

ASPIRE HOUSING

ANNUAL SELF ASSESSMENT AGAINST THE COMPLAINT HANDLING CODE

OCTOBER 2022

The Housing Ombudsman Service is set up by law to look at complaints about housing organisations registered with them. It is mandatory for all registered social housing providers, including Aspire, to be members of the Ombudsman Scheme.

They resolve disputes involving the tenants and leaseholders of social landlords (housing associations and local authorities) and our voluntary members.

Their service is free, independent and impartial. Residents and landlords can contact the Ombudsman at any time for support in helping to resolve a dispute. Their website, housing-ombudsman.org.uk, provides information and guidance to support residents and landlords and they can be contacted by telephone on 0300 111 3000 or by mail at Housing Ombudsman Service, PO Box 152, Liverpool, L33 7WQ.

The Housing Ombudsman first published a Complaints Handling Code in July 2020, setting out good practice to help landlords respond to complaints effectively and fairly. This has since been revised and an updated Code was published in March 2022. A key requirement of the code is for landlords to publish a self-assessment against the Code's key complaint handling principles annually.

This is Aspire's third self-assessment. It has been completed by an internal complaints panel, led by the Executive Director of Customer Experience. It has been reviewed with Aspire's customer group OASIS on October 2022 and will be reviewed by **Aspire Housing Board in November 2022**. **All data refers to 2021/22.**

The Ombudsman's revised Complaint Handling Code can be found [here](#). The Code includes mandatory requirements ('musts') and best practice guidance ('shoulds') as laid out below.

Aspire's previous self-assessments can be found at aspirehousing.co.uk.

Section 1: Definition of a complaint

Code Section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
1.2	A complaint must be 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'.	Yes	As set out within the Customer Feedback Policy which is available to customers on the Aspire website ' Policies ' page.
1.3	The resident does not have to use the word 'complaint' for it to be treated as such. A complaint that is submitted via a third party or representative must still be handled in line with the landlord's complaints policy.	Yes	All expressions of dissatisfaction with our service in line with the definition are logged as a complaint, whether it

			concerns Aspire or a third party acting on our behalf.
1.6	... if further enquiries are needed to resolve the matter, or if the resident requests it, the issue must be logged as a complaint.	Yes	As above (1.3).
1.7	A landlord must accept a complaint unless there is a valid reason not to do so.	Yes	Exclusions reasons are included in the Customer Feedback Policy.
1.8	A complaints policy must clearly set out the circumstances in which a matter will not be considered, and these circumstances should be fair and reasonable to residents	Yes	As above (1.7).
1.9	If a landlord decides not to accept a complaint, a detailed explanation must 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.	Yes	As above (1.7).
1.4	Landlords should recognise the difference between a service request, where a resident may be unhappy with a situation that they wish to have rectified, and a complaint	Yes	Service requests are dealt with in line with process. Training for the customer service team includes recognising the difference between a service request and a complaint.
1.5	Survey feedback may not necessarily need to be treated 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.	Yes	Where a customer expresses dissatisfaction with a service in a survey, they are advised of the option to pursue as a formal complaint as applicable and the feedback is also sent to the service manager.

Section 2: Accessibility and awareness

Code Section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
2.1	Landlords must make it easy for residents to complain by providing different channels through which residents can make a complaint such as in person, over the telephone, in writing, by email and digitally. While the Ombudsman recognises that it may not be feasible for a landlord to use all of the potential channels, there must be more than one route of access into the complaints system.	Yes	Complaints are accepted by all communications methods.
2.3	Landlords must make their complaint policy available in a clear and accessible format for all residents. This will detail the number of stages	Yes	The Policy is available on the 'Policies' page of the Aspire website along with additional

	involved, what will happen at each stage and the time frames for responding.		guidance on the ‘FAQ’ page under ‘General’.
2.4	Landlord websites, if they exist, must include information on how to raise a complaint. The complaints policy and process must be easy to find on the website.	Yes	As above (2.3). Complaints and feedback can be raised via the ‘Contact Us’ page.
2.5	Landlords must comply with the Equality Act 2010 and may need to adapt normal policies, procedures, or processes to accommodate an individual’s needs. Landlords must satisfy themselves that their policy sets out how they will respond to reasonable adjustments requests in line with the Equality Act and that complaints handlers have had appropriate training to deal with such requests.	Yes	The Policy includes reference to our obligations under the Equality Act 2010. Training for complaint handlers is being reviewed and will include reference to the necessary skills.
2.6	Landlords must publicise the complaints policy and process, the Complaint Handling Code and the Housing Ombudsman Scheme in leaflets, posters, newsletters, online and as part of regular correspondence with residents.	Yes	Our ‘People First’ approach to welcoming feedback and the role of the Ombudsman is promoted in our customer newsletters, annual rent letter and annual report.
2.7	Landlords must provide residents with contact information for the Ombudsman as part of its regular correspondence with residents.	Yes	As above (2.6).
2.8	Landlords must provide early advice to residents regarding their right to access the Housing Ombudsman Service throughout their complaint, not only when the landlord’s complaints process is exhausted.	Yes	The Stage 1 letter has been reviewed to include reference to the Ombudsman’s broader service. Information on our online FAQ page has also been updated.
2.2	Where a landlord has set up channels to communicate with its residents via social media, then it should expect to receive complaints via those channels. Policies should contain details of the steps that will be taken when a complaint is received via social media and how confidentiality and privacy will be maintained.	Yes	Where a complaint is raised via social media correspondence is requested by private message.

Section 3: Complaint handling personnel

Code Section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
3.1	Landlords must have a person or team assigned to take responsibility for complaint handling to ensure complaints receive the necessary attention, and that these are reported to the	Yes	Head of Customer Services is the responsible role. In response to the revised Code, a new role has been created to support the delivery of

	governing body. This Code will refer to that person or team as the “complaints officer”.		regulatory requirements for complaint handling.
3.2	...the complaint handler appointed must have appropriate complaint handling skills and no conflicts of interest	Yes	The appropriate training is mandatory for all complaint handlers and the responsibility of the complaints officer. As above (2.5) this is being reviewed and will include reference to the required skills and expectations as laid out in the revised Code.
3.3	Complaint handlers should : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be able to act sensitively and fairly • be trained to handle complaints and deal with distressed and upset residents • have access to staff at all levels to facilitate quick resolution of complaints • have the authority and autonomy to act to resolve disputes quickly and fairly. 	Yes	This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2).

Section 4: Complaint handling principles

Code Section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
4.1	Any decision to try and resolve a concern must be taken in agreement with the resident and a landlord’s audit trail/records should be able to demonstrate this. Landlords must ensure that efforts to resolve a resident’s concerns do not obstruct access to the complaints procedure or result in any unreasonable delay. It is not appropriate to have extra named stages (such as ‘stage 0’ or ‘pre-complaint stage’) as this causes unnecessary confusion for residents. When a complaint is made, it must be acknowledged and logged at stage one of the complaints procedure within five days of receipt.	Yes	Handlers are required to record all interactions with the customer on our system. In line with our Customer Feedback Policy, we have a two-stage process, prior to escalation to the Housing Ombudsman Service. Complaints are acknowledged at the point of receipt and a reference number provided.
4.2	Within the complaint acknowledgement, landlords must set out their understanding of the complaint and the outcomes the resident is seeking. If any aspect of the complaint is unclear, the resident must be asked for clarification and the full definition agreed between both parties.	Yes	Handlers are required to contact the customer to understand the complaint and outcomes sought and record this on the system. There is a standard template resolution letter that requires that this is set out as agreed.
4.6	A complaint investigation must be conducted in an impartial manner.	Yes	This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2).

4.7	<p>The complaint handler must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • deal with complaints on their 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, with information only disclosed if necessary to properly investigate the matter. 	Yes	As above (3.2).
4.11	Landlords must adhere to any reasonable arrangements agreed with residents in terms of frequency and method of communication	Yes	As set out within the Customer Feedback Policy.
4.12	<p>The resident, and if applicable any staff member who is the subject of the complaint, must also be given a fair chance to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set out their position • comment on any adverse findings before a final decision is made. 	Yes	As above (4.11).
4.13	A landlord must include in its complaints policy its timescales for a resident to request escalation of a complaint	Yes	As above (4.11).
4.14	<p>A landlord must not unreasonably refuse to escalate a complaint through all stages of the complaints procedure and must have clear and valid reasons for taking that course of action. Reasons for declining to escalate a complaint must be clearly set out in a landlord's complaints policy and must be the same as the reasons for not accepting a complaint.</p>	Yes	As reflected in our Customer Feedback Policy, as above (4.11)
4.15	A full record must be kept of the complaint, any review and the outcomes at each stage. This must include the original complaint and the date received, all correspondence with the resident, correspondence with other parties and any reports or surveys prepared.	Yes	As above (4.1).
4.16	Landlords must have policies and procedures in place for managing unacceptable behaviour from residents and/or their representatives when pursuing a complaint.	Yes	As reflected in our Customer Feedback Policy, as above (4.11)
4.3	Landlords should manage residents' expectations from the outset, being clear where a desired outcome is unreasonable or unrealistic	Yes	This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2).
4.4	A complaint should be resolved at the earliest possible opportunity, having assessed what evidence is needed to fully consider the issues, what outcome would resolve the matter for the	Yes	This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2) and is

	resident and whether there are any urgent actions required.		reflected in our Customer Feedback Policy, as above (4.11)
4.5	Landlords should give residents the opportunity to have a representative deal with their complaint on their behalf, and to be represented or accompanied at any meeting with the landlord where this is reasonable.	Yes	This is reflected in our Customer Feedback Policy, as above (4.11)
4.8	Where a key issue of a complaint relates to the parties' legal obligations landlords should clearly set out their understanding of the obligations of both parties.	Yes	This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2) and is reflected in our Customer Feedback Policy, as above (4.11)
4.9	Communication with the resident should not generally identify individual members of staff or contractors.	Yes	This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2).
4.10	Landlords should keep residents regularly updated about the progress of the investigation.	Yes	This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2).
4.16	Landlords should seek feedback from residents in relation to the landlord's complaint handling as part of the drive to encourage a positive complaint and learning culture.	Yes	<p>A complaint handling satisfaction survey is completed for a large proportion of cases, two months following the closure of the complaint or appeal. Results are shared with managers, Aspire's quarterly Complaints Panel, Executive and Leadership teams OASIS and Board.</p> <p>2021/22 –153 responses and a satisfaction with complaint handling result of 72.5% - an improvement from 62.5% during 2020/21.</p>

4.17	Landlords should recognise the impact that being complained about can have on future service delivery. Landlords should ensure that staff are supported and engaged in the complaints process, including the learning that can be gained	Yes	<p>In the complaint handlers training is described as ‘gold dust’ from customers and is used to improve service delivery.</p> <p>A quarterly Complaints Panel reviews cases, learning and team performance.</p> <p>Feedback from complaints including positive feedback, is shared with handlers and compliments are recorded and shared alongside complaints and feedback.</p>
4.19	Any restrictions placed on a resident’s contact due to unacceptable behaviour should be appropriate to their needs and should demonstrate regard for the provisions of the Equality Act 2010.	Yes	The Policy includes reference to our obligations under the Equality Act 2010, as above (2.5).

Section 5: Complaint stages

Code Section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
5.1	Landlords must respond to the complaint within 10 working days of the complaint being logged. Exceptionally, landlords may provide an explanation to the resident containing a clear timeframe for when the response will be received. This should not exceed a further 10 days without good reason.	Yes	<p>Customer Feedback Policy is in line with Code requirements.</p> <p>During 2021/22 89.5% of cases were resolved in 10 days or less, vs. 87.4% during 2020/21.</p>
5.5	A complaint response must be sent to the resident when the answer to the complaint is known, not when the outstanding actions required to address the issue, are completed. Outstanding actions must still be tracked and actioned expeditiously with regular updates provided to the resident.	Yes	As above (3.2) and stated in our Customer Feedback Policy.
5.6	Landlords must address all points raised in the complaint and provide clear reasons for any decisions, referencing the relevant policy, law and good practice where appropriate.	Yes	<p>The standard resolution template letter requires that all points listed are responded to.</p> <p>This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2).</p>

5.8	<p>Landlords must confirm the following in writing to the resident at the completion of stage one in clear, plain language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the complaint stage • 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 • details of how to escalate the matter to stage two if the resident is not satisfied with the answer 	Yes	As above (5.6), the letter template also outlines the process for escalation to stage two.
5.9	<p>If all or part of the complaint is not resolved to the resident's satisfaction at stage one it must be progressed to stage two of the landlord's procedure, unless an exclusion ground now applies. In instances where a landlord declines to escalate a complaint it must clearly communicate in writing its reasons for not escalating as well as the resident's right to approach the Ombudsman about its decision.</p>	Yes	As reflected in our Customer Feedback Policy, as above (4.14).
5.10	<p>On receipt of the escalation request, landlords must set out their understanding of issues outstanding and the outcomes the resident is seeking. If any aspect of the complaint is unclear, the resident must be asked for clarification and the full definition agreed between both parties.</p>	Yes	Heads of Service are allocated stage two cases and are required to contact the customer to confirm understanding of the issues and outcomes sought.
5.11	<p>Landlords must only escalate a complaint to stage two once it has completed stage one and at the request of the resident.</p>	Yes	In response to the revised code, the contact centre no longer escalates a case as a result of non-contact at stage one, rather it is escalated to the handlers' manager for a response at stage one.
5.12	<p>The person considering the complaint at stage two, must not be the same person that considered the complaint at stage one.</p>	Yes	As set out within the Customer Feedback Policy.
5.13	<p>Landlords must respond to the stage two complaint within 20 working days of the complaint being escalated. Exceptionally, landlords may provide an explanation to the resident containing a clear timeframe for when the response will be received. This should not exceed a further 10 days without good reason.</p>	Yes	<p>The Customer Feedback Policy is in line with Code requirements.</p> <p>During 2021/22 72.7% of stage 2 cases were resolved in 20 days or less, vs. 95.2% during 2020/21.</p>

5.17	Two stage landlord complaint procedures are ideal. This ensures that the complaint process is not unduly long. If landlords strongly believe a third stage is necessary, they must set out their reasons for this as part of their self-assessment. A process with more than three stages is not acceptable under any circumstances.	Yes	As set out in the Customer Feedback Policy, there is a two-stage process before escalation to the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS)
5.20	Landlords must confirm the following in writing to the resident at the completion of stage three in clear, plain language: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the complaint stage • 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 • details of how to escalate the matter to the Housing Ombudsman Service if the resident remains dissatisfied 		N/A
5.2	If an [stage one] extension beyond 20 working days is required to enable the landlord to respond to the complaint fully, this should be agreed by both parties.	Yes	The Customer Feedback Policy is in line with Code requirements, as above (5.13).
5.3	Where agreement over an extension period cannot be reached, landlords should provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details so the resident can challenge the landlord's plan for responding and/or the proposed timeliness of a landlord's response.	Yes	As above (5.13).
5.4	Where the problem is a recurring issue, the landlord should consider any older reports as part of the background to the complaint if this will help to resolve the issue for the resident.	Yes	This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2).
5.5	Where residents raise additional complaints during the investigation, these should be incorporated into the stage one response if they are relevant and the stage one response has not been issued. Where the stage one response has been issued, or it would unreasonably delay the response, the complaint should be logged as a new complaint.	Yes	This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2). The Customer Feedback Policy is in line with Code requirements, as above (5.13).
5.14	If an [stage two] extension beyond 10 working days is required to enable the landlord to respond to the complaint fully, this should be agreed by both parties.	Yes	As above (5.13).

5.15	Where agreement over an [stage two] extension period cannot be reached, landlords should provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details so the resident can challenge the landlord's plan for responding and/or the proposed timeliness of a landlord's response.	Yes	As above (5.13).
5.18	Complaints should only go to a third stage if the resident has actively requested a third stage review of their complaint. Where a third stage is in place and has been requested, landlords must respond to the stage three complaint within 20 working days of the complaint being escalated. Additional time will only be justified if related to convening a panel. An explanation and a date for when the stage three response will be received should be provided to the resident.		N/A
5.19	Where agreement over an extension period cannot be reached, landlords should provide the Housing Ombudsman's contact details so the resident can challenge the landlord's plan for responding and/or the proposed timeliness of a landlord's response.		N/A

Section 6: Putting things right

Code Section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
6.1	Effective dispute resolution requires a process designed to resolve complaints. Where something has gone wrong a landlord must acknowledge this and set out the actions it has already taken, or intends to take, to put things right.	Yes	<p>The resolution letter template includes a section to set out what we are doing to put things right.</p> <p>We also record service changes on the case record and review them at the Complaints Panel.</p> <p>This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2).</p>

6.2	Any remedy offered must reflect the extent of any service failures and the level of detriment caused to the resident as a result. A landlord must carefully manage the expectations of residents and not promise anything that cannot be delivered or would cause unfairness to other residents.	Yes	This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2)
6.5	The remedy offer must clearly set out what will happen and by when, in agreement with the resident where appropriate. Any remedy proposed must be followed through to completion.	Yes	This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2) & referenced in the complaint resolution letter, as referenced above (6.1).
6.6	In awarding compensation, a landlord must consider whether any statutory payments are due, if any quantifiable losses have been incurred, the time and trouble a resident has been put to as well as any distress and inconvenience caused.	Yes	The Housing Ombudsman's guidance on compensation has been shared with the Complaints Panel to use as a basis for paying compensation. Our approach to awarding compensation is including in the Customer Feedback Policy. This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2).
6.3	Landlords should look beyond the circumstances of the individual complaint and consider whether anything needs to be 'put right' in terms of process or systems to the benefit of all residents.	Yes	Handlers are encouraged to identify process and policy service changes as well as addressing the individual issue. Complaint themes are reviewed by the Complaints Panel and Leadership in order to identify any process or system issues.
6.7	In some cases, a resident may have a legal entitlement to redress. The landlord should still offer a resolution where possible, obtaining legal advice as to how any offer of resolution should be worded.	Yes	This will also be reinforced through our revised complaint handler training, as referenced above (3.2), and is reflected in our Customer Feedback Policy, as above (4.8).

Section 7: Continuous learning and improvement

Code Section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
7.2	<p>Accountability and transparency are integral to a positive complaint handling culture. Landlords must report back on wider learning and improvements from complaints in their annual report and more frequently to their residents, staff and scrutiny panels.</p>	Yes	<p>Monthly complaints reports are shared with colleagues on the intranet, alongside learning from the Housing Ombudsman when it is published. The customer group OASIS and the Board also receive a quarterly report on complaints and learning and the self-assessment to review and approve.</p> <p>The customer annual report includes a section on complaints performance and learning and is published on our website here. It also includes a link to our latest self-assessment against the code.</p>
7.3	<p>A member of the governing body should be appointed to have lead responsibility for complaints to support a positive complaint handling culture. This role will be responsible for ensuring the governing body receives regular information on complaints that provides insight to the governing body on the landlord's complaint handling performance.</p>	No	<p>The appointment of a Board member as a complaints lead will be made alongside the establishment of stronger customer involvement in complaint review following recommendations from TPAS in early 2023/24.</p>
7.4	<p>As a minimum, governing bodies should receive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular updates on the volume, categories and outcome of complaints, alongside complaint handling performance including compliance with the Ombudsman's orders • Regular reviews of issues and trends arising from complaint handling, • The annual performance report produced by the Ombudsman, where applicable • Individual complaint outcomes where necessary, including where the Ombudsman made findings of severe maladministration or referrals to regulatory bodies. The implementation of management responses should be tracked to ensure they are delivered to agreed timescales. • The annual self-assessment against the Complaint Handling Code for scrutiny and challenge. 	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Board receive a quarterly complaint update which covers the requirements laid out • The Board will receive notice of the annual performance report when published as applicable • The Board receive an update on Ombudsman findings and actions required, which are tracked to ensure delivery • The Board receive the self-assessment following review by the customer group OASIS

7.5	Any themes or trends should be assessed by senior management to identify potential systemic issues, serious risks or policies and procedures that require revision. They should also be used to inform staff and contractor training.	Yes	A quarterly Complaints Panel including the Executive Director of Customer Experience, Director of Communities and Heads of Service review complaint data to identify and discuss areas that need action, including training.
7.6	Landlords should have a standard objective in relation to complaint handling for all employees that reflects the need to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have a collaborative and co-operative approach towards resolving complaints, working with colleagues across teams and departments • take collective responsibility for any shortfalls identified through complaints rather than blaming others • act within the Professional Standards for engaging with complaints as set by the Chartered Institute of Housing. 	No	Where colleagues are required to handle complaints this is stated clearly in the job description. Induction and ongoing training supports the requirements suggested in 7.6 and objectives are set with relevant colleagues to meet the Code, our own Customer Feedback Policy and performance targets.

Section 8: Self-assessment and compliance

Code Section	Code requirement	Comply: Yes/No	Evidence, commentary and any explanations
8.1	Landlords must carry out an annual self-assessment against the Code to ensure their complaint handling remains in line with its requirements.	Yes	Since the Code was first published, a self-assessment has been completed annually and can be found on our website here .
8.2	Landlords must also carry out a self-assessment following a significant restructure and/or change in procedures.	N/A	As the self-assessment has been completed annually any changes have been reflected. Any future significant changes would prompt a review of the self-assessment.

8.3	<p>Following each self-assessment, a landlord must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • report the outcome of their self-assessment to their governing body. In the case of local authorities, self-assessment outcomes should be reported to elected members • publish the outcome of their assessment on their website if they have one, or otherwise make accessible to residents • include the self-assessment in their annual report section on complaints handling performance 	Yes	<p>The self-assessment is shared with the Board as referenced above (7.2 & 7.4), is published on the website as referenced above (8.1) and included in the annual report as referenced above (7.2).</p>
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