

MEARS



Mears Your Voice Customer Champion Forum: Complaints as a positive challenge to excellent customer service

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John Goodwin, Housing Ombudsmen

Jon Warnock,

ForHousing

Eight residents represented the Mears Customer Champion Forum

In the first Mears Customer Champion Forum, Tpas, as an independent facilitator of the session, looked at recent changes to the complaint handling code from the Housing Ombudsmen, which came into effect in September 2020. The attendees were welcomed by Group Head of Customer Success at Mears, Tracey Lyth who advised the forum would provide attendees an opportunity to discuss how to effectively manage complaints and how these can be incorporated into best practice, following the introduction of the principles highlighted in the Social Housing Green Paper. The forum welcomed speakers from the Housing Ombudsmen, Tpas and ForHousing, as well as provoking feedback from residents, and Your Voice Board tenant members.

Putting Customers at the Heart of the Complaint Process.

From reviewing the Your Voice Online Panel complaint survey results, it is evident that the speed of the complaint and the effectiveness for the agent in listening and responding to the complainant are the most important factors. The results identified that the seniority of the agent and the response in a formal manner (i.e. a letter) are the least important factors to customers when reporting a complaint.

The New Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code

Adjudicator and Sector Development Trainer, John Goodwin advised the new Complaint Handling code came into effect at the beginning of September 2020, following the Government Green Paper in 2018. Partly driven by the Grenfell Fire, a chapter focused on complaints and highlighted reports of residents who had made complaints which hadn't been investigated by the Local Authority. This highlighted that complaint procedures were found to be confusing, complicated and inconsistent. The New Complaint Handling code is segregated into six key sections, including; definition of a complaint, ensuring that the complaint procedure is available and easily accessible to residents. The code highlights the importance of making residents aware that if they are unsatisfied with the outcome of an investigation, they can re-direct this to the Housing Ombudsmen who can investigate independently.

Landlords have until 31 December 2020, to implement policies and procedures, and to carry out self-assessments as required. The Housing Ombudsmen suggests for the process to actively involve residents in this process.

The complaint procedure should ideally be two stages, three, if necessary. It is important to ensure timeframes are clear and are communicated to the complainant. Residents should be kept informed throughout the investigation process, and investigation into a complaint shouldn't be refused. At Mears, the handling code has been welcomed and has been integrated into the final draft of the complaint process, under review. It was recognised from the handling code, that Mears' current complaints procedure was too long and as a result, decided to reduce the process from three stages to two. The new policy ensures that the complaint is acknowledged within two working days, an enhanced service to the code recommendation and is handled by one point of contact, taking it through to resolution and ensuring actions are implemented. In situations where the complainant is unsatisfied, this will require a further investigation, stage two. The importance of the complaint process is to ensure that the customer is listened to and be assured that the complaint is thoroughly investigated, resolved and lessons learned to drive improvement.

Complaint Handling at Mears

Mears has a positive complaint handling culture and value all customer contact. To encourage and respond to feedback on how your complaint was handled, Mears ensure all channels to the customer journey are continually improved. Your Voice scrutiny board consists of external experts and users of our service. The board carries out a variety of roles, for instance, process scrutiny, relationship development, feedback and knowledge. The Your Voice forums, like today, provides an opportunity to gather feedback and considerations from tenants and partners, to ensure the Mears Group Complaints Policy meets and exceeds the Housing Ombudsmen Complaint Code, and to challenge and validate the policy to launch.

Tpas: National tenant engagement perspective

Culture within an organisation and accountability are the cornerstones of a fantastic approach to Complaints. Culture includes the behaviours and attitudes of the staff dealing with complaints and accountability is about the organisation welcoming and owning and providing feedback around complaints as well as complaints being seen as a source of learning and insight

For Housing

ForHousing provided examples regarding how they have changed their complaint procedures, slides attached.

Question and Answers

Resident Question - Do Mears send out an employee to check the quality of a job, to prevent future complaints?

Tracey Lyth, Mears – All of our operatives and engineers use technology to ensure we are providing a good quality service to our customers. The operatives take two photographs, one upon the arrival of a job and another at the end. Therefore, if a customer is dissatisfied, we can review the photographs and have a transparent record as to the quality provided. In addition, there are various roles within the business whereby, they implement audits and spot checks to determine the level of service we have provided.

Resident Question(s) - John Goodwin, you previously mentioned that you provide consequences in situations whereby a landlord does not comply. Can you provide further information to the type of policing the Housing Ombudsman provides to follow up the failures? John Warnock, it is alright to say that a job is not acceptable. Here in Milton Keynes, Milton Keynes Council are the landlords, and Mears are the contractors. Managing tenants' expectations i.e. something not covered on the contract, Mears shouldn't be expected to do if they are not being paid for it.

John Goodwin, Housing Ombudsmen – Some residents are under the impression that we do not have powers to require them to comply with our orders, but we do. We follow up every order we make and go through a process and ask for an explanation. Ultimately, we can ask the Secretary of State to let us enforce an order through the courts.

Jon Warnock, ForHousing – Our responsive repairs are carried out by an organisation called Liberty, which are part of our group, there is a connection between Liberty and our maintenance department. If we receive a complaint, we review it and decide that it is outside of the scope of Liberty responsive repair, we speak to the maintenance managers and try and seek a quick resolution. If we have to say no to a complainant, and we have done as much as we can – we must ensure that we are open and give a full explanation.

Resident Question - Our District Council has a smaller number of houses to manage. How does the Housing Ombudsmen approach complaint procedures being held by a District Council who have a small stock of houses?

John Goodwin, Housing Ombudsmen - We have the same expectations of all landlords; we deal with Housing Associations and Councils across England; they are all meant to meet the requirements of the Housing Ombudsmen Scheme. 99% of what is in the housing code shouldn't be an issue for most landlords to meet, unless they are a corporative, for example. However, if it is an issue for a District Council, we would still ask for an explanation.

Resident Question - Mears, in relation to draft agreement, you mentioned that complaints will be forward to a panel of experts. Who is on the panel? How is this decided?

Tracey Lyth, Mears – Your Voice is an independent board, created alongside Centre of Governance and Scrutiny (CFGs) We appointed a chair to the panel, which was overseen by CFGs. The panel is completely independent, and reporting line into our executive team. From a tenant perspective, reached out to the business for tenants to apply for this panel. The panel is made up of eight tenants across all of our business, they reach out and challenge us but also have a reporting line to the executive team.

Resident Question - How does the complaint process work when other local authorities or utility companies are involved?

Tracey Lyth, Mears – As a service provider, whilst we actively try to represent issues for clients. However, sometimes there is the fundamental that it doesn't fit into our service.

Daniel Garfield, Mears – Mears often find that we are in a middle of a dispute between utility companies and the local authorities. Even though this may not be our responsibility, we try and assist and respond to all customers, however we do find ourselves in the middle.

John Goodwin, Housing Ombudsmen - Our role is clear, we are an Ombudsmen for social landlords. For instance, areas such as trees, parking, utilities – it is important to go through your landlord's complaints procedure, and the landlord would direct you to the correct Ombudsmen.

Resident Question - It's important that when a customer makes a complaint, that their expectations are managed. Mears should implement a strong training element for those answering the telephone and managing customer expectations.

Tracey Lyth, Mears – Listening is critical and ensuring agents are setting expectations to customers. This is an area we have reflected on within our proposal, ensuring the customer has one point of contact. This is critical to the customer, that they have one point of contact and are updated throughout the process.