



Title of policy:	Complaints Policy
Version:	1.1
Purpose:	To set out our approach to effectively manage and resolve customer complaints
Updated:	July 2024
Next review:	July 2026
By:	Head of Customers

The Complaints Policy is for North Star and John Pease Cottages tenants and customers. For the purpose of the policy, where North Star is referenced this will include arrangements for John Pease Cottages.

We are committed to using feedback from customers to improve what we do. From time to time, we know things go wrong. When they do, our priority is to work with the customer to put things right quickly and fairly. This is important to us to maintain trust and strong relationships with our customers.

1. Our Definition of a Complaint

“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”.

2. Our Definition of a Service Request

A service request is a request from a customer requiring action to be taken to put something right. This can sometimes resolve issues quickly without the need for a formal complaint.

3. Our Principles

- We believe our customers when they say a service has failed.
- We think that people are more important than processes.
- We build and maintain relationships with contractors as this helps with resolving complaints.
- We ask what remedy the customer is seeking at first point of contact.
- We ensure whoever receives a complaint has responsibility for resolving the issue or handover to a person who can.
- We ensure our Customers Service Team has access to all the tools necessary to resolve complaints at the first point of contact.
- We resolve the issue to the customer's satisfaction.
- We aim to resolve any issues at first point of contact.

- We communicate and update customers using their preferred method and personalise how we respond to customers.
- We will use the learning from complaints to improve services.
- We write any formal responses using clear, easy to understand language.
- We will have a collaborative and co-operative approach towards resolving complaints, working with colleagues across teams and departments.
- We will take collective responsibility for any shortfalls identified through complaints, rather than blaming others.
- We will act within the professional standards for engaging with complaints as set by any relevant professional body.

4. Legislation and Guidance

The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) has responsibility for the regulation of social housing providers in England. The RSH has set out a regulatory framework which includes the regulatory standards that providers must meet.

This includes the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard which outlines the regulatory standards for complaints handling.

The key areas of legislation in this policy are:

- Housing Act 1996 and 2004
- Landlord and Tenant Act 1985
- Equality Act 2010
- Localism Act 2011
- General Data Protection Act 2018
- Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code 2022
- Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard
- Children Act 1989 Part 3 Section 31

This policy complies with the Supported Accommodation Regulations 2023, The regulation is to ensure that young People aged 16 to 17 years old who are looked after children or care leavers and for whom the LA has a duty to accommodate are provided with safe, nurturing and supportive living environments as they transition to full independence.

5. What Customers Can Expect from North Star

We will treat all complaints fairly and will be transparent throughout, regardless of how we have been contacted.

We will work in line with the Supported Accommodation Standards 2023: no person who is the subject of a complaint or representation takes any part in its consideration or

investigation, except at the informal resolution stage if the registered person considers it appropriate.

We will listen if a customer tells us that they are not satisfied, and we will work speedily to put things right.

We will communicate clearly and regularly throughout any complaint using methods agreed with the customer.

We will take responsibility for sorting out any issues the customer has as quickly as possible if it is clear our service has failed. We will carry out a thorough investigation before we take any action that may be appropriate. Where necessary, we will investigate further, before we act.

We will communicate the findings and outcomes of all investigations clearly, we will communicate in the way which suits the customer best, and we will confirm in writing and give reasons for the decisions we take, referring to any legislation or policies that have guided our decision.

We will use all complaints we receive to support us to improve the services we deliver.

We will publicise the Complaints Policy on the website, in Tenants Newsletters and on our social media accounts along with information on the Housing Ombudsman service and the Complaint Handling Code. Leaflets will be made available at our supported housing schemes.

Our approach to complaints meets the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman Services Complaint Handling Code. Details of the Housing Ombudsman service can be found at www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk, by phone on 0300 111 3000 or by post at:

Housing Ombudsman Service
PO Box 1484
Unit D
Preston
PR2 0ET

6. Who Can Make a Complaint?

We will accept complaints from:

- Any of our customers (tenants (including young people and children, shared owners, leaseholders, management clients)
- Former tenants
- People who have applied for housing.

If a customer gives us permission, we will accept complaints on their behalf from:

- Anyone acting as their representative.
- Third parties and advocates such as social worker
- Family members

We will accept complaints from anyone who is a formal representative of the above including:

- MPs

- Councilors
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Solicitors
- Local Council

Customers can have a representative deal with their complaint at any stage of the complaints process. This will include representing or accompanying the customer during any meetings with North Star.

7. How Complaints Can Be Made

We will accept complaints in the following ways:

- In person
- In writing
- By phone
- By email on complaints@northstarhg.co.uk
- Via our website www.northstarhg.co.uk
- Through another person such as an advocate
- Through comments on social media such as Facebook, Twitter etc.

We will always try and resolve customer issues as soon as possible. A customer does not have to use the word “complaint” for it to be treated as such. Where a customer tells us that they are unhappy with something about our service for the first time, there are times when the quickest and most effective way to resolve this is through a service request. Where this is the case, we will discuss it with the customer and will only ever resolve an issue through a service request in full agreement with the customer. If the customer remains unhappy, they can continue through our complaint’s procedure.

8. When We Won’t Accept Complaints

A complaint will be accepted unless there is a valid reason not to do so. There are some specific instances when we won’t accept a complaint, but each case will be considered on its own merits. Some examples include:

- When the service failure or incident occurred over 12 months from the complaint 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 through the complaint procedure.
- Where legal action is being taken against North Star related to the complaint. This is defined as details of the claim, such as the Claim Form and Particulars of Claim, having been filed at court.
- 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.
- When it is referring to a service not provided by North Star.

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 that they have the right to challenge the decision via the Housing Ombudsman.

9. Service Requests

The decision to make a formal complaint or service request rests with the individual customer.

We will review all service requests and seek to resolve them first time within three working days. The customer will be asked if they are satisfied with the actions taken to resolve the service request and if the customer remains unhappy, they can continue through our complaint's procedure. Any outstanding actions from a service request must still be completed.

When required, issues may be passed to a third party such as our contractors.

Service requests are recorded, monitored, and regularly reviewed to identify learning opportunities or systematic issues.

10. How Complaints Will Be Handled

At the outset of a customer's complaint and at every stage of the complaint, we will provide clear guidance, including how to escalate if the customer is dissatisfied with the response. This will include details of how to access the Housing Ombudsman Service for support. We will keep a full record of the complaint, our response and correspondence with customers.

Any actual/perceived conflict of interest will be discussed with the Complaints and Performance Coordinator and allocated to an alternative manager to handle the complaint if appropriate.

11. Responding to Complaints

Stage One

Initial complaints are referred to as 'stage one'. We will acknowledge the complaint within two working days and aim to resolve all complaints within 10 working days.

Where multiple complaints are brought to us by a customer, we will record these under one complaint, but we will investigate and respond to all issues separately within our communication. Where customers raise additional complaints during the investigation, these must be incorporated into the stage one response if they are related, and the stage one response has not been issued. Where the stage one response has been issued, the new issues are unrelated to those already being investigated or it would unreasonably delay the response, the new issues must be recorded as a new complaint.

We will contact customers to discuss the complaint and the outcome they are seeking.

If the complaint is complex and the 10 days' timescale is not achievable, we will contact the customer and agree a revised timescale. Where a complaint takes some time to investigate, we will keep the customer updated as to the progress of the investigation.

If the extension exceeds a further 10 days, approval is required by the Head of Service/Assistant Director and a suitable revised date should be agreed with the customer.

If the customer is unhappy for us to extend their complaint, we will close the complaint and issue our findings in writing. We will provide details of how the customer can escalate their concerns to the next stage. Details of the Housing Ombudsman Service will be provided.

We will confirm in writing the outcome of the complaint and provide customers with information about their options they have if they remain unhappy.

This will include:

- The complaint stages
- 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
- Details of how to escalate the matter to stage two if the complainant is not satisfied with the response
- Their right to seek advice and support from the Housing Ombudsman Service including the Housing Ombudsman contact details

We will include information on future actions/remedies/appointments that are agreed with the customer within the final complaint response letter prior to closing the complaint. Any outstanding actions should not delay the complaint being closed and the customer being informed of the outcome of their complaint.

Before we make decisions to not uphold a complaint, we will contact the customer and give them the opportunity to comment before a final decision is made.

We will consider if any redress or compensation should be awarded in recognition of our service failure and the impact on the customer. This will be considered and awarded in accordance with our Compensation and Claims Policy.

Stage Two - Reviewing Complaints and Decisions

Customers have the right to request a review if all or any part of the complaint is not resolved to the satisfaction of the customer at stage one.

A request for stage two must be sent to us within 10 working days from the date of our stage one response letter. However, any reasonable request to escalate after this timescale must be considered.

We will acknowledge requests for a review within two working days.

A review will be carried out by an independent manager – usually a Head of Service, Assistant Director or Executive Director who has not been involved in the stage one investigation.

As part of the review, we will contact the customer to understand the outstanding issues and the outcome the customer is seeking.

All stage two responses must have approval by an Executive Director.

We aim to provide a full response within 10 working days. We recognise that some reviews may require a more in-depth investigation. If we are unable to respond within 10 working days, we will contact the customer to advise when we expect to be able to respond to the request for review. Any extension must be no more than 10 working days without good reason, and the reason(s) must be clearly explained to the customer.

Where an agreement over an extension period cannot be reached, we will provide the customer with the Housing Ombudsman contact details.

We will write to the customer to confirm our findings and outcome of the review.

This will include:

- The complaint stage
- The complaint definition
- Outcome of our investigation
- Reasons for any decision including any relevant policy, law, and good practice.
- Details of any remedy/compensation to put things right.
- Details of any outstanding outcomes
- Details of how to escalate to the Housing Ombudsman if customer remains dissatisfied.

Throughout the complaints process, we will promote awareness of, and the ability to seek advice and support from the Housing Ombudsman Service. Complainants will be able to refer complaints that have completed our mandatory stage one and two processes to the Ombudsman for independent review.

The following will be included in our correspondence:

“The Housing Ombudsman can be contacted for advice and information at any point during the complaints process. Details for the Housing Ombudsman can be found on North Star’s website www.northstarhq.co.uk or by contacting them at www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk”

12. Situations When We Will Not Review a Complaint

We will not review a complaint in the following circumstances:

If we have already completed a stage two review of the complaint for the same issue and provided the customer with details on how to escalate to the Housing Ombudsman.

If a customer does not ask for a review within 10 working days from the date of our final response letter unless there are valid reasons why they were unable to request a review earlier.

The customer is raising new issues to those responded in stage two.

13. Complaints Management

We will ensure that we manage complaints in line with this policy. We do however recognise that individual issues and complaints can vary and be complex. We reserve the right to consider each situation on an individual basis to ensure fairness for our customers and effectiveness of complaint investigation.

14. Unacceptable Behaviour

We understand that making a complaint can be frustrating, however we expect our customers to behave in a reasonable and appropriate way when making a complaint.

We recognise that on rare occasions customers make complaints that are deemed as vexatious. We expect all staff to be treated in a respectful manner. We will not tolerate behaviour which is deemed unacceptable, threatening, abusive or unreasonably persistent.

In these rare cases, North Star will use its Unreasonable Customer Behaviour and Persistent Complaints Policy.

15. Equality and Fairness

North Star will

- Ensure all customers are treated with fairness and respect.
- Deliver relevant, accessible, and responsive services which consider the sensitivities and needs of different groups including, but not limited to social, cultural, and religious needs, and any customer with additional support needs.

In line with Supported Accommodation Standards 2023 young people can also make a complaint direct to the Local Authority allocated PA or to the Children's Commissioner confidential complaints line help at hand:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/help-at-hand/>

Freephone: 0800 528 0731.

Complaints can also be made directly to Ofsted if you have concerns about the quality of support you are receiving.

enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk or call them on 0300 123 1231.

North Star will make reasonable adjustments to our service to ensure that no one is disadvantaged in using this policy. We will discuss with individuals their specific needs and keep them under review, 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.
- Monitoring customer access and satisfaction in all areas.
- Providing additional support for customers with communication or learning disabilities.
- Providing additional support for customers with physical/mental health conditions.
- Providing support to people who have some other vulnerability.

A copy of this policy is available on our website. We are committed to providing a website that is accessible to the widest possible audience. The website enables the policy to be translated to other languages, and has a range of tools to ensure that people with hearing and visual support needs have easy access to the policy. We can also translate to braille. Further information can be found on <https://www.northstarhg.co.uk/your-home/access-to-services/>

16. Monitoring and Learning

We report quarterly to Board through our performance reports. This includes a summary of complaints by service areas including any learning and service improvements.

We will take an annual report to Board which will include the following:

- Annual self-assessment against the Code
- A qualitative and quantitative analysis of complaint handling
- Summary of complaints we have refused to accept
- Any findings of noncompliance with the Code by the Ombudsman
- Any service improvements made as a result of learning from complaints
- Any actions following any annual report about performance from the Ombudsman
- Any actions following relevant reports/publications produced by the Ombudsman

We will conduct root cause analysis on complaints received, sharing recommendations, and learning from complaints to drive improvements to services.

We will report each year to all customers on our performance regarding complaints.

17. Self-Assessment

The reporting of complaints handled within the Code timescales as part of the self-assessment has been aligned to the requirements of the RSH Tenant Satisfaction Measures. Our submission will be made to the RSH by 30th June 2024 and will be published on our website.