

Department / Team	Corporate
Dealing with Correspondence and Complaints	Procedure
Approved by Director	Issue number 4
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1.	Aims and Objectives
1.1	The effective handling of correspondence and complaints promotes good relationships between Hightown and residents. It is important that Hightown deals with correspondence efficiently, accurately, and in accordance with the timescales outlined in the Customer Charter and the Housing Ombudsman’s complaint handling code.
1.2	Complaints are welcomed by Hightown as they give us the opportunity to learn from resident and service user feedback and develop our services. Recording and acting upon issues that have been brought to our attention is important because it enables us to implement changes that help us to continuously improve.
1.3	The purpose of this procedure is to ensure a customer focused and consistent approach to dealing with correspondence and complaints.
2.	Definitions and Scope
2.1	This procedure applies to all staff in the Housing, Development, Care and Supported Housing Departments and the Sales Team.
2.2	Correspondence includes letters, emails, and messages via Hightown’s website.
2.3	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.	Procedure
3.1	Correspondence
3.1.1	All correspondence received via Reception should be recorded on the Correspondence workflow, which is accessed through Report Manager.
3.1.2	Reception staff will log the correspondence on the workflow and allocate it to the appropriate member of staff for response.

3.1.3	Any correspondence received from an MP, the office of an MP, a Councillor, or the Housing Ombudsman Service will be logged under the specific category for such correspondence on the workflow. If this is received directly by a member of staff it must be forwarded to Reception for logging. The correspondence must then be dealt with in accordance with the Responding to MP and Councillor Enquiries Procedure or the Responding to Correspondence from the Housing Ombudsman Procedure as applicable.
3.1.4	If the member of staff allocated the correspondence forwards it to someone else for reply, the correspondence should be reassigned on the workflow for that member of staff.
3.1.5	If the correspondence needs to be reassigned more than once, the staff member should contact the IT helpdesk to request the first reassignment be reversed for Reception staff to reassign.
3.1.6	The staff member should respond to the correspondence within an appropriate timescale, taking into consideration the nature of the issue. This must be within the target response time set out in Hightown's Customer Charter.
3.1.7	The member of staff must update the correspondence workflow with the method and date of reply. Staff must generate letters to tenants through tenancy summary or QL and ensure that clear records of all contact and correspondence with residents are saved against the tenancy in QL or tenancy summary reports.
3.1.8	If the correspondence workflow is not updated when the target response date becomes due, an automated reminder message will be sent to the staff member for whom the correspondence is logged via FlowBot.
4.0	Complaints
4.1	Logging complaints relating to Hightown House services/departments
4.1.1	A complaint may be received via correspondence through Reception, direct email to a staff member, by phone, in person, or via social media.
4.1.2	When a complaint is received, the recipient will forward it immediately to the Customer Resolution Officer, who will log the complaint on the complaints log, send an acknowledgement to the complainant within five working days and allocate the complaint to the appropriate Manager or Head of Service. In the absence of the Customer Resolution Officer, the complaint should be passed to the appropriate manager for logging and acknowledgement.
4.1.3	All correspondence relating to the complaint should be saved in the documents tab on the Complaints Log.
4.2	Where a complaint is received via social media, the Communications team will acknowledge receipt to the complainant in a private message and pass the details of the complaint to the Customer Resolution Officer for logging and investigation.
4.2.1	Where a 1 or 2 star review of Hightown is posted on Google or Trust Pilot, the Communications team will post a response following the Responding to Online Reviews process. Where the person who posted the review can be identified, the appropriate member of staff will contact them directly regarding their concerns.

4.2.2	If a complaint relates to more than one service area, all aspects of the complaint must be logged and responded to together. The team managers will agree a member of staff to lead on the response.
4.2.3	The staff member should acknowledge the complaint within five working days and confirm the complaint reference number.
4.2.4	In order to ensure appropriate levels of confidentiality, staff recording complaints on the Complaints Log must not include details in the free text boxes of the log which may identify the complainant or any staff member concerned, as these sections are used for reporting to the Complaints Scrutiny Group.
4.2.5	The acknowledgement should set out Hightown's understanding of the complaint, and the outcome/s the complainant is seeking.
4.2.6	Any staff member handling a complaint must ensure that they carry out a full investigation before drafting a response. This may include meeting with the complainant. The method(s) of investigation must be recorded on the complaints log.
4.2.7	Reasonable adjustments to the complaints process may be required to meet the needs of vulnerable customers. Reasonable adjustments may include changing the way in which the complaint is handled or responded to to meet the diverse needs of complainants. Where an adjustment is made the nature of the adjustment and the reasons for it must be clearly recorded on the Notes tab of the Complaints Log.
4.2.8	Where a complaint involves a recurring issue, staff should consider the background as part of the complaint investigation and response if this will help to resolve the issue for the complainant.
4.3	Logging complaints relating to Care & Supported Housing services
4.3.1	When a complaint is received, the recipient will log the complaint on the complaints log, send an acknowledgement to the complainant within five working days and allocate the complaint to the appropriate Manager or Head of Service. In the absence of the line Manager, the complaint should be passed to the Cash Contracts Manager for logging and acknowledgement.
4.3.2	All correspondence relating to the complaint should be saved in the documents tab on the Complaints Log.
4.3.3	The Manager will investigate and respond to the complaint.
4.3.4	The C&SH Contracts Manager will monitor all complaints including logging escalations and closing complaints.
4.4	Investigating and Responding to complaints
4.4.1	Responses to complaints at all stages must use plain language that is appropriate to the complainant. Staff should use the template letters available on the intranet as a basis for responses to complaints.

4.4.2	<p>The staff member responding to a complaint must address all points raised in the complaint and provide clear reasons for any decisions, referencing the relevant policy, law and good practice where appropriate. They must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • deal with complaints on their merits • act independently and have an open mind • take measures to address any actual or perceived conflict of interest • consider all information and evidence carefully • keep the complaint confidential as far as possible, with information only disclosed if necessary to properly investigate the matter.
4.4.3	<p>Communication with the resident should not identify individual members of staff or contractors as their actions are undertaken on behalf Hightown.</p>
4.4.4	<p>At the completion of each stage of the complaints process staff member investigating the complaint should write to the complainant advising them of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the complaint stage • the outcome of the complaint • the reasons for any decisions made • the details of any remedy offered to put things right • details of any outstanding actions • details of how to escalate the matter if dissatisfied, including information about the Housing Ombudsman service.
4.4.5	<p>The complainant shall be given a fair opportunity to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set out their position • comment on any adverse findings before a final decision is made.
4.4.6	<p>Where it is not possible for a complaint to be investigated and responded to within the timescales published in the Complaints policy, the staff member should contact the complainant to explain the reasons and agree an extension.</p>
4.4.7	<p>The staff member investigating the complaint should agree, where appropriate, reasonable arrangements for frequency and method of communication during the investigation process.</p>
4.4.8	<p>Where an agreement over an extension cannot be reached, the staff member should provide the complainant with the contact details of the Housing Ombudsman, so that they can challenge the plan or proposed timeliness of the response via the Ombudsman.</p>
4.4.9	<p>Where there is a longer term investigation, the member of staff investigating the complaint should provide the complainant with interim updates on progress.</p>
4.4.10	<p>Complaint responses must be sent to the complainant once the investigation has been carried out, and within the prescribed timescales. Responses should not be deferred to when outstanding actions relating to the complaint have been completed. Outstanding actions will be tracked by the Customer Resolution Officer, and updates provided to the complainant.</p>
4.5	<p>Investigating and responding to Formal Stage One Complaints</p>
4.5.1	<p>The Manager or Head of Service will investigate the complaint, and send a written response using the template letter within 10 working days of the date the complaint</p>

	being received. If an alternative format is needed due to the individual's known needs this should be taken into account.
4.5.2	The complainant should be advised that if they remain dissatisfied they are able to escalate their complaint to Formal Stage Two of the complaints process within 20 working days of the date of the response.
4.5.3	When the response is sent, the member of staff responsible for the investigation and response should update outcome and lessons learned sections of the Complaints Log. Lessons learned should highlight any changes made to a service, process or policy/procedure as a result of the complaint. Where changes are made, these should be communicated to the complainant.
4.6	Formal Stage Two
4.6.1	If, within 20 working days of the Formal Stage One response, the complainant requests to escalate their complaint to Formal Stage Two of Hightown's complaints process, the staff member receiving notification of this should obtain details and confirm with the complainant what outcome they are seeking from their complaint.
4.6.2	The staff member should escalate the complaint to Formal Stage Two on the complaints log and allocate the complaint to the Director for the department to which the complaint relates.
4.6.3	The Director will co-ordinate an investigation and written response, using the template letter which will be sent within 20 working days of the escalation date.
4.6.4	The response will outline any applicable external sources of dispute resolution the complainant can refer their complaint to if they remain dissatisfied (i.e. Housing Ombudsman Service, CQC, First Tier Tribunal (Property Chamber)).
4.7	External Remedies
4.7.1	Any communication from the Housing Ombudsman must be dealt with in accordance with the Responding to Correspondence from the Housing Ombudsman Procedure.
4.7.2	Other remedies may be available to C&SH scheme service users and home owners, and reference should be made to these where relevant in complaint responses.
4.8	Closing complaints
4.8.1	The circumstances in which Hightown will close a complaint are outlined in the Complaints Policy.
4.8.2	Where a complaint is to be closed, the staff member should close the complaint on the Complaints Log, giving the reason for closure.
5	Legal/Regulatory Background
5.1	Regulator of Social Housing's Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard.
5.2	The Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code

<p>6.</p> <p>6.1</p> <p>6.2</p> <p>6.3</p>	<p>Other considerations:</p> <p>The Complaints Scrutiny Group, made up of residents and staff, meets quarterly to review complaints regarding head office services received in the previous quarter.</p> <p>The Residents Voice and Scrutiny Panel reviews information regarding the number of complaints received at each stage of the complaints process every 6 months.</p> <p>The Service User VoiceBox, made up of staff and Care and Supported Housing service users, meets quarterly to review complaints regarding Care and Supported Housing services received in the previous quarter.</p>
<p>7.</p> <p>7.1</p> <p>7.2</p> <p>7.3</p> <p>7.4</p> <p>7.5</p> <p>7.6</p> <p>7.7</p>	<p>Role and Responsibilities/Monitoring</p> <p>The Customer Resolution Officer is responsible for logging and monitoring the Complaint Log, and for tracking progress of agreed actions and lessons learnt</p> <p>The Head of Housing reports on complaints received by head office departments (excluding C&SH) monthly, including performance against complaint response timescales and lessons learned.</p> <p>The Heads of Care and Supported Housing report monthly on the complaints received by the C&SH department.</p> <p>Details of the number of complaints received at each stage of Hightown's internal complaints process, and learning points from complaints are reported to residents in the Annual Report to Residents each year.</p> <p>The Director of Housing and Director of Care and Support report the following to the Operations Committee:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • outcomes from any Housing Ombudsman investigations • any systemic failure which may lead to serious detriment or harm to residents or service users • A complaint that reaches local or national media that might bring Hightown into disrepute • Any complaint that has completed stage 2 of the complaints process where residents have not confirmed that they are satisfied with the outcome so may lead to an Ombudsman enquiry • Progress on lessons learnt and the impact of implementing these changes. <p>The Operations Committee receives quarterly and annual reports on complaints and determinations from the Housing Ombudsman Service.</p> <p>The Head of Housing will review Hightown's complaints self-assessment annually, the outcome of which will be reported to the Board.</p>
<p>8.</p>	<p>Policy/document References:</p> <p>Complaints Policy</p> <p>Compensation Policy</p> <p>Reception Services Procedure</p> <p>Responding to MP and Councillor Enquiries Procedure</p> <p>Responding to Correspondence from the Housing Ombudsman Procedure,</p> <p>Call Handling Procedure</p> <p>Hightown's Customer Charter</p>

