



# Complaints Policy

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## 1. Introduction



Alpha Living aims to provide a high quality and value for money service to its customers. We welcome complaints and feedback as a means of correcting failures in performance and improving services and levels of satisfaction with our customers by actively listening to and understanding the needs to influence continuous improvement.

We will endeavour to resolve any service failure to the complainant's satisfaction at the first point of contact. At all stages of the complaints process we will deal with the matter as quickly as possible.

Alpha will publicise this policy on their website, and also include information about the Housing Ombudsman and the Complaints Handling Code. A printed copy of the policy will be available within communal areas at each development for easy accessibility.

This policy will outline how the organisation will receive, react and respond to complaints from customers in a way that is clear, timely, fair and accessible.

## **2. Statement of Intent**

Through this policy Alpha Living intends to:

- Encourage and welcome feedback, both positive and negative, through a publicised and easily accessible two-tier procedure.
- Where possible, resolve all complaints at the first point of contact and as quickly as possible.
- Provide a full and fair resolution within published timescales.
- Prevent the need for repeat complaints.
- Recording, monitoring and analysing feedback, so as to examine service performance and improve future service delivery.
- Promote and monitor performance against agreed service standards.
- Apply data from complaints to support intelligence for risk management and assurance purposes.
- Have a range of options available to put things right when there has been a service failure including compensation.
- Comply with the ombudsman complaint handling code (April 2024)
- Comply with the localism act 2011 and advise how customers can access the ombudsman services.
- Act within the Professional Standards for engaging with complaints as set by the Chartered Institute of Housing

## **3. Managing Complaints**

Alpha Living will have an accessible complaint process available in various formats, that will provide consistency to customers and offer a single point of contact. Complaints will be handled centrally by the Customer Experience Team (CEXT). Regular communications will be maintained with customers to ensure they are fully

informed of progress throughout the process. The complaint process is initiated when the complaint is brought to the attention of the organisation by the customer or their representative. A speedy satisfactory resolution will always be the primary outcome that the organisation aims to achieve for its customers. Consequently, the Customer Experience Manager (Complaints Officer) will have both the autonomy and authority to facilitate early dispute resolutions.

As a 'continuous learning organisation', Alpha Living aims to achieve a customer centric culture that sees its customers as the key drivers of service excellence and performance improvement. Lessons learnt from customer complaints will therefore be regularly reported to the Board and Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and to all staff to embed the values of engaging with customers in all we do.

#### **4. Reasonable Adjustments**

Alpha Living is committed to ensuring that no resident is disadvantaged in accessing its services. To this end we will make reasonable adjustments when needed, ensuring compliance with the Equality Act 2010.

Full details can be found within our Reasonable Adjustments Policy.

#### **5. Complaint Definition**

Alpha Living recognises the difference between a service request and a complaint.

A service request is a request from a resident to the landlord requiring action to be taken to put something right. Service requests are not complaints, but must be recorded, monitored and reviewed regularly.

A complaint must be raised when the resident expresses dissatisfaction with the response to their service request, even if the handling of the service request remains ongoing. Alpha Living will continue to attempt to address the service request regardless of whether a complaint is raised.

Effective complaint handling enables residents to be heard and understood. The starting point for this is a shared understanding of what constitutes a complaint.

It is not therefore necessary that the customer uses the word 'complaint' in raising a dispute. Whenever a resident expresses dissatisfaction, landlords must give them the choice to make a complaint. Alpha Living's definition of a complaint aligns with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code (amended April 2024) 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 an individual resident or group of residents' <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/landlords/complaint-handling-code/>

#### **6. Customer Definition**

For the purposes of this policy Alpha Living defines a customer as:

- Tenants and leaseholders
- Members of the public
- Third parties who have permission to represent the interests of an individual.
- Neighbours of our properties.
- Visitors to our properties and offices.
- Board members and co-optees.
- Members of parliament.
- Solicitors.
- Citizen's advice bureau and other similar advocacy agencies.

## **7. Complaint Investigation Principles**

A complaint investigation will be conducted by the complaints officer or delegated person in an impartial manner, seeking sufficient reliable information from both parties so that fair and appropriate findings and recommendations can be made.

To ensure that a complaint investigation is fair we will:

- deal with each case on its 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. We will only disclose details of the complaint more widely where this proves necessary in order to allow us to conduct a thorough investigation.

## **8. Complaints Process**

Customers may raise a complaint through a range of formats including email, phone, letter, face to face, website or social media. Alpha Living will manage the reasonable expectations of its customers and will operate a simple two-stage process as noted below.

Complaints will be acknowledged by the CExT within five working days and recorded as stage one of the process. The Complaints Officer (Customer Experience Manager) will contact the customer to discuss the nature of the complaint and their desired outcome or remedy will be confirmed by either email or in writing for clarity. If any aspect of the complaint is unclear, we will ask the resident for clarification.

When a complaint is received via social media channels the CExT will contact the complainant and acknowledge the complaint and ask for contact details or that the complainant contacts Alpha Living using telephone or email so as to ensure confidentiality is maintained.

Survey feedback (an expression of dissatisfaction with services made through a survey) is not defined as a complaint, though, where possible, the person

completing the survey should be made aware of how they can pursue their dissatisfaction as a complaint if they wish to.

All complaints involving 3<sup>rd</sup> parties will be managed by Alpha Living in line with the Complaints Handling Code.

At each stage of the complaints process, the complaint handler will:

- a) Deal with complaints on their individual merits, act independently, and have an open mind;
  - b) Give the resident a fair chance to set out their position;
  - c) Take measures to address any actual or perceived conflict of interest; and
  - d) Consider all relevant information and evidence carefully.
  - e) Address all points raised, and provide clear reasons for any decisions referencing relevant policies, laws and best practice where appropriate.
  - f) Should an additional complaint be raised prior to stage 1 resolution being issued, Alpha will include this within the original complaint - however, if the Stage 1 response has been issued or where the additional complaint is unrelated a separate complaint will be logged.
- **Stage 1** Complaints will be resolved as early as possible at this stage with a response provided within 10 working days from the date the complaint has been acknowledged. The date may be extended by up to 10 further working days if justifiable, e.g., complex complaints and the reason must be clearly explained to the resident. Where a complaint has not been resolved to the customer's reasonable satisfaction the customer may request that it is escalated to Stage two. Alpha Living will not unreasonably refuse to escalate a complaint through all stages of a complaint. Reasons for declining to escalate a complaint are detailed in Section 14 - Exclusions from this policy.
  - **Stage 2.** The complaint will be considered by an independent Director of service who has had no prior involvement in the complaint, and an acknowledgement must be issued within 5 working days of the escalation request being received. For a response within 20 working days from the complaint acknowledgement. The date may be extended by up to 20 further working days if justifiable, and the extension must be clearly explained to the resident. Throughout this internal process, the complaints officer will maintain regular contact with the customer.

Residents must not be required to explain their reasons for escalation to Stage 2 of their complaint. Alpha will make reasonable efforts to understand why our resident remains unhappy.

Stage 2 is the final response from Alpha Living and if the complainant remains unsatisfied with the outcome, Alpha Living will advise the resident that they should contact the Housing Ombudsman, providing contact information.

## 9. Responding to Complaints

We will respond to all Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints in writing either by email or letter, and will at each stage:

- Identify the complaint stage.
- Include the complaint definition.
- State the outcome of the complaint.
- Outline the reasons for any decisions made.
- Detail suggested remedies offered to resolve the issue.
- Identify any outstanding actions, and track them, keeping the resident informed throughout the process.
- Provide clear guidance on how to escalate the matter if the complainant remains dissatisfied.
- Include contact details for the housing ombudsman.
- A complaint response must be provided when the answer to the complaint is known and not when the outstanding actions required to address the issue are completed.

## **10. Putting Things Right**

Effective dispute resolution requires a process designed to resolve complaints. Where something has gone wrong Alpha Living must acknowledge this and set out the actions it has already taken, or intends to take, to put things right. These can 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 or adding a correction or addendum;
- Providing a financial remedy
- Changing policies, procedures or practices.

Any remedy offered must reflect the impact on the resident as a result of any fault identified. Alpha Living will consider whether service improvements can be made as a result of any learning from the complaint and will at all times take account of the guidance issued by the Ombudsman when deciding on appropriate remedies.

The remedy offer will clearly set out what will happen and by when, in agreement with the resident where appropriate. Any remedy proposed, will be followed through to completion.

## **11. Compliance**

Accountability and transparency are integral to a positive complaint handling culture, and we will report back on wider learning and improvements from complaints to our stakeholders including our resident scrutiny team, staff and board members.

We will also report regularly to our 'Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC) providing insight on our complaint handling performance, providing access to all suitable information. Content of Report to the MRC will include:

- a) regular updates on volume, categories and outcomes of complaints alongside complaint handling performance
- b) regular reviews of issues and trends arising from complaint handling
- c) regular updates on the outcomes of any Ombudsman's investigations and progress made in complying with orders related to severe maladministration findings
- d) the annual complaints performance and service improvement report.

Alpha Living will undertake a self assessment, following any significant changes to structure or policy.

## **12. Anonymous Complaints**

Anonymous complaints will be considered as feedback and may influence change. However, due to the anonymity, the provisions of this policy will not apply.

## **13. Petitions**

Petitions will be treated as complaints where appropriate. Responses will be provided to the representative lead, submitting petitioner. Petitions about political issues, matters beyond the control of the organisation or about planning applications will not be considered within this policy.

## **14. Exclusions from this policy**

There may be occasions when a complaint will not be dealt with in line with this policy they include:

- An initial request for service, such as the first report of a repair or an enquiry about a service
- Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) or nuisance managed within the ASB Policy unless the complaint is in relation to staff conduct or how Alpha Living have managed the ASB case.
- Nominations for properties which falls within the responsibilities of the Statutory Housing Authority
- 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.
- Any serious allegations of inappropriate conduct from an Alpha Living Board member or member of staff. These will be handled in line with Human Resources policies or the Governance structure of the company.
- Issues that fall outside the remit of Alpha Living as a landlord and outside of its area of control.
- Unless there are exceptional or extenuating circumstances, the organisation will

not investigate complaints that have already been dealt with under this policy or are over twelve months old. Alpha Living will however, consider whether to apply discretion to accept complaints outside of this time limit where there is good reason to do so.

If we decide not to accept a complaint, a detailed explanation will be provided to the resident setting out the reasons why the matter is not suitable for the complaints process and the right to take that decision to the Ombudsman. If the Ombudsman does not agree that the exclusion has been fairly applied, the Ombudsman may instruct Alpha Living to take on the complaint.

Alpha Living will not take a 'blanket approach' when considering excluding complaints, and will consider the individual circumstances of each case.

## **15. Unreasonable and Vexatious Complaints**

We recognise that on occasion complaints made can be vexatious. Alpha Living will not tolerate continuous vexatious complaints and will take appropriate action through the enforcement of the tenancy or advise the customer the way in which their tenancy and communication with us will be managed in future. Alpha Living will ensure that it acts proportionately and in accordance with this policy and the Equality Act 2010 and related procedures.

## **16. Implementation**

This policy and its procedures were implemented from 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020. The key principles of this operational policy will also be reinforced to managers in team meetings and copies of the policy will be available on SharePoint. The policy has been further reviewed following amendments to the Complaint Handling Code from the Housing Ombudsman - latest updates/amendments April 2024.

## **17. Consultation**

The views of the Senior Leadership Team, other relevant staff and Alpha Living residents have and will be incorporated within the continuous development of this policy.

Following the amendments introduced April 2024 a review of the policy has been undertaken by the resident scrutiny team (April 2024) to ensure the policy continues to meet the needs of our residents.

## **18. Equality Impact Assessment**

We believe all people should be treated with dignity and respect regardless of their age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion, belief or non-belief, sex or sexuality or by association with someone with any of these characteristics or perception of having any of these characteristics. An Equality impact assessment has been undertaken.



## 19. Monitoring

The effectiveness of this policy will be measured, monitored, and reported to board members through Performance Indicators (PI's) in line with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code ('the Code'). The primary focus will be on timeliness, quality, customer relationships, outcomes and lessons learnt.

The Director of Housing & Support will take responsibility for monitoring the performance of the complaints officer and for ensuring service areas meet required internal protocols to support the requirements of the Code. The Complaints Officer will have access to staff at all levels to facilitate a prompt resolution.

Performance will be reported on a quarterly basis to Alpha Living board members, and an annual complaints performance and service improvement report will be published on our website, alongside our board members response to the report.

The report will include qualitative and quantitative analysis of the landlord's complaint handling performance and a summary of:

- a) The annual self-assessment against the Code to ensure our complaint handling policy remains in line with the Ombudsman requirements.
- b) A qualitative and quantitative analysis of the complaint handling performance including a summary of the types of complaints Alpha Living have refused to accept;
- c) Any findings of non-compliance with the Code by the Ombudsman
- d) The service improvements made as a result of the learning from complaints;
- e) Any annual report about the

Complaints fall under the Consumer Standard, Tenant Involvement and Empowerment of the Regulator for Social Housing standards. This policy also provides a mechanism for responding effectively and clearly to customer complaints as expected of the Regulator.

## 20. Policy Review

The policy will be reviewed every 2 years or earlier if deemed necessary resulting from the performance monitoring process. Next full Review will be November 2024. However, continuous amendments will be made as necessary continuous and recorded through the amendment log.

| Amendment No | Date       | Details  |
|--------------|------------|--|
| 1            | 30/04/2024 | Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code (April 2024) |
|              |            |  |