



Operational Manual

Corporate

Complaints

Policy

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Development**

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Hightown Housing Association (Hightown) aims to provide excellent services to all customers and to treat all customers fairly.
 - 1.1.1 For the purposes of this policy, the term "customer" refers to any person entitled to make a complaint under this policy, as outlined in point 3.6 below.
- 1.2 We recognise that sometimes things go wrong, and there will be occasions when our customers are dissatisfied and wish to complain. When this happens, we will try to address and resolve the complaint as quickly as possible to the satisfaction of the customer.
- 1.3 Hightown welcomes complaints as an opportunity to improve and develop services. We are committed to learning from customer feedback, and proactively use this to drive service improvements.
- 1.4 This policy aims to support our teams to resolve matters locally, as quickly as possible, by adopting the Housing Ombudsman's Dispute Resolution Principles of:
 - Being fair
 - Putting things right
 - Learning from outcomes
- 1.5 Complaints will be recorded, response times monitored, and outcomes analysed. We will also review diversity characteristics where the data is available and monitor access and outcomes.
- 1.6 The complaints process, including details of each stage and contact information for the Housing Ombudsman, will be publicised in leaflets and on the Hightown website, and will be included in the tenants' newsletter each spring and the Annual Report to Residents. This is also included in Welcome/Sign-up packs and displayed on Care and Supported Housing service notice boards. Information about the complaints process will also be

provided upon request and at each stage of a complaint. It will be provided in other formats (e.g. Braille, brousealoud, other languages etc upon request).

- 1.7 Staff handling complaints should make reasonable adjustments in the implementation of this policy, where required, to meet the needs of customers. Any such adjustments made to meet the needs of a customer will be clearly recorded.
- 1.8 This policy should be read in conjunction with Hightown's Compensation Policy, Dealing with Correspondence and Complaints Procedure, Equality and Diversity Policy, Responding to Correspondence from the Housing Ombudsman Procedure, and the Responding to MP and Councillor Enquiries Procedure.
- 1.9 Hightown reserves the right to use discretion when applying this policy, and may deal with a complaint differently where the individual circumstances merit it. Any discretion will be applied fairly and appropriately; complaints should be progressed as far as possible to maximise the opportunity to resolve the dispute. Authority to manage a complaint outside of the Complaints Policy rests with the relevant Director or the Chief Executive

2.0 Legal and Regulatory background

- 2.1 This policy has been developed in accordance with the following relevant legislation and best practice guidance:
 - The Localism Act 2011
 - The Housing Act 1996 (schedule 2)
 - The Equality Act 2010
 - The Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code
 - The Regulator of Social Housing's Consumer Standards (where applicable)
- 2.2 Information about customers will be collected, stored and used in accordance with Hightown's Privacy Notice for Residents, which can be found on the Hightown website.

3.0 Definitions and Scope

- 3.1 This policy applies to all staff within the Housing Directorate, the Development team, Sales team, and Care and Supported Housing (C&SH) department.
- 3.2 A complaint is defined 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".
 - 3.2.1 The customer does not have to use the word "complaint" in order for their expression of dissatisfaction to be treated as such under this policy.

- 3.3 For the purposes of this policy, the term “customer” refers to an individual who falls into the category of persons entitled to make a complaint in point 3.6 below.
- 3.4 Where a property is managed by Hightown on behalf of another Housing Association, the arrangements for making complaints under the management agreement will be made clear to customers.
- 3.5 Complaints can relate to:
- Failure in quality of service
 - Delay or failure to respond
 - Disagreement with a decision
 - A matter of Hightown’s policy or procedure not being followed
 - Dissatisfaction with the way a member of staff has dealt with an issue, including being treated unfairly
 - Dissatisfaction with a third party/contractor acting on behalf of Hightown
- 3.6 The following people are entitled to make a complaint under this policy:
- A current Hightown Tenant, Leaseholder, Shared Owner, Licensee or Service User, or someone who has a lawful “arrangement to occupy premises”
 - A former Hightown Tenant, Leaseholder, Shared Owner, licensee or Service User (if under six months since the issue or incident occurred)
 - An applicant for housing in any property, of any tenure, owned or managed by Hightown
 - C&SH Service Users who do not live in a property owned by Hightown
 - A non-legal representative/advocate of any of the above where Hightown has received their express authorisation for that person to pursue a complaint on their behalf (for example a friend or family member)
 - A non-legal representative of any of the first four people above who does not have capacity to authorise a representative to act on their behalf
 - A person with the legal capacity to make a complaint on behalf of any of the first three people above who is deceased (the Executor or Administrator of the estate).
- 3.7 Expressions of dissatisfaction from people not included in the list above will be responded to as correspondence, with an explanation that the matter is not subject to Hightown’s complaints policy but will be looked into and appropriate follow up action taken.
- 3.8 Complaints about the conduct of a member of staff will be investigated by an appropriate manager. Details of any subsequent disciplinary or capability processes will not be disclosed to the complainant.
- 3.9 The following matters are not classed as complaints under this policy:

- The issue giving rise to the complaint occurred more than six months prior to the complaint being made.
- 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. Except in Disrepair claims, where the complaints process will be offered as Alternative Dispute Resolution under clause 4.2 of the Pre-Action Protocol for Housing Repair Claims
- Requests for a service (e.g. reporting a repair or anti-social behaviour)
- Requests for advice or information
- Provision of parking
- Disputes regarding any terms and conditions of any agreement signed by the individual (e.g. tenancy agreement, lease, licence)
- Valuation levels
- Employment matters, personnel issues, internal grievances or whistleblowing (which are covered by separate policies)
- Expressions of dissatisfaction or concerns from external C&SH stakeholders (e.g. care managers, service finders, statutory professionals) about a member of C&SH staff or management, a policy, or approach to management of premises
- Where there is a commercial or contractual relationship that is not connected with the customer's application for, or occupation of, a property.
- Anonymous complaints
- Matters that have already been considered under this policy.

3.9.1 Where a matter is not eligible to be considered under this policy, a detailed explanation will be provided setting out the reasons why the matter is not suitable for the complaints process.

3.10 Complaints received via MPs or Councillors may not be dealt with under this policy if they are considered to be general enquiries or service enquiries. In such cases, the procedure for responding to MP and Councillor enquiries will be followed.

3.11 Where a customer has made a complaint which is being investigated under Hightown's formal complaints process, they may provide additional information regarding the issue where applicable. However, additional unrelated matters will not be added to an existing complaint. Where an unrelated matter meets the categories of complaints outlined above, these will be logged and investigated as a separate complaint.

4.0 Making a Complaint

4.1 We will make it as easy as possible for customers to complain and will accept complaints made in person, verbally or in writing, including by email and social media. Reasonable adjustments will be made, where appropriate, to support customers through the complaints process.

- 4.2 Where complaints are received via social media, the Communications team will alert the relevant staff member to log the complaint and make direct contact with the complainant, where they can be identified, and manage the complaint outside of the social media channel. If the customer cannot be identified, we will encourage them to make a complaint directly to us.
- 4.3 Petitions may be treated as a complaint under this policy where the majority of the signatories to the petition fall into the category of persons entitled to make a complaint (see 3.6), and where a lead petitioner has been identified. Complaint responses will be addressed to the lead petitioner with the understanding that they will disseminate the response to the other signatories.

5.0 Complaints Process

- 5.1 When a formal complaint is made, we will log it on the Complaints Log at Formal Stage One and acknowledge within five days, which will be counted from the working day after receipt.
- 5.2 The Formal Complaints process is as follows:

Stage	Complaint investigated by and responded to by	Target time for response (counted from the working day following receipt or escalation of complaint)
Stage 1	A Manager or Head of Service	10 working days
Stage 2	A Director or the Chief Executive	20 working days

- 5.3 If it is not possible for a Stage 1 or Stage 2 complaint to be responded to within the timescales above, an explanation will be given to the customer and an extension to the response deadline will be agreed with them. This should not exceed a further 10 working days without good reason.
- 5.4 At the completion of each stage of the complaints process we will write to the customer advising them of the following:
- The complaint stage
 - The outcome of the complaint
 - The reasons for any decisions made
 - The details of any remedy being offered to put things right
 - Details of any outstanding actions
 - Details of how to escalate the matter if the customer remains dissatisfied
- 5.5 All complaints will be responded to in writing, addressing all points in the complaints and providing clear reasons for any decisions. Where the customer has requested a verbal response, this will be given and confirmed in writing.

- 5.6 The person investigating a complaint at any stage should speak to or arrange a meeting with the complainant, to discuss the matter and to understanding the resolution the customer is seeking.
- 5.7 We will consider offering mediation if it is felt that this would help resolve the complaint at any stage.
- 5.8 An interpreter or other relevant support in making a complaint will be provided upon request.
- 5.9 Where the investigation into the complaint confirms that there has been a service failure, we will take reasonable steps to put it right. Where appropriate, the staff member should refer to Hightown's Compensation Policy.
- 5.10 Any remedy offered as a result of the complaint will reflect the extent of any and all service failure, and the level of detriment caused to the customer as a result. These will include:
- 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
 - Changing policies, procedures, or practices
- 5.11 Throughout the complaints process, the customer shall be given a fair opportunity to:
- set out their position
 - comment on any adverse findings before a final decision is made
- 5.12 At no stage is a response to a complaint or actions arising out of that response to be taken as legal advice or a statement of the customer's legal position. If the customer requires clarity regarding their legal position, they will be advised to seek their own independent legal advice.

6.0 Closing a Complaint

- 6.1 Complaints will be closed in the following circumstances:
- The customer specifically states that they do not wish to escalate the complaint.
 - The customer has made a complaint about service charges and remains dissatisfied following a Stage 2 response. The customer will be advised that they will need to refer the matter to the First Tier Tribunal (Property Chamber) if they wish to pursue the matter further.

- The customer refuses to, or does not, supply further information required to investigate the complaint after two requests to do so.
- A process and timescale for resolving the matter has been agreed with the customer and they have agreed closure, pending resolution.
- The customer does not contact us to advise that they wish to escalate their complaint to the next stage of the complaints process within 20 working days of the date of the response at any stage.
- If the complaint becomes the subject of legal proceedings which have started. This is defined as details of the claim, such as the Claim Form and Particulars of Claim having been filed at Court.

7.0 External Remedies

7.1 Customers who remain dissatisfied following completion of Hightown's internal complaints process may refer their complaint to an external agency.

7.1.2 Hightown will publicise details of external avenues for complaint resolution in leaflets and on our website.

7.2 The Housing Ombudsman Service

7.2.1 The Housing Ombudsman Service offers a dispute support approach which actively supports landlords and customers to find a resolution between themselves within the landlord's procedure. Customers and landlords can contact the service at any time while a complaint is going through the internal process for advice and to help find a resolution. The Ombudsman cannot make a formal decision on a case at this time.

7.2.2 The Housing Ombudsman will not usually consider complaints that have not already been through the internal complaints process. Customers wishing to refer their complaint to the Housing Ombudsman Service can do this directly following receipt of Hightown's final response.

7.2.3 There may also be occasions when the circumstances of the complaint or the customer fall outside of the legal jurisdiction of the Housing Ombudsman, and therefore they are unable to consider the complaint. The Housing Ombudsman Service is able to advise customers if this is likely to be the case.

7.2.4 Hightown will provide early advice to complainants regarding their right to access the Housing Ombudsman Service throughout their complaint, not only when the internal complaints process is exhausted.

7.3 First Tier Tribunal (Property Chamber)

7.3.1 Shared Owners and Leaseholders may apply to the First-tier Tribunal (Property Chamber) for leasehold disputes, or if statutory consultation procedures have not been correctly followed.

7.4 Care and Supported Housing

- 7.4.1 Care and Supported Housing customers receiving services which are funded by the County Council, Clinical Commissioning Group, or Health Trust may contact the relevant organisation if they are not satisfied with Hightown's response to their complaint.
- 7.4.2 The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman may consider complaints related to adult social care which have completed Hightown's internal complaints process.
- 7.4.3 Customers receiving support from a regulated service that falls within Hightown's CQC registration may wish to contact the Care Quality Commission on completion of Hightown's internal complaints process.
- 7.4.4 Details on who to approach will be provided upon request, following completion of Hightown's internal complaints process.

8.0 Monitoring and reporting

- 8.1 All complaints will be centrally logged on the Complaints Log for monitoring compliance with this policy.
- 8.2 The Annual Report to Residents will include information on the number of complaints received, lessons learned and changes made to service provision as a result of complaints.
- 8.3 The Head of Housing and Heads of Care and Supported Housing will report monthly on the number of complaints received and escalated, and the service areas to which the complaints pertain. The Directors Group monitors the monthly reports, which are also electronically available for Board members.
- 8.4 The Complaints Scrutiny Group, made up of residents and staff, meet quarterly to review how complaints not related to C&SH have been handled, to identify any trends and to recommend any further changes to working practices or policies that have not already been instigated as a result of complaints received.
- 8.5 The Residents Voice and Scrutiny Panel will receive information regarding complaints six monthly.
- 8.6 Complaints relating to Care and Supported Housing are reviewed by service users at quarterly Voicebox meetings.
- 8.7 The Operations Committee receive quarterly and annual reports on complaints performance, which includes lessons learned from complaints and changes made or proposed amendments to policy so that the learning is embedded.

- 8.8 Hightown's self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code will be reported to the Operations Committee, published on the Hightown website, and included in the Annual Report section on complaints handling performance.

Appendix 1

Unacceptable Complainant Behaviour Policy

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Hightown is committed to providing excellent services and to dealing with complaints fairly and impartially. However, on rare occasions a customer may conduct themselves in a way that is unreasonable or unacceptable.
- 1.2 A customer who is forceful or persistent when pursuing a complaint will not necessarily be considered to be acting in an unacceptable manner, and the circumstances of the complaint will be taken into consideration. However, the behaviour of some customers may be such that they are acting in an unreasonable manner or making unreasonable demands.
- 1.3 Unacceptable behaviour may be verbal, in person, physical or written.

1.3 This policy outlines the way in which Hightown will manage unacceptable behaviour from customers when making complaints.

2.0 Definitions of unacceptable behaviour

2.1 Examples of unacceptable behaviour include (this is not an exhaustive list):

2.1.1 Aggression, threats or abuse: e.g. threats, intimidation, physical aggression, derogatory remarks, inflammatory statements, personal insults, or multiple unsubstantiated allegations.

2.1.2 Unreasonable demands: e.g. unrealistic response deadlines, persistent contact (calls/letters/emails/voicemails), insistence on seeing or speaking to a particular member of staff.

2.1.3 Repeated requests for information that it is not reasonable to expect Hightown to provide (for example information Hightown does not have access to, or personal information regarding another individual).

2.1.4 Making an excessive number of complaints or requests for information.

2.1.5 Providing such a volume of supporting information that would take up an unreasonable amount of staff time to deal with.

2.1.6 Persistent refusal to accept explanations relating to what Hightown can or cannot do, or refusal to accept valid documents.

2.1.7 Continuing to pursue a closed complaint, or a complaint to which the customer has received a final response under Hightown's complaints process.

2.1.8 The customer refuses to use a single point of contact where advised.

2.1.9 The customer makes complaints about individuals to multiple other bodies and/or individuals before the outcome of, or regardless of the outcome of, the complaints procedure.

3.0 Managing Unacceptable Complainant Behaviour

3.1 Authority to manage a complaint outside of the Complaints Policy rests with the relevant Director or the Chief Executive.

3.2 The way in which unacceptable complainant behaviour will be managed depends on its nature and extent.

3.3 If the complainant's behaviour adversely affects our ability to do our work and provide a service to others, we may restrict their contact with staff or the method in which they may contact us. Wherever possible, we will do this in a way which still allows the customer to follow our complaints procedure.

- 3.4 Threats of violence, actual violence, or harassment towards any member of staff will not be tolerated. Hightown reserves the right to end all direct contact with the customer in these circumstances and the matter will be reported to the Police where appropriate. Hightown may also take legal action or enforcement action under the tenancy agreement or lease.
- 3.5 We may not deal with communication in any format which is abusive to staff, or which contains allegations that lack substantive evidence.
- 3.5.1 In the case of repeated unsubstantiated allegations against staff that have been investigated, we may seek legal advice about appropriate proportionate action in accordance with our responsibilities towards staff members.
- 3.6 We will inform the customer in writing of any measures we are putting in place, and the reasons for doing so. Such measures may include:
- Arrangements where only designated staff deal with the customer's calls or correspondence
 - Requiring the customer to communicate with us in writing only
 - Returning documents to the customers, and/or advising that any further irrelevant documents will be destroyed
 - Acknowledging receipt of letters/emails on the subject but not entering into further discussion
 - Filing letters/emails on the subject with no acknowledgement
 - Barring the customer from Hightown's premises
 - Requiring a written agreement from the customer to be in place regarding any future communication
 - Any other action that we consider appropriate.
- 3.7 A written explanation of the reason(s) for the measures taken and the period for which they apply will be provided, and made available in other formats upon request. The explanation will emphasise that the action is not punitive, but is being put in place to enable an equitable use of Hightown's resources for all its customers, and where applicable, to protect staff carrying out their duties.
- 3.8 Any arrangement put in place will be reviewed after twelve months if the period of its implementation is not shorter than this.