

# Housing Executive Complaints Policy

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## Introduction

The Housing Executive is committed to providing excellent services for all of our customers, placing customer needs at the centre of everything we do and sustaining high performance across key service areas.

You can find out more about the service you can expect to receive from us in the Housing Executive Customer Charter. This is available on [the Customer Charter page of our website](#), in your tenancy sign-up pack or on request from your local office.

If something has gone wrong, we want to hear from you. The Housing Executive is committed to making improvements to our service and learning from customer feedback. We would also like to hear if you are happy with the service you have received or if you have suggestions about how we can improve. We need your feedback to deliver better services.

If you are not happy with our service you may wish to make a complaint. This policy aims to explain

- How to make a complaint
- What a complaint is
- How we deal with complaints
- How we report and learn from complaints

## Our Complaints Principles

The Housing Executive is committed to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman's Statement of Principles. These are:

- Start off right
- Fix it early
- Focus on what matters
- Be fair

- Be honest
- Learn and improve

## **How do I complain?**

You can complain in person, on the phone, via email, by sending a message on the “My Housing Executive” Customer Portal, on [the 'Make a complaint' page of our website](#), using the Housing Executive complaints leaflet, or by post. Where appropriate, messages received through our Social Media pages may also be responded to through our complaints procedure after it is established that this is what the customer wants. If you raise an issue and wish for it to be handled as a formal complaint, please tell us this.

For more details, please read the section “Who should I complain to?” below.

If you are making a complaint, please tell us:

- Your full name, address and contact details, including how you prefer to be contacted and if there are preferred times to contact you
- As much as you can about the complaint, including any evidence you may have
- What has gone wrong
- How you want us to resolve the matter

The more information you give us, the quicker we can start investigating your complaint. You can submit evidence at a later stage, but we may not be able to investigate your complaint until we have received any evidence we need from you.

## **Definition of a complaint**

A complaint is:

“An expression of dissatisfaction or unhappiness that cannot be resolved at the initial point of service delivery about:

- the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the Housing Executive
- an action, delay or lack of action
- a decision made by the Housing Executive that falls within the remit of the complaints policy”

If we are not sure if you are making a complaint or an enquiry, we will deal with your issue as an enquiry and tell you how to make a complaint if you are unhappy with the response.

## **What can be complained about?**

You can complain if:

- We don't deliver a service on time
- We give you incorrect, or not enough, information
- We give you a poor quality service, or fail to provide a service
- We do not follow proper procedures
- You are unhappy with a decision that has been made and no appeals process is in place for the decision.
- You believe that your case has not been dealt with properly, or is not being dealt with properly
- You have a complaint about a member of staff

Complaints may involve more than one of our services or be about someone working on our behalf, such as a contractor.

## **What cannot be complained about?**

The following matters are not covered by the Housing Executive's Complaints Policy:

- A routine first-time request for service, for example, reporting a repair or an initial action in relation to an Anti-Social Behaviour case.
- Policies and procedures that have a separate right of appeal, for example:
  - Challenging a Housing Benefit decision
  - Challenging an adverse statutory homelessness decision
  - Challenging suitability of an offer of temporary accommodation to those with Full Duty Applicant status (those with interim status do challenge this through the complaints procedure)
  - Challenging reasonableness of an offer of permanent accommodation to those with Full Duty Applicant status (those without Full Duty Applicant status do challenge this through the complaints procedure)
  - Appealing a decision to end your introductory tenancy
  - Challenging a decision not to award a succession/ assignment of tenancy

If there is a separate appeals process for your decision, your decision letter will tell you how to raise this appeal.

- Issues that have previously been addressed through the Housing Executive complaints process where we have given you a final complaint response.
- Issues that are in court or have already been heard by a court or tribunal
- Requests for compensation. These will be handled by our Insurance and Claims team.
- Staff disciplinary matters. These will be handled under our Disciplinary Procedure.
- Fraud investigations. These will be handled by our Corporate Investigations and Security Unit.

If you complain to us about a matter that is not covered by our Complaints Policy, we will give you information and advice on how to deal with the matter. If you are making a formal complaint, we will tell you what matters we are looking at under our Complaints Policy and what the appropriate procedures are for any other matters you may raise.

## **Who can complain?**

Anyone can make a complaint about their experience with us. This includes a representative of someone who is unhappy with our service. This means you can ask someone else to complain on your behalf. Examples of this include family and friends or an advice body such as Housing Rights. In the case of a representative, we will ask for a form of authority so we can respond to the complaint. If a local Elected Representative (Councillor, MLA or MP) makes a complaint on your behalf we will not usually need to ask for the form of authority to be completed.

We value all complaints, including those made anonymously. Staff will consider anonymous complaints if there is sufficient information provided to allow them to make further enquiries. If the complaint does not provide enough information, staff may not be able to investigate the complaint.

## **Getting help to make your complaint**

We understand that it may be difficult to make a complaint yourself. We accept complaints from the representative of a person who is unhappy with our service. We can take complaints from a friend, relative, or an advocate, if you have given them your consent to complain for you. We will ask for confirmation of this consent before proceeding with your complaint. We can also take complaints from an elected representative.

If you need help making your complaint, you can also contact Housing Rights. Housing Rights are an independent housing advice organisation and can support you in making your complaint to us.

You can contact Housing Rights online at [the Housing Advice NI website](#) or on the Housing Advice Helpline, which is open from 09:30 to 16:30 Monday to Friday. You can call 028 90245640 to speak with a Housing Rights adviser.

Download the Form of Authority.

## **How long do I have to make a complaint?**

Normally, you must make a complaint within three months of the event you wish to complain about.

If you remain unhappy after the First Stage response, you have 3 months to ask for your complaint to be investigated as a Final Stage complaint.

In exceptional circumstances, we may accept a complaint after this time limit. You will have to tell us why you think we should accept the complaint after this time limit. We will tell you if we decide to accept your complaint or not, and the reasons why.

There are some exceptions to this.

If your complaint is about the reasonableness of an offer of accommodation, and you have not been assessed as homeless with Full Duty Applicant status, you have **40** days to make a complaint. Your offer letter will advise you how to do this.

If your complaint is about the withdrawal of an offer of accommodation, you have **seven** days to make the complaint. Your withdrawal of offer letter will advise you how to do this. Your complaint will be treated as a Final Stage complaint.

## **Who should I complain to?**

We want to sort out problems quickly and locally, where possible. If you have a problem, please contact your local office and staff will try to help. Your local office will review your issue and try to fix the problem straight away.

If your issue relates to maintenance matters, you may wish to contact the contractor directly. This may be especially helpful in scheme matters where a specific

customer liaison officer has been appointed (you should have been given contact details for this person at the start of the scheme).

If you are not sure how to contact your local office, you can call 03448 920 900 ([18001 03448 920 900](tel:1800103448920900), Relay UK) or visit [the Contact Us section of our website](#).

If your local office or contractor cannot fix your problem, you can make a formal complaint at First Stage. Your local office can tell you how to make a formal complaint or help you to do this.

### **First Stage Complaint**

You can make a complaint about any of our services through [the 'Make a complaint' page of our website](#).

- If your complaint is about repairs, housing, your rent account, scheme-related work or neighbourhood problems, you should contact your local Area Manager.
- If your complaint is about Housing Benefit, you should contact the Housing Benefit Manager for the office that was dealing with your case.
- If your complaint is about Grants, you should contact the Grants Manager for the office that was dealing with your case.
- If your complaint is about buying or selling your house or land, you should contact the Place-shaping Manager for the office that was dealing with your case.

If you are not sure how to contact your local Manager, you can call 03448 920 900 ([18001 03448 920 900](tel:1800103448920900), Relay UK) or visit [the Contact Us section of our website](#).

If you are not sure who you should complain to, you can contact the Central Complaints Unit using the details below. They will ensure that your complaint is independently investigated by the appropriate team.

## **Final Stage Complaint**

We will always try to sort your complaint out at First Stage. However, if we are unable to do this, you can ask for a Director to investigate your complaint by contacting our Central Complaints Unit.

Telephone: 03448 920 900

Email: [centralcomplaints@nihe.gov.uk](mailto:centralcomplaints@nihe.gov.uk)

Website: [The 'Make a complaint' page of the Housing Executive website](#)

Post:

Chief Executive's Office  
Final Stage Complaint  
Housing Executive  
The Housing Centre  
2 Adelaide Street  
Belfast BT2 8PB.

## **What happens when I make a complaint?**

Any issues you have can always be raised informally. This might be the quickest way to fix your problem. Try speaking to your Housing Advisor, Patch Manager, Maintenance Officer, contractor, Scheme Coordinator, Grants Officer, Housing Benefit Officer or Place-shaping Officer to see if they can help you with the issue in the first instance.

If they cannot help, you can access the formal complaints process.

## **First Stage Complaint**

If you are unhappy with how you have been treated, you can ask for the Manager in the local office to review the matter as a formal complaint. This will be considered a First Stage complaint.

It is really helpful to us if when making your complaint you provide:

- Your full name, address and contact details, including how you prefer to be contacted
- As much information as you can about the complaint, including any evidence you may have
- What has gone wrong
- What you want us to do to fix the problem

Once you make a complaint we will acknowledge receipt of your complaint. This should be within three working days of receipt of your complaint. If you make your complaint over the phone, the call itself will act as acknowledgement.

If any of the matters of which you complain do not fall within the Complaints Policy, we will advise you about how to deal with these matters.

If someone is complaining on your behalf, the local office will ask for a form of authority. This gives us your consent to communicate with a representative about your complaint.

The local office will assess what your complaint is about and what you want us to do about the problem. We aim to identify your issues of complaint as soon as possible. In some cases we may need to contact you to discuss this and we will do this within three working days of receiving your complaint. This allows us to make sure that we are properly addressing all the matters of your complaint.

After agreeing the issues of complaint with you, we aim to respond to you within 10 working days. This may take longer if we need to ask someone else, for example a contractor, for information. Where there is exceptional reason, we may take up to an extra 10 working days to respond to you. We may also need to ask you for additional information or evidence to help us investigate your complaint or make a decision. If this is the case we will have 10 working days, from when you supply this information to us, to investigate and issue a response. If we need longer, we will contact you and advise you of the delay and keep you updated on the progress of the investigation.

If, at any point in the investigation, the local office decides that your case is complex, it will be escalated to the Final Stage of the Complaints Procedure. This is to make sure that your complaint is fully and properly investigated. The local office will contact you to advise you that your complaint is being treated as a complex complaint and has been sent to the Final Stage of the Complaints Procedure.

We will provide you with your response in writing, via email or post. Your response will be issued by an Area Manager for housing or repairs issues, a Housing Benefit Manager for Housing Benefit issues, a Grants Manager for Grants issues and a Place-shaping Manager for Land and Property issues. We will tell you how you can escalate your complaint to the Final Stage of our Complaints Procedure, if you are not happy with the outcome. We will request feedback on how we handled your complaint.

If required, your local office will also contact you to discuss the response over the telephone or in person.

If we need to take action as a result of your complaint, the local office will monitor the progress of actions to make sure that they are completed.

### **Final Stage Complaint**

If you are unhappy with the outcome of your First Stage complaint, you can ask us for an independent investigation under the Final Stage of our Complaints Procedure. You have three months in which to do this. If there are exceptional circumstances, we may accept a complaint outside this time limit. You will have to tell us why you think we should accept the complaint after this time limit.

Your complaint should provide:

- Your full name, address and contact details, including how you prefer to be contacted and if there are any preferred times to contact you
- As much information as you can about the complaint, including any evidence you may have
- What has gone wrong

- Why you are not happy with the decision made in your First Stage Complaint
- Any new information or information you think that we did not consider
- What you want us to do to fix the problem

You will be given a Final Stage Complaints Officer who will deal with your complaint. Your Complaints Officer will contact you to acknowledge receipt of your complaint. This should be within 3 working days.

If any of the matters of which you complain do not fall within the Complaints Policy, the Complaints Officer will advise you of how to deal with these matters.

If someone is complaining on your behalf, the Complaints Officer will ask for a form of authority. This gives us your consent to communicate with a representative about your complaint.

The Complaints Officer will agree with you what your complaint is about and what you want us to do about the problem. This allows us to make sure that we are fully investigating all the matters of your complaint. We aim to contact you within 3 working days of receipt to agree your issues of complaint.

After agreeing the issues of complaint with you, we aim to respond you within 20 working days. In some cases, you may wish to add to your issues of complaint while the case is ongoing. In normal circumstances we can do this, but it should be noted that this means we will have 20 working days from when your final issues of complaint are agreed to issue any response. When you submit your complaint, we may need to ask you for additional information or evidence to help us investigate your complaint or make a decision. Where that is the case, we will have 20 working days from when you supply this evidence to us to issue a response to you. If we need longer, your Complaints Officer will contact you and advise you the delay and keep you updated on the progress of your investigation.

We will provide you with your response in writing, via email or post. Your response will be issued by the Director who has responsibility for the business area you are complaining about. We will tell you how you can escalate your complaint to the

Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, if you are not happy with the outcome. We will request feedback on how we handled your complaint.

If required, your Complaints Officer will also contact you to discuss the response over the telephone or in person.

If we need to take action as a result of your complaint, the Complaints Officer will monitor the progress of actions to make sure that they are completed.

### **What happens if I am not happy with the final outcome of the complaint?**

Your final complaints response from us will tell you when you have exhausted the Housing Executive's Complaints Procedure. The response will tell you the next steps you can take if you are still not happy with the outcome of the complaint.

If you remain unhappy, you can complain to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. You have six months in which to do so.

Usually, before you complain to the Ombudsman about the service you have received from us, you will be expected to have exhausted the Housing Executive's Complaints Procedure. Exceptionally, the Ombudsman may be prepared to accept your complaint before you have received your final response from us. Your reasons for this will need to be set out in your complaint to the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman can be contacted using the following details:

Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman  
Progressive House  
33 Wellington Place  
Belfast, BT1 6HN

Telephone: 02890 233821

Text Phone: 02890 897789

Freephone: 0800 34 34 24

Email: [nipso@nipso.org.uk](mailto:nipso@nipso.org.uk)

Freepost: Freepost NIPSO

## **Feedback on complaints**

We welcome any comments on how to deal with complaints more efficiently or how to improve our service. You can pass this to the Complaints Officer dealing with your case.

## **Unreasonable Contact Procedure**

In some cases, complainants will have expectations that we cannot meet. The Housing Executive will always try to find a reasonable and practical solution to complaints raised. Staff will always be sensitive to a complainant's individual circumstances and will use discretion in considering what we consider to be unreasonable behaviour.

However, where a complainant is demonstrating unreasonable behaviour, the Housing Executive reserves the right to use our Unreasonable Contact procedure. We may use this in the following instances:

- Unreasonable levels of contact with staff which affect staff carrying out their work
- Continuing to raise new issues during or after the investigation that should reasonably have been raised at the beginning of the complaint
- Failure to clearly agree the issues of complaint with staff
- Pursuing a complaint after the Complaints Procedure has been exhausted
- Threats of violence, harassment or abusive language or behaviour towards staff
- Failure to accept documented evidence as factual
- Recording staff without their permission
- Unreasonable demands or expectations

- Refusal to co-operate with the investigation process

If Complaints staff decide that issues should be handled under the Unreasonable Contact procedure, they will write to the complainant. This will tell the complainant:

- They are being considered under the Unreasonable Contact procedure
- Why this is the case
- Details of any restricted contact arrangements
- Details of any actions, such as closing the complaints investigation, barring complainants from offices or otherwise restricting contact to reasonable levels, and involving the police where any threats have been made
- The length of time that any restrictions will be in place and
- The review date of the restriction
- The right of the complainant to contact the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman about the decision to consider them under the unreasonable contact procedure.

## **Reporting and regulatory requirements**

Customer satisfaction is important to the Housing Executive. Complaints provide us with valuable information which we can use to improve our services and prevent issues from happening again. We report on complaints to understand trends and areas where services need to be improved. We will identify where action should be taken to remedy issues and will monitor this to ensure that actions are completed.

Within our governance structure, we report on complaints to:

- Performance Review Group
- Executive Team
- Board

- Department for Communities

We will publish information for customers about complaints on our website, in the Annual Report and in our tenant magazine(s), as appropriate.

The Housing Executive falls under the jurisdiction of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and has a duty to comply with the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. The Housing Executive is committed to abiding by the Ombudsman's Principles of Good Administration, Principles of Good Complaints Handling and Principles for Remedy.

We will review this policy every three years. More regular reviews will be considered where, for example, there is a need to respond to new legislation or policy guidance. Reviews will consider legislative changes, performance standards and good practice.

This policy is available on our website. A hard copy is available on request. Customers can also get a copy of the policy on tape, in Braille, in large print or in translation on request, by contacting the Equality Unit on 03448 920 900 / [18001 03448 920 900](tel:03448920900) (Relay UK) or at [equality@nihe.gov.uk](mailto:equality@nihe.gov.uk).