Introducing change: Improving tenant and service user experience

Learning and good practice from our complaint's audits

November 2023

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Introduction

Since the publication of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code in July 2020, social housing providers have welcomed the clarity and guidance in the code requirements. For tenants and service users, the code offers consistency in processes and response times. It also provides transparency around how social housing providers are addressing complaints and concerns and learning lessons to improve services.

Across our client base spanning public, not for profit, financial services, and corporate organisations, we undertake internal audit reviews in relation to complaints. This briefing provides information on the approaches and good practices that have been identified from our audits. It provides key insight into what others are doing to improve the services they provide and allows you the opportunity to incorporate key good practices into your own operations where there is scope for services to be enhanced.

Complaint handling and resolution management is important from a tenant and service user satisfaction perspective. Whether the complaint is a simple misunderstanding or a more complex issue, it should be addressed as quickly as possible, to ensure agreed upon services are being delivered to a high standard. It's also important to avoid the issue escalating, resulting in a breakdown of the social housing provider – tenant/service user relationship, which can be damaging to your reputation. Of course, it's imperative that housing providers can demonstrate that they are meeting their legal requirements.

For service users, it is vital that there is a clear route to raise concerns, with the confidence that issues will be addressed in a timely manner. Any delay in addressing an issue could result in further poor service delivery and further preventable damage.
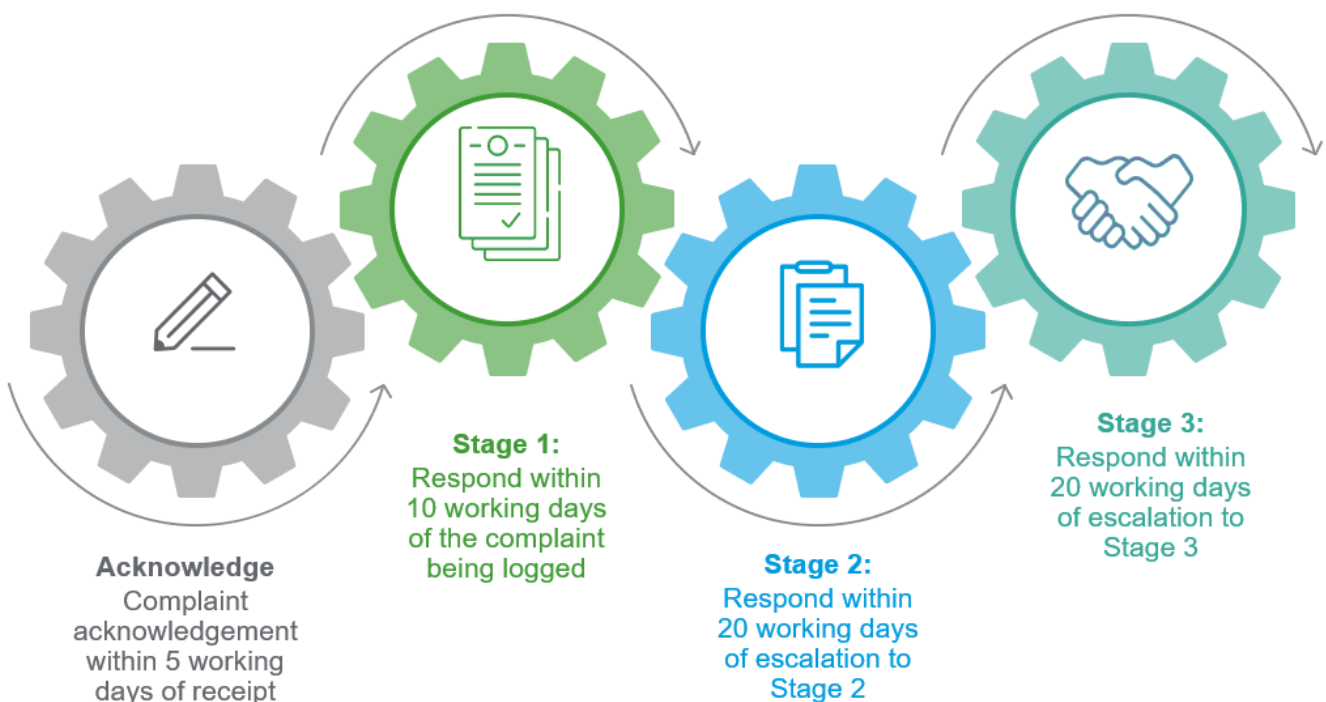
Regulatory standards

The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard acknowledges that tenants (service users) should be involved in any decision making that affects their home. It includes the following key requirements.

- Access to information: maintenance procedures and any changes that may affect the tenant (service user) agreement.

- Participating in decision making: on rent increases, changes to lease terms, repairs and maintenance for example.

- Clear communication: clear open lines of communication, different routes of communication open to social housing providers, for instance social media platforms in addition to the more traditional routes of email, website and even paper.

- Training and support: giving tenants and service users the skills, knowledge and support to get involved.

- Representation and empowerment: tenant / service user involvement, with training and support can be a positive and empowering combination which should bring about change and improvement.

This Standard aims to create a collaborative and inclusive relationship between service users and service providers.

Stages as detailed in the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code

Acknowledge
Complaint acknowledgement within 5 working days of receipt

Stage 1:
Respond within 10 working days of the complaint being logged

Stage 2:
Respond within 20 working days of escalation to Stage 2

Stage 3:
Respond within 20 working days of escalation to Stage 3

Data quality

With the new Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) now in place, housing providers are required to report their outcomes in relation to the 12 tenant perception measures (part of the wider 22 TSMs) to the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH, the Regulator).

The Regulator has also confirmed that in autumn 2024, it will publish the first year of TSM data. Providers will be gathering accurate, reliable and relevant data and naturally, seeking to understand what is working well and where there is scope for improvement.

To learn more about this, read our Data quality – are you assured? | RSM UK
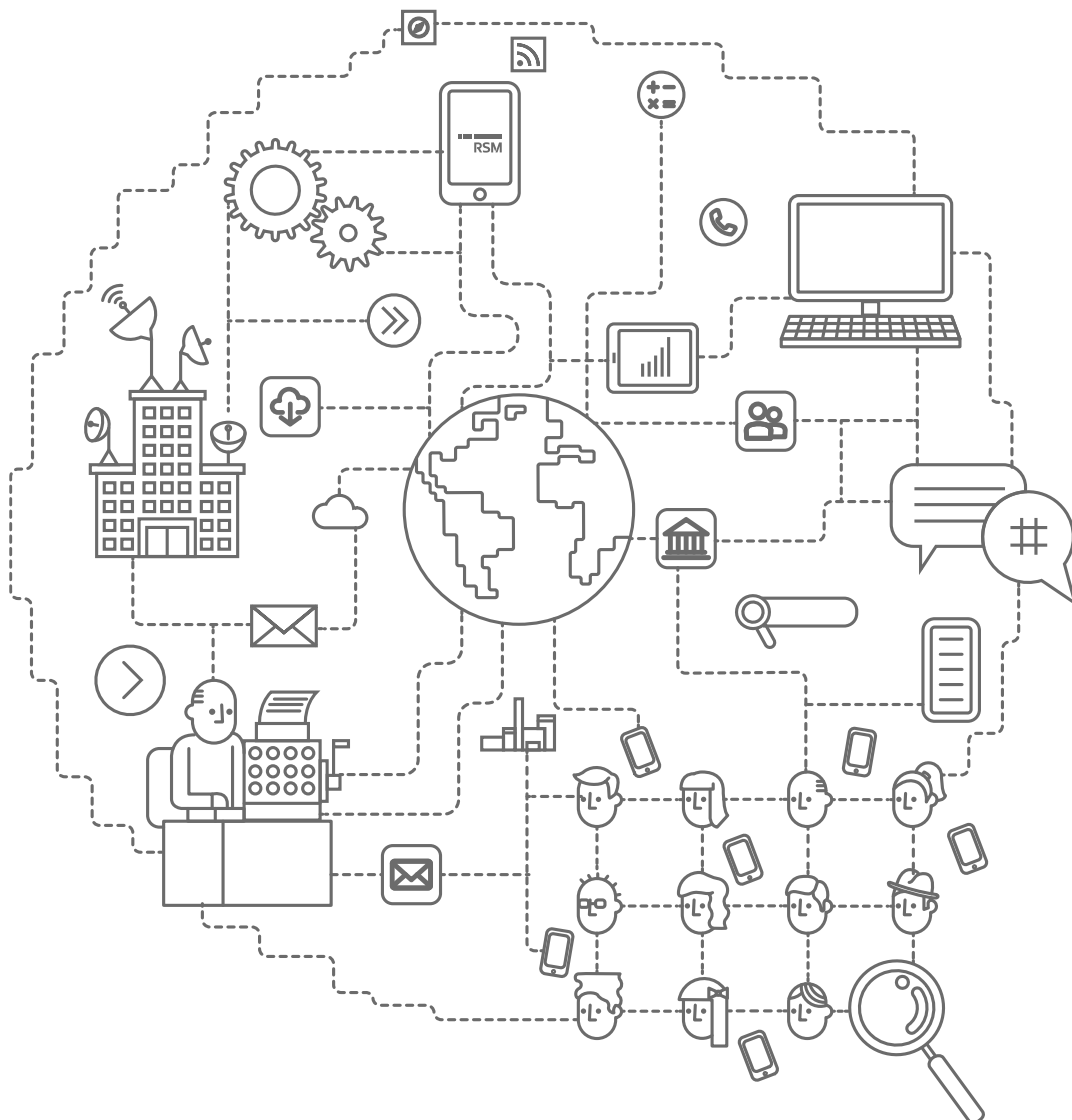
Our findings

During 2016/17 to 2022/23, RSM has undertaken circa 100 audits of complaints, including complaints handling, management, lessons learnt and incidents. We have also undertaken audits which focus on positive feedback, with 'complaints and compliments' audits across some of our housing clients and the wider not for profit sector. The examples of good practice we have seen from our audits which are consistent with the requirements of the Complaint Handling Code, include the following.

- A clear and consistent complaint handling process (defined in a policy) which includes timescales for responding and escalation.

- Accessibility and awareness of the policy internally and externally with service users via the organisations website, and across social media platforms.

- Centrally held correspondence, ensuring that all complaint details can be easily obtained, which is important where staff are absent

- Clear roles and responsibilities with a dedicated lead and team in place to investigate and respond to the tenant/service user.

- Consideration of the data that is requested. For example, asking for the location or a postcode could provide useful insight as to whether there is an issue or training need with a particular team or department.

- Having an overall executive lead for complaints. Some organisations also have an assigned non-executive lead too.

- Issuing a resolution letter to complainants and closing the complaint in a timely manner.

Common pitfalls

The findings from our audits have identified some common pitfalls, which have formed areas for improvement.

- Inconsistency in application of and compliance with the process (the policy). We noted examples where the policy for acknowledging a complaint and responding stages was not always met.

- Timeliness in responding to the complaint, in line with policy and the code requirements. We identified instances where the agreed timescales for responding to and resolving complaints set by the organisation are not monitored and therefore, not met.

- Lack of retention of documentation in support of the complaint, actions to investigate and improve and even correspondence with the complainant.

- Instances of overwriting the complaints log, resulting in the loss of key information and an audit trail.

- Inadequate systems to capture and manage complaints, resulting in unreliable data and sometimes confusing results.

- Not using the data available. In this data-rich world, the potential to analyse data collected can be key to improving the services provided.

  o Look for recurring trends, patterns and common themes from complaints. This could identify an area or team where improvements may be required, or more resources are needed.
  o Consider whether you are getting to the root cause of a complaint or just dealing with similar complaints in isolation?
  o Look at where numbers are reducing. This may indicate that some teams have introduced a working practice that is helping to reduce the number of complaints – could this be shared across the organisation?

Key initiatives

Most organisations follow a similar process when dealing with complaints, starting with a policy, which details how to handle a complaint, the timescales to respond within and how to escalate those that are not successfully resolved. From our audits we have found consistency across the housing sector as well as some of the other sectors we work in; we have also identified some local initiatives which organisations have introduced.

Communication

- Regularly requesting and inviting feedback from tenants (service users) not only about the service provided, but also when they have raised a complaint, asking how satisfied they were with how it was handled.

- Sending out an initial acknowledgement letter, before the complaint is assigned for review. This lets the complainant know the complaint has been received.

- Empowering front line staff to deal with issues before they become formal complaints. An example of this is through surveying, asking the service user to comment on the quality of the service or the contact. If this highlights an issue, front line staff are empowered to take remedial action to address the problem identified. It can, in some instances, stop the issue from becoming a formal complaint.

- This does of course require training and for the employee to feel confident, supported and empowered.

Governance and reporting

- Having a committee where complaints, feedback and compliments are reviewed and discussed. In some instances, this includes formal key performance indicator (KPI) reporting to the board. This review can bring in rigor around required assurances that logged complaints have all been actioned and are being progressed in line with policy, and that complaints are not being 'forgotten' or getting 'stuck' at an operational level.

  As part of the wider governance structure, a committee providing oversight allows an organisation to dive into the data more, challenge themes and identify where training, support and resources may be needed but can also look at the assurances needed to drive the learning from complaints.

  Management and non-executive directors should understand trends in complaints and what is being done to remedy identified issues. This is paramount to ensuring that wider risks, for example those related to health and safety, are being effectively managed, and that assurance has been sought to confirm this is the case. It is also vital in ensuring that landlords are meeting their legal, regulatory and social responsibilities to tenants.

- An independent review by a central team or department within the organisation is good practice as it enables 'quality control' to be exercised over the handling of the complaint and the appropriateness of the resolution decision.

- Transparency to service users by way of a publication detailing what feedback and complaints were received from customers, and what the organisation then did with this – how it responded and how it improved.

Key initiatives

Data and trends

- Identifying key themes and trends and outlining how the provider has learnt lessons from the feedback received. This included examples of:

  o monthly dashboards collated for the leadership team and board;

  o customer relations department actively monitoring complaints, using Power BI daily dashboards; and

  o the publication of an annual report, both internally and externally on the organisation website.

Celebrating the positives

- There is a lot of good feedback and excellent service which some organisations look to capture and report on. This is important to consider as it can be motivational for staff across the organisation, but it also demonstrates to service users that the organisation wants to listen and improve.

Raised a complaint – how satisfied were you?

When a tenant (service user) raises a complaint, and the complaint has been resolved consider asking for feedback using some of the below questions.

- Were you satisfied with the response you received in relation to the complaint you raised?

- Did we understand the nature of your complaint?

- Were the steps to address your complaint made clear to you?

- Did we communicate with you in a timely way?

- Were there any aspects of the complaint handling process that you were not happy with?

- Is there anything we could have done differently to improve your experience?

- On a scale of 1 to 10 how satisfied were you with how we handled your complaint?

Positive change

Steps to introduce change and a more positive process

- Introduce a Tenant / Service User Participation Policy or add this element into an existing feedback and complaints policy. This demonstrates commitment to service users that your organisation values their feedback and wants to engage with them.

- Develop a culture of open communication and a want to listen and learn. Encourage service users to provide feedback, raise concerns and give compliments. Provide them with the information on how they can do this and give them examples of where you have listened before, the action that was taken and the outcome.

- Make sure information is accessible, in a variety of formats and ensure that where social media platforms are being used that they are monitored so that comments are captured, responded to and addressed.

- Create the opportunity for input and involvement, including decision making. This could be through meetings, surveys, working groups and having a central team or point of contact being available to listen.

- Demonstrate and deliver continuous improvement - improving services can enhance the overall experience of service users and build confidence in reputation. A good (and consistent) reputation can bring more investment which in turn can attract more service users.

Summary thoughts

No matter how hard an organisation tries or how helpful staff are, there will always be things that do not go quite to plan, or there is an unforeseen challenge. Service users also have varying expectations, which adds another dimension as providers seek to measure and understand complaints regarding the standard of service provided.

Service users complain because it matters to them, and impacts them, which is demonstrated by the areas and 'themes' where complaints are often highest – damp, mould and condensation, for example, and anti-social behaviour. This is why organisations cannot see complaints as 'just a process' and why the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard and new TSMs offer an opportunity to improve in this area.

In highlighting how social housing providers are performing, the TSMs can drive improvement, reducing issues or complaints – as well as the associated time and costs involved. Together with the wider Consumer Standards, it gives service users confidence that they are being listened too, and there is someone there to help. Think, what if it was you or a member of your family facing issues, and no one was listening or acting on them.

There will always be feedback and always a need to complain, which is why being open, transparent and inviting feedback is the only way to improve. The code provides a good structure and a framework to work within. However, it takes time to address issues and change unsatisfactory processes and procedures. Sharing the feedback, updates on the actions being taken in response and the challenges faced can be helpful in showing service users that they are being listened to.

RSM is launching two solutions which may help with the management of complaints and tackling damp, mould, and condensation.

Our **Insight4Housing** software can be used for the online completion of tenant satisfaction surveys. Once captured you will have data which, as well as helping to meet the TSM requirements, will allow you to manage the outputs, and present reports efficiently and visually.

In addition, RSM has developed a damp, mould and condensation board assurance framework (BAF) module, part of our **Insight4Housing** software. The BAF includes key risks and controls to enable the effective management of damp, mould and condensation and allows providers to map their assurances at the first, second and third line.

Get in touch with your usual RSM contact for more information.

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