



NORTH STAR

Creating homes, building futures

**North Star's Approach
to Complaints, Comments and Compliments**

*Using Feedback to
Improve Services*

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1. Our Approach

At North Star we recognise the importance of using the information we gather from our customers and we are constantly striving to improve our services and we welcome complaints, comments and compliments.

Handling complaints effectively is not just about processes and time limits. It is also about the culture within our organisation and the behaviour and attitudes we display.

We will ensure complaints are handled quickly and efficiently and making any improvement and changes where required.

We empower our staff to look at complaints positively, viewing them as an opportunity to put things right quickly, promote positive relationships with customers and provide a learning opportunity.

This document is designed to understand what a service complaint is and dealing with it as easily and effectively as possible and to identify service improvements for our customers. It also enables staff to deal with issues at first point of contact.

In July 2020, the Housing Ombudsman published a Complaint Handling Code and this policy has been reviewed to comply with the code. There is also a requirement for landlords to complete an annual self assessment against the code and our latest self assessment can be viewed on the North Star website at www.northstarhg.co.uk.

There may be instances where the Compensation Policy or the Unreasonable Customer Behaviour and Persistent Complainants Policy may need to be referred to.

2. Our Guiding Principles

Principles	Explanation
We will identify when a service failure has taken place.	This means that we do not expect people to specifically say "I wish to complain" and will never ask people to put things in writing to us. It also means that the distinction between informal complaints, formal complaints and comments is immaterial. The customer doesn't care how we categorise things: they want their problem sorting out.
People tell the truth.	From analysing many complaints it is clear that people tell the truth.
We will take swift action to resolve the complaint.	In order to speed things up we may ring or visit people to obtain any additional information needed in order to investigate.
People are individuals.	We will never rely on standard letters. All contact will be individual and will meet the requirements of the customer i.e. if they want contact in email - no problem, over the phone - that's fine, in writing - we'll do that. The important thing is to sort it out. If a customer has support needs, then refer to the "What If?" guide.
If it wouldn't be good enough for me or my family, it's not good enough for our customers.	Be reasonable and sensible. If you were making the complaint, how would you want to be treated? How would you want things resolving?
Process is important BUT ensuring that we understand the issue and sort it out is more important.	We will strive to resolve every complaint as soon as we are able to. The important thing is that we keep people updated on progress and be honest with them. In every case we will aim to finalise all actions within 10 working days.
We will be honest.	If we identify something has gone wrong, we will admit this. We will apologise for this and explain why it happened. We will not "fudge" the issue. We will use clear language in all of our contacts. We will apologise and offer compensation when appropriate.
We will learn.	We will review the complaints we have dealt with and learn from them. We will report to Senior Management Team and Board.
We will monitor.	Of course we need systems. However, we don't need them to shape what we do. The system is there to record what we do and when we do it and what the outcome was.
Find out "How was it for you".	We will ask for feedback on how we dealt with people's complaints and use this information to shape our learning.

3. How we can receive Complaints, Comments and Compliments

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*”. The customer does not have to use the word complaint in order for it to be treated as such.

We want to make it as easy as possible for customers to comment or make a complaint about our services and we accept them in any of the following ways:

- In person
- In writing
- By telephone
- Via [MyNorthStar](#), our online service
- By email on customer.services@northstarhg.co.uk
- Via our website, www.northstarhg.co.uk
- Through another person, perhaps an advocate, social worker, solicitor, etc.
- Through comments made on surveys
- Through comments on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.

We will deal with anonymous comments and complaints in the same way. The fact that someone doesn't want to leave their name should not influence the action we take. We record the issue, sort it out and record what we've done.

Social Media

Any comments regarding a complaint received through a social media platform must be contacted privately to gather further details and try to resolve the issue at first contact if possible.

The response to the post should thank them for their feedback and offer the opportunity to provide further details privately so we can look into their issue. An example of a reply is: “North Star appreciates your valuable feedback and would like to investigate this further. Please can we contact you directly for further details? Alternatively, you can contact us using the contact us options at the top of this page. Thank you”.

Once further details are received it can be processed through the comments or formal complaints procedure as appropriate.

4. Exclusions

There may be circumstances where we do not accept a complaint or decide to deal with it in a different way to the normal process. Examples include:

- When the service failure or incident occurred over six months from the complaint being made, unless it is a safeguarding or health and safety issue.
- When repeated complaints are made about the same or related matters that we have already addressed.
- Where legal action is being taken against North Star related to the complaint.

If we decide not to accept the complaint, we will write and explain why we are not accepting the complaint and in our response, inform the complainant they have the right to challenge this decision via the Housing Ombudsman.

A complaint regarding a breach of tenancy such as anti-social behaviour will not be regarded as a complaint unless the complaint is about the handling of the situation.

5. Reasonable Adjustments

North Star is committed to improving accessibility to all of our customers.

This policy has been developed in accordance with North Star's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy to ensure equality of treatment for all our customers.

North Star is committed to provide any reasonable adjustments to our service to ensure that no one is disadvantaged in using this policy. We will discuss with individuals their specific needs but some examples could be:

- Providing information and responses in large print on request.
- Allowing extra time to respond in timescales.
- Providing a language interpreter.
- Providing additional support for customers with communication or learning disabilities.
- Providing additional support for customers with physical/mental health conditions.

6. Informal Complaints/Comments and Compliments

Comments and remarks that identify a service failure must be responded to, resolved and recorded so that we can use this feedback to improve our services. This is our opportunity to resolve an issue at first point of contact to the customer's satisfaction and prevent the need to escalate to a formal complaint.

Examples of such comments are:

- 'That contractor fixed the boiler, but he made a right mess when he was doing it'.
- 'I wanted that leaflet in large print, but the woman I spoke to said it wasn't available. Can anyone else help?'
- 'The gardener only stayed for five minutes when he came, is that what I'm paying all that money for?'
- 'I wanted to email you, but your email address wasn't included in your letter'.
- 'Our windows haven't seen a lick of paint for a while'.

These "comments" are actually complaints and should be captured and recorded to improve our services.

When dealing with a customer who makes a comment or informal complaint about a service failure, firstly apologise and then see if it is something that can be dealt with straight away. If it can be sorted, sort it out and at the end ask if the customer is satisfied with the outcome or would they like to progress the issue further. If the

customer would like their comment to be investigated under Stage One of our Complaints Policy, enquire on how it can be resolved to their satisfaction.

If they are satisfied, treat the informal complaint as completed and record on the “Comments, Compliments” spreadsheet on the Housing public drive.

If the customer would like the matter to be taken further, then progress to Stage One of the formal complaints procedure by recording the details and passing it to the Information and Data Officer (IDO) or in their absence the Business Support Officer (BSO). The person who accepted the complaint has responsibility for ensuring it is passed onto the appropriate person. If a comment is going to be investigated under our complaint procedure it does not need to be recorded on the comments and compliments spreadsheet.

Compliments are also important to us as they show where we are getting things right and recognise the hard work of people working to provide excellent services. It can make all the difference to know that we are doing well. These should be recorded on the “comments and compliments” spreadsheet on the Housing public drive. Compliments will be analysed and fed back to managers to update their teams and identify any learning from best practice.

7. Formal Complaints

Stage One - Investigation

There will be occasions when customers want to make a formal complaint. As Section 3 states, this does not have to be in writing. Details can be taken over the phone, in person, etc. The officer who accepted the complaint has responsibility for ensuring it is passed to the IDO or in their absence the BSO. The IDO will keep record of the complaint and record it.

We will acknowledge receipt in writing (letter or email) within **two working days**. We will record this and at this stage the complaint will be looked into by a Service Manager/Team Manager. **Each letter sent to a customer will be specific to their circumstances and clearly give contact details of the Service/Team Manager handling the complaint.** The acknowledgment will also make the customer aware of the Housing Ombudsman service and that they can contact them for advice throughout the complaint process if required.

We will aim to provide a full written response within **10 working days**. If the complaint is complex and this timescale is not achievable we will contact the customer and agree a revised timescale. The IDO should be informed of any revised timescales. Any extension beyond this requires approval by the relevant Head of Service.

It is important that the customer receives a written response to their complaint.

Prior to the written response, the outcome should be discussed with the customer and they should be given the opportunity to comment on any adverse findings before the final decision is made.

The written response should include:

- The complaint stage.
- The outcome of the complaint.

- The reasons for any decisions made.
- The details of any remedy offered to put things right.
- The details of any outstanding actions and timescales they will be completed by.
- If they remain dissatisfied with the response, next stage for a review to be carried out by either a Head of Service/Executive Director within 10 working days.

It should clearly give the contact details of the IDO who should be the first point of contact should they not be satisfied with the outcome and wish to escalate to Stage Two.

Stage Two - Review

There may be times when customers are still dissatisfied with how we have handled their complaint. The customer can request a review of the complaint via any communication within 10 working days of receipt of the Stage One response.

This will be completed by either a Head of Service or Executive Director. Again this request should be acknowledged within **two working days** stating the name and contact details of the Head of Service/Executive Director who is completing the review.

At this stage the Head of Service/Executive Director will fully review the actions so far. They may decide that more information is needed and should contact the customer as part of the review. We will aim to provide a full response within **10 working days**. If this timescale is not achievable we will contact the customer and agree a revised timescale for the review to be concluded.

Again the outcome should be discussed with the customer and be given the opportunity to comment on any adverse findings before the final decision is made.

We will provide the customer with a full written response which will include:

- The complaint stage.
- The outcome of the complaint.
- The reasons for any decisions made.
- The details of any remedy offered to put things right.
- The details of any outstanding actions and timescales they will be completed by.
- They have now completed the landlord's complaints process and if they are still dissatisfied they have the right to take their complaint to a "designated person" or wait eight weeks and take it to the Housing Ombudsman. Further details are provided in the enclosed complaints leaflet.
- Include a copy of the complaints leaflet.

Further guidance is provided in Section 10 of this policy.

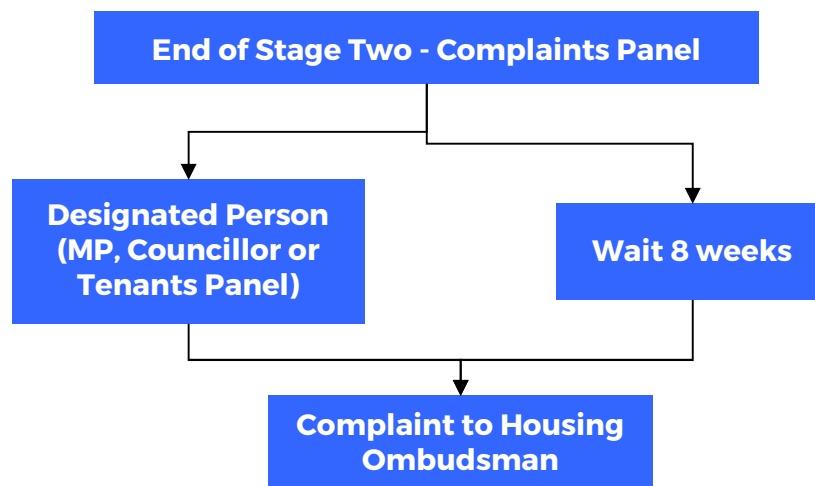
Consideration to mediation should be made if appropriate to assist in resolving the complaint. If we do not think mediation is appropriate, we need to demonstrate why this view was taken. The customer can refuse to participate in mediation and want to progress with the formal process.

8. The Housing Ombudsman and the Designated Persons

After receiving the final Stage Two response, the customer has completed the landlord's complaints process. If the customer is still dissatisfied with how the complaint has been handled, they have the right to take their complaint to a "designated person" recognised by the Housing Ombudsman or wait eight weeks to take it directly to the Housing Ombudsman.

During the eight-week period they may take the complaint to a "designated person" who can be a Member of Parliament (MP), a local Councillor or a recognised tenant's panel. The IDO can assist with providing contact details for the "designated persons" on request. North Star does not have a designated tenant's panel for complaints following consultation with tenants.

The designated person's role is to liaise with the landlord to assist in resolving tenant complaints, providing a fresh, impartial and independent perspective on problems. They do not have the powers to overrule the landlord's policies and procedures. After considering the complaint, they can, with the consent of the complainant, refer the complaint to the Housing Ombudsman.



After the eight-week period from closure of the Stage Two complaint, the complainant can take their complaint directly to the Housing Ombudsman. The complaint must be received by the Ombudsman within six months of receiving the Stage Two complaint response letter. The Housing Ombudsman can be contacted at:

The Housing Ombudsman Service
PO Box 152
Liverpool
L33 7WQ or through their website on www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk

9. The Role of Regulator of Social Housing

Consumer standards apply to all registered providers including Local Authorities. The role of the Regulator of Social Housing is to set the consumer standards and to intervene where failure to meet the standards has caused, or could have caused, serious harm to tenants. The four consumer standards are:

- Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard
- Home Standard

- Tenancy Standard
- Neighbourhood and Community Standard

It is possible that a dis-satisfied tenant can complain directly to the Regulator of Social Housing.

The outcome of this could be:

- The Regulator refers them back to the landlord to allow the complaint to be investigated.
- The Regulator asks for clarification from the landlord how the complaint has been handled.
- The Regulator refers the matter to their consumer panel who investigate the matter themselves.

Any complaints raised with or by the regulator must be reported to a member of Senior Management Team (SMT).

10. Final Response Letter/Email

Once an investigation is complete at any stage the final response letter should be written in clear, plain language. Final letters ought to include:

- An apology or, if an apology would not be appropriate, an expression of regret that a complaint was necessary to raise an issue, whether the complaint was justified or not.
- A summary of the complaint.
- A summary of the outcome of our investigation.
- Any offer made to settle the complaint and how long that offer will remain open if appropriate.
- Proposed method of any compensation payment and who the cheque will be made payable to.
- Include an acceptance slip for the tenant to return for any offers or compensation.
- If they remain dissatisfied with the outcome how to proceed to the next stage.

11. Monitoring and Learning

We use all complaint feedback to review how effectively we are handling complaints to ensure that we are providing the best service that we can to our customers. Complaints are monitored by managers and are used to identify trends, issues and to drive quick change to improve the services we deliver. The information is also collated and presented to SMT and Board on an annual basis. Our tenants via LINK are also updated every six months.

12. Feedback and Satisfaction

We will seek feedback from complainants at the end of the complaints process. The IDO will do this by contacting the customer by telephone to ensure that the complaint has been resolved to the customer's satisfaction. This will take place

within 10 working days of the complaint's closure. The results will be used as examples of you said/we did in our annual report to tenants and to improve services.

Document Control

Department	Housing
Responsible person	Sara Herrington
Creation date	December 2020
Review period	Annual
Next review date	December 2021
Previous review dates	October 2012, April 2013, February 2015, July 2019
Version number	6
Amendments and dates	Sections 4,5,6 and 7
Has the policy been Equality Impact Assessed? <i>If no, please outline the reasons why. If yes, please outline when and with what results.</i>	No
Has tenant/customer consultation been undertaken? <i>If no, please outline the reasons. If yes, please explain how, when and with what results.</i>	No
Has the document been approved by Link? <i>If no, please outline the reasons. If yes, when and with what results?</i>	Yes
Has the document been approved by Board? <i>If no, please outline the reasons. If yes, when and with what results?</i>	N/A
Has the document been approved by the Stronger Together Group? <i>If no, please outline the reasons. If yes, when and with what results?</i>	N/A
Associated policies and procedures	N/A
Associated documents/leaflets	Your guide to Complaints, Comments and Compliments