them informed about their complaint and give them an opportunity to comment on findings before a decision is made.

Where a complainant raises additional points during the investigation, these will be incorporated into our stage 1 response if they are related, and the stage 1 response **has not** been issued.

Where we have already issued the stage 1 response, and the new issues are unrelated to the issues that have already been investigated, or it would unreasonably delay the response, the issues will be logged as a **new complaint**.

At the completion of Stage 1 (when the answer to the complaint is known), we will communicate with the complainant in writing and provide them with the following information:

* the complaint stage.
* the complaint definition.
* address all the points raised in the complaint definition.
* 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 and how often we’ll update the complainant on these, to ensure actions are completed satisfactorily.
* details of how to escalate the matter to stage 2 if dissatisfied with our response.
* relevant Ombudsman contact details
  + 1. **Stage 2 Complaint Investigation and Resolution**

If an individual believes we have failed to resolve all or part of their complaint to their satisfaction, then they can ask for an escalation to Stage 2 of our complaints process.

This is our final response. Individuals are not required to explain their reasons for requesting a Stage 2 consideration. We’ll log, define, and acknowledge a Stage 2 complaint **within five working days of the complainant’s request to escalate**.

We’ll make reasonable efforts to understand why the individual remains unhappy and what they are expecting from the Stage 2 review.

A more senior manager, not previously involved with the complaint, will be assigned as the Investigating Officer, and will carry out a robust review of the complaint. The review will usually be restricted to the matters included in the stage 1 complaint unless we decide otherwise, for example where they relate directly to the original complaint. Any new issues not dealt with as part of stage 2, will need to be dealt with as a new complaint.

The Investigating Officer at Stage 2 will be responsible for:

* Understanding the issues and the outcome sought.
* Reviewing the stage 1 investigation and actions to assess whether we have met our responsibilities.
* Identify any additional actions that may be required to ensure that the complaint can be resolved.

We aim to deal with Stage 2 complaints within **20 working days of the complaint being acknowledged**. If this isn’t possible, we’ll extend the complaint giving a clear explanation and details of when a response will be received.

The extension details will be communicated to the complainant in writing and in this communication, we will also include the relevant Ombudsman’s contact details. This will not exceed **20 working days** without good reason.

The Investigating Officer will keep in touch with the complainant throughout the process and give them an opportunity to comment on findings before a decision is made.

At the completion of Stage 2 (when the answer to the complaint is known), we will communicate with the complainant in writing.

We will address all points raised in the complaint definition and provide clear reasons for any decisions, referencing the relevant policy, law, and good practice where appropriate. Our response will include:

* the complaint stage.
* the ‘complaint definition’, this is an outline of our understanding of the complaint and the outcomes the individual is seeking.
* 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; and
* details of how to escalate the matter to the relevant Ombudsman if the individual remains dissatisfied.

In cases where the decision is that no further action is required and all reasonable and appropriate measures have been taken, the complainant will be notified that they have reached the end of the process. We will also provide advice on the next available steps.

1. **Complaint Remedies and Resolutions**

We strive to ensure that any remedy provided in response to a complaint aligns with the severity of any service failures and the resulting impact on the complainant or individuals involved. Remedies may include:

* Acknowledging where things have gone wrong.
* Providing an explanation, assistance, or reasons why a certain approach was taken.
* Apologising.
* Taking action if there has been a delay and letting the complainant know what will happen and when.
* Reconsidering or changing a decision.
* Amending a record.
* Providing a financial remedy.
* Changing policies, procedures, or practices.

When determining suitable remedies, we will consider the guidance provided by the Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. Our offered remedies will accurately reflect the impact on the complainant or individuals affected by any identified fault.

The remedy that we offer will clearly outline the proposed actions and timelines, in agreement with the complainant, as appropriate. Furthermore, we will ensure that all remedies are followed through to completion.

1. **Complaint Escalation**

The Stage 2 outcome response is final and there is no further right of appeal within the organisation.

If the complainant remains dissatisfied, they have the right to contact and refer their complaint to the Housing Ombudsman or Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman for final review within 12 months of our Stage 2 response:

**Housing Ombudsman**

Email: info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk

Phone: 0300 111 3000

Address: PO Box 152, Liverpool, L33 7WQ

Website: <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/residents/make-a-complaint/>

**Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman**

Phone: 0300 061 0614

Address: PO Box 4771, Coventry, CV4 0EH  
Website: <https://www.lgo.org.uk/make-a-complaint/how-to-register-a-complaint>

For Social Care complaints involving clients who are also residents of ours, the Housing Ombudsman will handle these initially and, if required, forward them to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman for escalation.

1. **Compensation**

Where financial compensation is requested or is being considered, each case will be reviewed on its own merits. The Investigating Officer can agree an appropriate amount up to £100 with their Operational Manager or appropriate Director. Any recommendation for compensation above this amount should be referred to the Senior Leadership Team.

In-line with the Housing Ombudsman and Local Government and Social Care Complaint Handling Code; when awarding compensation, we will take account of the guidance issued by the Housing Ombudsman when deciding on appropriate remedies. In addition, we’ll consider whether any statutory payments or quantifiable losses have been incurred. We’ll also consider time and trouble and any distress and inconvenience caused.

1. **Unreasonable, Persistent and Vexatious Complainants**

While all complaints should be handled with empathy and patience, there may be cases where certain complainants consume a disproportionate amount of time and resources, even after thorough investigation and attempts to address their concerns. It's crucial to ensure that the complaints procedure has been correctly followed and all reasonable measures have been taken to resolve the issues raised.

Examples of this behaviour include:

* asking for responses within an unreasonable timescale.
* insisting on communicating with a particular colleague.
* continual phone calls, emails, or letters.
* repeatedly changing the substance of the complaint or raising unrelated concerns.
* refusal to co-operate with the complaint investigation process while still requesting their complaint be resolved.
* persistent refusal to accept a decision.
* persistent refusal to accept explanations relating to what the organisation can or cannot do.
* continuing to pursue a complaint case without presenting any new information.

In such circumstances, a senior manager will review the case and decide as to how future correspondence will be dealt with. It may be necessary to obtain legal advice before a decision is made.

If necessary, the complainant will receive written notification explaining the rationale behind the decision. A code of behaviour could be put in place to define mutual expectations for ongoing support within the organisation, particularly if they are currently receiving support from one of our services. This code may involve stipulations such as requiring the complainant to communicate in a specific manner (e.g., in writing only) or with a designated employee, which will be documented in their complaint record or client record, depending on whether they are a client of ours.

1. **Learning and Continuous Improvement**

We believe that fostering a culture of positive complaint handling is essential for effectively resolving disputes. At the heart of our ethos lies a genuine commitment to ongoing improvement. We understand that minor mistakes are natural in any journey, and we embrace them as chances to learn and evolve.

We are fully dedicated to gleaning insights and trends from the feedback we receive. We'll make certain that this feedback is disseminated to service teams throughout the organisation and improvements are reflected upon, updates to policies, procedures, and employee training. This approach ensures learning from individual cases, facilitating continuous improvement in our services.

We will ensure that accountability and transparency remain central to fostering a positive complaint handling culture by reporting back on wider learning and improvements from complaints to stakeholders, including client’ panels, employees, and Trustees.

We have designated a member of our team to oversee and manage all complaints received to work alongside our Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC). These individuals play a crucial role in ensuring that complaints are handled promptly, fairly, and in line with our organisation's values and the standards set forth by relevant regulatory bodies, including the Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

Once a complaint is resolved, we will invite the complainant to share their experience with us. We'll send them a brief satisfaction questionnaire to gather feedback on their experience with the complaints process.

We will use the feedback gathered through the satisfaction questionnaire to assess the effectiveness of our complaints process. This information will help us identify areas where we excel and areas where we can make improvements. By understanding the complainants' experiences, we can refine our procedures and ensure that we continue to provide a high level of service.