

Complaints Handling and Resolution Policy

March 2024



Policy summary

This policy sets out Arhag Housing Association's (AHA) policy for receiving and handling complaints, ensuring we deal with them in a consistent and transparent way.

We understand that sometimes things go wrong and that we need to take action to put this right. If this happens, we'll record this, apologise, understand why it happened, and try to quickly resolve your enquiry. We'll check that you're happy with our explanation and proposed resolution. If we need to make further enquiries to resolve your issue, or if you remain unhappy, we'll escalate your enquiry through our formal complaints process as a Stage One complaint. You can also ask to open a complaint at any time. We welcome your feedback to help us to improve the services we provide.

The Complaint Handler will log and manage your complaint. They'll make sure we investigate it fully and that any outcome is fair, clear and reasonable. If you're not happy with our response to your complaint or feel that we haven't answered your questions, you can escalate your complaint to a Stage Two Appeal Panel. If you're not satisfied with AHA's response to your Stage Two appeal, you can escalate your complaint to the Housing Ombudsman, as detailed in this policy.

We're committed to resolving complaints to your satisfaction wherever possible, and to using your feedback to learn lessons so we improve the services we provide.

If you have any queries about this policy or would like to make a complaint, you can call us on 020 7424 7370, email contact@arhag.co.uk or visit our office. You can also contact us through our website or social media.

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1. Policy purpose

- 1.1 We welcome resident feedback to help us to improve the services we provide. This policy sets out how we'll handle complaints, ensuring they're dealt with quickly in a fair, consistent, transparent and impartial way. It also explains how we'll learn from complaints to improve the way we work for our residents.

2. Policy scope

- 2.1 A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction, however it's made, about the standard of service, action or lack of action that affects an individual resident or group of residents. This could be about AHA and our employees, or any individual or organisation acting on our behalf.
- 2.2 This policy does not cover service requests as these are different from complaints. In line with guidance from the Housing Ombudsman, a service request is when a resident needs action to put something right. We record, monitor and review service requests regularly. We explain how these link to complaints in section 3 of this policy.
- 2.3 This policy applies to all areas of our business, including contractors and partners delivering our services.
- 2.4 An expression of dissatisfaction with services made through a survey is not defined as a complaint. However, the resident completing the survey may raise this as a complaint if they wish to. Where we ask for wider feedback about our services, we also provide details of how residents can complain.
- 2.5 Within this policy, we define resident as a person who is or has been in a landlord/tenant relationship with us. This includes people who have a lease, tenancy, licence or other arrangement to occupy premises owned or managed by us. This also includes applicants for an AHA home.
- 2.6 If we receive a complaint from someone who isn't an AHA resident who feels they've been affected by our service or actions, we'll also manage their complaint through this policy. However, non-AHA complainants aren't able to appeal to the Housing Ombudsman.

3. Policy details

3.1 Our approach to service requests and complaints

- 3.1.1 We understand that sometimes things go wrong and that we need to take action to put this right. If this happens, we'll record this, apologise, understand why it happened, and try to quickly resolve your enquiry. We'll agree the timeframe for doing this with you. We'll check that you're happy with our explanation and proposed resolution.
- 3.1.2 If we need to make further enquiries to resolve your issue, or if you remain unhappy, we'll escalate your enquiry through our formal complaints process as a Stage One complaint. You can also ask to open a complaint at any time and don't have to use the word complaint for it to be treated as such.
- 3.1.3 At any point during the complaints process you may raise additional complaints that relate to the original complaint and we will include this in our investigation.
- 3.1.4 At any point during our complaints process you can contact the Housing Ombudsman for impartial advice, using the details shown in section 3.4.
- 3.1.5 We'll respect your confidentiality wherever possible and will advise you if we need to share information with others.
- 3.1.6 We'll treat anonymous complaints seriously and investigate them fully but aren't able to respond without contact details.
- 3.1.7 Arhag will always use plain language when communicating with residents. We will offer the services of Language Line and make available, our staff and contractors who use a range of languages, to remove language and cultural barriers when residents want to complain.

3.2 Managing formal complaints – Stage One

- 3.2.1 We'll always make it easy for you to complain and will provide multiple ways for you to do this, for example, through our website or social media, by telephone or email, in person or writing. If you complain via social media, we'll respond via private message to maintain your privacy. If information isn't suitable for the public domain, we may remove your complaint from social media (for example, the names of employees, other residents, or address details).
- 3.2.2 The Complaint Handler will log and manage your complaint. They'll make sure we investigate your complaint fully and that any outcome is fair, clear, and reasonable.

- 3.2.3 Anyone can raise a complaint on your behalf. We must have your written permission to share information and discuss your complaint with a person other than you. When we respond to a formal complaint raised by someone else, we'll send our outcome letter to you and provide a copy to the other person. This includes if we receive a complaint made on your behalf by your MP or local councillor.
- 3.2.4 We'll log your complaint and contact you to acknowledge it within five working days of receiving it. The Complaint Handler may ask you for more information or clarification, if needed and will also explain our understanding of your complaint, and the outcomes you're seeking.
- 3.2.5 We'll always accept a complaint unless there's a valid reason not to. We've listed examples of when we wouldn't accept a complaint below.
- In most circumstances, we'd expect the complaint to be made within twelve months of the incident or matter taking place. However, we'll not usually exclude complaints that concern safeguarding or health and safety issues outside this timeframe.
 - We won't open a complaint if legal proceedings have started. This applies if details, such as a Claim Form and Particulars of Claim, have been filed at court.
 - If the matter you're complaining about has previously been considered as a complaint, we'll escalate your original complaint rather than opening a new complaint.
 - We won't open a complaint if there are outstanding or ongoing insurance claims.
- 3.2.6 If we don't accept your complaint, we'll always explain the reasons why it's not suitable and your right to take that decision to the Housing Ombudsman.
- 3.2.7 We'll investigate your complaint, keeping you updated of progress. We'll provide a full response within ten working days of logging your complaint. We'll track any outstanding actions and keep you informed on how they're progressing.
- 3.2.8 If your complaint is more complex and the investigation may take longer, we'll explain why and provide you with a clear timeframe of when you can expect our response. This extension will never exceed a further ten working days without good reason. If we need an extension longer than 20 working days, we'll agree this with you. If we can't agree this timeframe, we'll provide you with the Housing Ombudsman's contact details so you can challenge our plan and proposed timescales for responding.
- 3.2.9 If your complaint involves the conduct of an employee, we may run our complaints investigation alongside a formal Human Resources disciplinary

investigation. We'll explain this to you and update you on progress, as much as we can. However, in order to comply with employment and data protection laws, we aren't able to share the outcome of a disciplinary investigation with you.

3.3 Appeal Panel – Stage Two

- 3.3.1 If you're not satisfied with our response to your Stage One complaint, you can escalate your complaint to a Stage Two Appeal Panel.
- 3.3.2 We should receive your request for escalation within 20 working days from the date of our Stage One response. We'll reconsider this timeframe in exceptional circumstances.
- 3.3.3 We'll never unreasonably refuse to escalate a complaint through all stages of our complaints procedure. The reasons for declining to escalate a complaint are the same as set out in 3.2.5. If we aren't able to escalate your complaint, we'll always explain our reasons for this.
- 3.3.4 We'll log your request to escalate your complaint and contact you to acknowledge it within five working days of receiving it.
- 3.3.5 We'll provide you with a summary of your complaint. The purpose of this summary is to provide those on the Appeal Panel with information relating to your complaint, including our understanding of outstanding issues and the outcomes that you're seeking. If any aspect of the complaint is unclear, we'll ask you for more information or clarification. This will be used at the Appeal Panel so you should let us know before the meeting if you don't agree with our summary or if you feel we've missed anything out.
- 3.3.6 The purpose of an Appeal Panel is to give you the opportunity to explain your reasons for challenging our Stage One complaint response and to explain the outcome you're seeking.
- 3.3.7 The Appeal Panel will be made up of a senior manager and another employee. Both panel members will be independent from the service area or areas that you've complained about and won't have been part of the Stage One response. You also have the option to ask that a member of our resident scrutiny panel (RSP) attends as a third panel member.
- 3.3.8 The Appeal Panel meeting will take place within 15 working days of your escalation request. If this isn't possible, we'll explain why this is and arrange the meeting at the earliest convenient date and time for you.

- 3.3.9 You can choose whether to attend the Appeal Panel meeting in person or remotely (for example, an online conference call). You can also choose not to attend if that's your preference.
- 3.3.10 You can bring a friend or family member for moral support or to speak on your behalf. This isn't a legal process so legal representatives can only attend in a personal capacity. We may exclude any individual if we feel that their involvement makes it difficult for the panel to understand and resolve your complaint.
- 3.3.11 After the meeting has finished, the Appeal Panel will decide the outcome. We'll send you details of the outcome within five working days of the date of Appeal Panel meeting.
- 3.3.12 If the Stage Two appeal to your complaint is more complex and the investigation may take longer, we'll let you know and keep you informed of progress. This will never exceed a further 10 working days without good reason. If we need longer than 10 working days' extension, we'll agree a new timeframe with you. If we can't agree this timeframe, we'll provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details so you can challenge our plan for responding and our timeframes.

3.4 External appeals

- 3.4.1 If you're an AHA resident, at the end of our internal two stage complaints process you can appeal externally to the Housing Ombudsman if you still remain unhappy.
- 3.4.2 For more information about the Ombudsman's service, to ask for advice or to contact them to escalate a complaint please use the following details.

Address: Housing Ombudsman Service, PO Box 152, Liverpool. L33 7WQ
Tel : 0300 111 3000
Email : info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk
Web: www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk

3.5 Record keeping

- 3.5.1 We'll keep a full record of all complaints, the outcomes at each stage, and the lessons that we learn in line with our Data Retention Policy. This will include the original complaint and the date received, all correspondence, and any other relevant documents.

3.6 Support

- 3.6.1 We'll support you throughout the complaints process, making sure that you understand the next steps and who to contact if you have any queries. We'll regularly update you about the process of our investigation.
- 3.6.2 We'll provide information in the format you need. We'll be flexible based on your needs and will consider any reasonable adjustments you request.
- 3.6.3 We'll support you at the panel and help signpost you to an advocacy service if you would like one to help your voice be heard. You can choose to have another resident on the Appeal Panel with life experience of being an AHA resident.

3.7 Unreasonable complainants

- 3.7.1 We aim to provide a fair service and to work together with our residents to provide a resolution as quickly and effectively as possible where things go wrong. However, in rare cases, the excessive frequency of contact or unreasonableness from a resident may inhibit our ability to properly consider their issues and those relating to other residents.
- 3.7.2 If we believe that a resident is behaving unreasonably during the complaints process, we'll explain the reasons why we believe this to be the case.
- 3.7.3 If the same unreasonable behaviour continues to occur, we will agree a contact strategy tailored to the individual case. This may include:
 - agreeing regular updates on a topic at a defined frequency;
 - limiting the resident to only contact the organisation via an agreed method;
 - limiting the resident to only contact a named team member;
 - limiting the frequency or timing of contact on certain topics;
 - responding only to new issues or complaints.
- 3.7.4 We'll only consider a strategy such as this in exceptional circumstances and we'll always explore all other options of finding a resolution before discussing this. This will be agreed by a Director/Head of Service, and we'll confirm this in writing to the resident.
- 3.7.5 We'll explain to the resident that they need to appeal within 10 working days if they disagree with our approach. Appeals will be reviewed by a different director/head of service to who agreed the strategy.
- 3.7.6 It's important to recognise that in some cases involving persistent contact or unreasonable complaints, there may be an underlying reason for the

complainant's behaviour which makes effective communication difficult. We'll always consider the Equality Act 2010 when agreeing a strategy. We'll also consider the use of advocates, support agencies and mediation to help communication and resolution, where appropriate.

3.8 Goodwill gestures

3.8.1 We aim to provide an excellent service, but we recognise that occasionally things do go wrong. If we fail to meet the level of service set out in our published standards, we'll apologise and put things right. At times this may involve paying compensation to you or making a goodwill gesture. Please view our Compensation and Goodwill Gesture Policy for further details.

3.9 Learning from complaints

3.9.1 We use all feedback as a positive source of information to continuously improve the services we provide and our residents experience. We'll monitor service requests and formal complaints, analysing trends and learning from feedback.

3.9.2 It's important to us that we have a culture in AHA that learns from complaints. We'll ask for your feedback about how we've handled your complaint and how we can improve this via a survey.

3.10 Reporting

3.10.1 We'll carry out an annual self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code to ensure our complaint handling remains in line with their requirements.

3.10.2 We'll regularly report information about complaints, performance and lessons learnt to our Board, Operations Committee, Senior Management Team and Resident Scrutiny Panel. They'll use this to identify potential systemic issues, risks, policies and procedures that require revision. This information will inform employee and contractor training.

3.10.3 We'll regularly tell residents about our performance in handling complaints, what we've learnt and improvements we've made. This includes publishing information in our annual report, which you can access via our website.

3.11 Awareness

3.11.1 We'll publicise this complaints policy and process, the Complaint Handling Code and the Housing Ombudsman Scheme. We'll do this through leaflets, newsletters, our website, social media and as part of regular correspondence with residents.

4. Equalities considerations

- 4.1 We're committed to ensuring that everyone is supported and receives services fairly. This policy has been reviewed to ensure it is fair, meets the needs of residents and considers all protected characteristics.
- 4.2 We'll provide support and guidance to anyone wishing to make a complaint and will ensure that the process is accessible to all. We'll make reasonable adjustments as needed to accommodate a person's individual needs, as detailed in the policy.

5. Policy consultation, approval and review

- 5.1 Residents were contacted as part of this policy update to ensure that it is fit for purpose from a resident perspective.
- 5.2 This policy will be reviewed every year, as legislation changes or in line with best practice in complaints service delivery.

6. Policy Supporting Documents

- Equality Act 2010
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act 2018
- Anti-Social Behaviour Policy
- Compensation and Goodwill Gesture Policy
- Reasonable Adjustments Policy
- Zero Tolerance Policy
- Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code

Complaints Handling & Resolution Policy

Responsible Person/Policy Owner: Head of Housing

Authored and Reviewed by: CEO & Service Improvement Manager

Approved by: Senior Management Team

Updated: March 2024

Next Review: March 2025