

# Operational Procedure 42

## Customer Feedback / Complaints

|                     |                 |              |          |                |                  |          |                      |
|---------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------|----------------|------------------|----------|----------------------|
| Responsible Officer | Head of Service |              |          |                |                  |          |                      |
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Shetland Islands Council – Housing Service  
Customer Feedback/Complaints – Operational Procedure 42

Amendment and Authorisation Record

OP42 – Customer Feedback/Complaints

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## Introduction

This procedure draws on best practice recommendations made by the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO) and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA); parts are extracted from their key documents.

We (SIC) should be aiming to, “get it right first time”. However, errors and therefore complaints are an inevitable part of any organisation providing services to a large number of people. However, complaints information can be used to examine the quality and effectiveness of services.

The SIC Housing service is an organisation committed to continual improvement. Customer feedback may be sought through various formats, i.e. customer/tenant/applicant surveys which may be carried out by mailshot, by electronic mail or by telephone, from a suggestion box placed in the reception area of the main office or from unsolicited comments or complaints made verbally or in writing to any member of staff.

Either way, the information provided should be seen as our opportunity to improve and in the case of complaint our opportunity to put things right and help restore confidence in the Housing service. Complaints are also a way to provide constructive ideas for improving services, practices and policies.

Recognising the importance of responding fairly and efficiently to customer disappointment, many organisations have established effective and customer-sensitive systems for resolving complaints. In the private sector, those companies with a positive philosophy and a reputation for fair complaint management have a competitive edge.

However, there is nothing to prevent public sector organisations from adopting this same proactive and creative response to complaint management. This may not lead to greater profits but it should enhance the standing and reputation of an organisation.

In this context it is the feedback and our actions, which is the most important aspect, with less emphasis on how a complaint or feedback is defined.

All new complaints will be monitored by HMT at their meetings and any corrective actions noted.

A formal acknowledgment will be provided in all cases within 3 working days.

**NOTE: this procedure does not relate to formal decisions on homelessness determinations. This will be covered elsewhere within the QMS.**

**If a member of staff is unsure in anyway about the definition or classification of a complaint or feedback, they should refer the issue to their line manager for clarification.**

**Contact details for the SPSO are attached as *Appendix A***

## **The Basics (as recommended by the SPSO)**

Complaints should be welcomed with a positive attitude and valued as feedback on service performance

Every organisation must have a process for handling complaints

The process should be owned by the governing body of the organisation

The complaint management function should carry the authority of the Chief Executive, or equivalent

There should be clearly defined responsibilities for dealing with complaints

The process should be readily available to all customers and staff of the organisation

The process should be subject to regular review

The process should reflect and enhance the culture of good service delivery

The process should be driven by the search for improvement and not the apportionment of blame

## **Definition and scope**

The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA) defines a complaint as:

*“An expression of dissatisfaction that needs a response”.*

Or alternatively:

*“An expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard and quality of service, action or lack of action by the housing service or its staff affecting an individual customer or a group of customers”.*

In general a customer’s viewpoint should be adopted. If a person considers they are making a complaint, then they are. It should be treated as a complaint, whatever the Council, and its staff thinks, providing it falls within the remit of the Council’s work.

Client’s perceptions and comments about the Council and its Housing service, its services and staff, whether with foundation or not, still have value.

Complaints will also arise over policies the Council may have. Where a simple explanation of the policy will not suffice, a person responsible for the policy area should handle the complaint about policies as lead officer.

## **Anonymous Complaints**

The service will occasionally receive anonymous complaints, and these should be dealt with in line with these procedures as far as practically possible. Obviously it will not be possible to provide written responses to the complainant, however database records and discussion with a line manager should be undertaken, as well as any agreed appropriate action.

There should be no blurring of the distinction between the way communications are handled; they should be treated as suggestions / comments or as complaints. If there is any doubt about how a person would like a matter to be dealt with, they should be asked directly whether they would like the matter treated as a formal complaint or as a comment.

## **Complaints**

In the early stages a complaint may be a relatively low level expression that the Council or the housing service has failed the complainant in some way. This could be verbal, written or via the town hall as a formal complaint. An example might be, they did not get a house they wanted, or staff were late for an appointment, or failed to ring back. **Note:** it does not have to come via the town hall or be addressed to the Head of Service to be a complaint.

The aim is to encourage service users to raise their complaint with the front line staff they come into contact with. The majority of complaints should be dealt with quickly and smoothly, often on the spot or within the working day and without the need for a formal investigation.

With this type of complaint it may be that the complainant simply does not like the outcome of a properly made decision, or Council staff have failed in practice to follow procedures or guidelines.

It is likely in these circumstances that whole scale review of policy and procedures is not required but a low level review may be required to check the validity of the complaint. It could be that an explanation is all that is required. In these cases a record of response should be placed on the house or general file.

## **Responsibility**

It is the responsibility of the Housing Management Team to ensure that comments, suggestions and complaints are dealt with accordingly.

## **Dealing with comments, suggestions and complaints**

### **Dealing with initial correspondence**

- Correspondence can be in the form of letters, emails, telephone calls, faxes or in person at the Housing Service.
- The officer receiving the complaint should log the complaint on the database log, with as much detail as possible. A sample page is attached as Appendix B, and issue an acknowledgement letter to the complainant.
- A new complaint folder should be created using the Complaint ID number as the folder name
- The complaint should be scanned and saved in the complaint folder
- Documents relating to the complaint should then be passed and e-mailed to the relevant member of HMT.
- The member of HMT should assign a level to the complaint (or close if not valid).

### **Comments and suggestions**

- This would be a genuine expression of how we might improve. This could be delivered verbally or written, from an applicant, tenant, advocate, councillor or member of the public.
- This might be in the form of a request for information or service provision expressed by a third party. For example, a written enquiry on behalf of someone else, from a Councillor, MSP, MP, CAB, doctor etc. The formal nature of an enquiry does not necessarily mean that it is a complaint. It remains the case that some people do prefer to seek advocates to help with their information requirements.

### **Level 1 complaint**

- Anything that cannot be resolved the same day should be treated as a level 1 complaint

### **Level 2 Complaint**

- These are complaints brought to the attention of Service Managers, Head of Service or the Chief Executive, seeking to review or appeal the outcome of a level 1 response.

### **Level 3 Complaint**

- These will be serious accusations or complaints regarding a major failing of the Council or the Housing service. An example might be an accusation of corruption, mal-practice or mis-conduct.
- In any event staff should be aware of the Councils policy for reporting concerns at work. The link below can be used to access that policy.
- [http://www.sic.gov.uk/services/personnel/policies/documents/Reporting\\_Concerns\\_aug04\\_JGS.pdf](http://www.sic.gov.uk/services/personnel/policies/documents/Reporting_Concerns_aug04_JGS.pdf)

### **Dealing with different levels of complaint**

#### **Comments, Suggestions and Level 1 complaints**

- The member of HMT should allocate the complaint to a member of staff, passing on e-mailed details and documents to that officer, and update the database accordingly.
- The assigned officer should discuss the issue with their line manager and agree the appropriate action;
- If necessary, the assigned officer will initiate an enquiry to determine what has happened and record a summary of the enquiry. A template for such purposes is provided at Appendix C. **Note:** a summary of the complaint from the data base can be printed and attached to Appendix D to avoid duplication of information already available;
- The appointed officer will review the decision / outcome and proposed actions with their line manager
- The appointed officer should update the database giving brief details of the action taken.
- Within 10 working days, the appointed officer will ensure that a full written response is provided to the complainant, thanking them for their feedback and confirming the actions we will be taking. A sample letter is attached as Appendix E; A copy of the letter should be saved in the appropriate complaints folder on the network.
- The reply should make it clear that if the person is unhappy with the response, they should consider making an appeal to the Head of Housing, with an eventual recourse to the Chief Executive or the SPSO, as appropriate;

- Ensure that details of the feedback and the response given are recorded on the house or general files;
- The appointed officer should notify the member of HMT who delegated the work that the complaint has been dealt with and is ready to be closed.
- The member of HMT will consider the need for any service action to be taken and action it themselves or delegate it to a relevant member of staff. This must then be recorded on the database and the complaint closed.
- If corrective or preventative action is required, Quality Procedure (QP4) should be followed.

### **Level 2 complaint**

- The member of HMT should assign the complaint to a senior officer to deal with. (If they are dealing with the complaint themselves the database still needs to be updated to show this). **Note: the person carrying out the review should not have carried out or counter signed the first enquiry;**
- Establish from the complainant the reasons why the original decision was unacceptable or unsatisfactory;
- Consider whether to examine the case afresh or review the earlier response;
- Within 10 working days the senior officer will ensure that a full written response is provided to the complainant, thanking them for their feedback and confirming results of the appeal. An example letter is attached as Appendix F; (Save a copy of the letter in the relevant complaints folder).
- The complainant should be advised that they can appeal the decision to the Chief Executive or the SPSO where appropriate;
- Ensure that details of the feedback and the response given, recorded on the house or general files;
  - The appointed officer should notify the member of HMT who delegated the work that the complaint has been dealt with and is ready to be closed.
  - The member of HMT will consider the need for any service action to be taken and action it themselves or delegate it to a relevant member of staff. This must then be recorded on the database and the complaint closed.

- If corrective or preventative action is required, Quality Procedure (QP4) should be followed.

### **Level 3 Complaint**

- These issues should be passed to the Head of Service and actioned as in level 2 above. The Head of Service should consider the need for an independent investigation.
- However, if the accusation is against the Head of Service the matter should be passed to the Chief Executive, the Head of Legal Services and/or the Police. This will then be dealt with by the Chief Executives' office.
- In the case of any financial irregularity reference should be made to the Council's standing orders for guidance on how to proceed.

## Appendix A – External Contact Details

### Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO)

Address: Melville Street  
Edinburgh  
EH3 7NS

Tel: 0800 377 7330

Web link: <http://www.spsso.org.uk/index.php>

### The Care Commission

Address: Compass House  
11 Riverside Drive  
Dundee  
DD1 4NY

Tel: 01382 207100

Web link: <http://www.carecommission.com>

## Appendix B - Sample page of database log (to be completed)

COMPLAINTSRecord: 1 of 1

# Add a Complaint

|           |                         |                        |           |                    |
|-----------|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| ID Number | Date Complaint Received | Date Complaint Entered | Logged by | Mail log Reference |
|           | 25/04/2008              | 25/04/2008             |           | 0                  |

Source of complaint:

Complaint about:

Complaint from:

Name(s):

Current Address:


Previous Address (If complaint is regarding previous house):

|                      |                      |                      |                      |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Home Phone           | Work Phone           | Mobile               | email                |
| <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |


Details of complaint:

Any special requirements:

Passed to (member of HMT):



**Housing  
Complaints  
v3**



## Appendix C - Review of Housing Complaint - File audit trail

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Name of file or file ref:</b> A N Other file ref, 1234  |  |
| <b>Nature of complaint relating to this case:</b><br><br>e.g. X is no longer residing in her accommodation and she is helped by relatives working in housing   |  |
| <b>Application address:</b> if relevant  |  |
| <b>Application date:</b> if relevant   |  |
| <b>Household make up:</b> Single man 18 years old with 2 year old son and joint applicant A N Other age 25   |  |
| <b>Staff involved:</b> All names of those involved directly or indirectly  |  |
| <b>Methodology:</b><br><br>For example <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview with A N Other</li> <li>• Review of application file</li> <li>• Review of house file</li> <li>• Interview of Housing Officer</li> </ul>  |  |
| <b>Review of File by event:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• e.g. Letter received from neighbour</li> <li>• E mail from HO to legal services</li> <li>• E mail from staff member related to applicant</li> <li>• Allocation made</li> <li>• 10/10/07 – rent statement for arrears</li> </ul> | <b>Any issues identified:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standard procedure</li> <li>• Protocol not followed</li> <li>• In line with policy</li> </ul> |
| <b>Follow up sought:</b> if required<br>For example <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When were points awarded and brought into operation</li> <li>• Check number of other 2 bed applicants who may have missed out if this complaint is upheld</li> </ul>  |  |
| <b>Summary of interviews and dates:</b><br><br>20/05/07 Interviewed Housing Officer – claimed to have no knowledge of events<br>21/05/07 Interviewed DLO operative who left in the afternoon after seeing tenant   |  |
| <b>Assessment / Conclusions:</b>   |  |
| <b>Recommendations:</b>  |  |
| <b>Audit completed by:</b>   |  |
|  | <b>Date:</b>   |
| <b>Line managers review undertaken by:</b>   |  |
|  | <b>Date:</b>   |

**Appendix D - Sample letter of response to a comment or suggestion**

Name  
Add1  
Add2  
Add3  
Post Code

Dear *name*

**Comment - Subject**

Thank you for your \*telephone call/letter/comments, received by us on the 00/00/200X. Thank you also for bringing this to my attention.

Following on from your comments the issue was discussed with the staff concerned and the manager responsible for this part of the housing service.

After careful consideration, I can advise you that \**explanation or we will / will not be able to carry out the following actions:*

- i)       XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX (include date if appropriate)
- ii)       YYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY

Your views and comments are always welcome to improve the quality of services we provide.

If you are in any way unhappy with this response, you can consider making a complaint by contacting this office by telephone or in writing. This could eventually lead to consideration of your complaint by the Head of Housing on behalf of the Council or the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO).

Please let me know if you require any further help or information.

Yours sincerely

AN Other

## Appendix E - Sample letter of response to a complaint

Name  
Add1  
Add2  
Add3  
Post Code

Dear *name*

### **Complaint - Subject**

Thank you for your \*telephone call/letter/complaint, received by us on the 00/00/201X. Thank you also for bringing this to my attention. I am sorry to hear of the difficulties you are experiencing.

Following on from your complaint the issue was \*investigated / discussed with the staff concerned and the manager responsible for this part of the housing service.

\*I am unable to uphold any part of your complaint for the following reasons: \*It would seem that we have not performed well on this occasion. Please accept my apologies on behalf of the housing service for any inconvenience this may have caused.

After careful consideration, I can advise you that \**explanation or we will / will not be able to carry out the following actions:*

- i)       XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX (include target date if appropriate)
- ii)       YYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY

\*I appreciate that this will not undo what has already happened. However, I trust that the actions we are now taking will help to resolve things to your satisfaction and help restore confidence in the housing service / \*I realise that this information will be disappointing but trust that it provides a proper explanation for our \*actions / decisions

Your views and comments are always welcome to improve the quality of services we provide.

If you are in any way unhappy with this response, you can consider making an appeal by contacting this office by telephone or in writing. This could eventually lead to consideration of your appeal by the Head of Housing, with an eventual recourse to the Chief Executive or the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO), as appropriate

Please let me know if you require any further help or information.

Yours sincerely

## Appendix F - Sample letter of response to an appeal

Name  
Add1  
Add2  
Add3  
Post Code

Dear *name*

### **Complaint appeal - Subject**

Thank you for your \*telephone call/letter/comments, received by us on the 00/00/201X. I am sorry to hear that you are less than satisfied with any part of the service you have received.

Following on from our response dated 000/00/200X the issue was \*considered further taking into account your reasons for appeal / discussed with the staff concerned and the manager responsible for this part of the housing service.

\*I am unable to uphold any part of your complaint for the following reasons: \*It would seem that we have not performed well on this occasion. Please accept my apologies on behalf of the housing service for any inconvenience this may have caused.

After careful consideration, I can advise you that \**explanation or we will / will* not be able to carry out the following actions:

- i)       XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX (include target date if appropriate)
- ii)       YYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY

\*I appreciate that this will not undo what has already happened. However, I trust that the actions we are now taking will help to resolve things to your satisfaction and help restore confidence in the housing service / \*I realise that this information will be disappointing but trust that it provides a proper explanation for our \*actions / decisions

Your views and comments are always welcome to improve the quality of services we provide.

If you are in any way unhappy with this response, you can consider making a further appeal by contacting this office by telephone or in writing. This could eventually lead to consideration of your further appeal by the Chief Executive or the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO), as appropriate.

Please let me know if you require any further help or information.

Yours sincerely

**Appendix G - Flow diagram for complaints procedure**

