Post course resources - Customer complaint handling workshop

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hqn TRAINING

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Trainer:

Nigel Greenwood has over 30 years experience of handling and analysing customer complaints across a wide range of sectors and organisations. He has even had a book published on how to handle complaints!

Areas covered in the workshop:

1. Why do customers complain? – a review of the main reasons complaints are generated – both generically and for housing providers in particular.
2. How to minimize complaints
3. The 3 things a customer wants when they complain
4. Handling the complaint:
    - Taking ownership – the initial call.
    - Investigating a complaint
    - Communicating with the complainant
    - Getting resolution
5. Learning from complaints

Key learning for the sector Landlords should ensure that they have all residents' vulnerabilities kept up to date, so that when issues do arise, they can respond appropriately and know what mitigations may be needed. A risk assessment process for vulnerable residents could be considered here. Where a repairs issue needs fixing on multiple occasions, landlords should reflect on why that may be the case and look at different approaches or wider work that may be needed. Landlords should also ensure any response is empathetic and that it is clear which channel residents should use to get the problem solved.

Key learning for the sector Timely inspections for pest infestations are important and work to locate their source should be a priority. Whilst there is acknowledgement this treatment can take time, landlords should communicate effectively with the resident to keep them up to date with progress and timings. Where there is the potential for other residents to be impacted, the landlord should ensure appropriate action is taken.

Key learning for the sector Landlords should take a pre-emptive action to prepare for such a position. Although the landlord was correct to be sensitive to residents' vulnerabilities, by failing to adhere to relevant safety regulations, they were potentially putting the lives of several its residents (including the resident himself) at risk.

Key learning for the sector Landlords should ensure that they abide by their own policies and don't unintentionally leave residents in poor housing as a result of not doing so.

Key learning for the sector The landlord acted unreasonably by failing to adopt its own policy and good practice dispute resolution and acted in a way that was procedurally unfair. The

landlord's response to concerns raised about its attitude and approach towards the resident demonstrated a number of failings and missed opportunities causing avoidable distress to the resident. Landlords should make sure there are call recordings and/or contemporaneous notes, keep residents updated as to the status and outcome of the investigation and ensure the complaints policy does not exclude complaints made about staff conduct.

This shows how complaints can be an exceptionally strong indicator of data gaps and information mismanagement. They can be one of the earliest warning signs of problems or identify missed opportunities. They can also indicate whether information management failings are about the system, the way people use it, the approach, or a combination of these factors. Yet it is sometimes only with the Ombudsman's intervention that data failings are being acknowledged and addressed, months or years after the landlord was made aware. This is alarming. Our report also details how poor records can impede and delay the Ombudsman's work, leaving a resident without the redress they require for longer. The complexities of this housing crisis require modern and agile services. But our report reveals how landlord's services can be held back by weaknesses in data and information, that can turn an ordinary service request into an extraordinarily protracted complaint.

Overall, last year two in three of our maladministration findings had information failings at their heart. This suggests the sector could have a significant challenge to get this right. So, the first lesson from this report is for landlords to squeeze every ounce of insight on information management from their complaints and to do so in a structured and appropriate way.

Therefore, successful knowledge and information management starts with an understanding and appreciation of its benefits to both the landlord and its residents. This needs senior leaders to be clear about the importance of knowledge and information management, and their standards and expectations. This in turn helps to foster a working environment where staff have direction, structure and guidance. These standards need to be routinely monitored through quality assurance processes, both internally and with third parties. Discussions with chief executives, suggest this is something they are focused on. We recommend landlords implement a knowledge and information management strategy, if one does not exist. In doing so, landlords should ensure it is shaped not only by fundamental requirements such as data protection and regulatory returns, but by their own vision and purpose too.

But of particular importance to all landlords are two areas. The first is the scale of the issues on disrepair, with 88% of landlord complaints handlers telling us how poor information undermines their response. When we investigate, I repeatedly see cases where the landlord's repair logs are missing or incomplete, and if they do exist are not informative because it records an operative's visit but not what they did, or indeed decided not to do. While concerns about material inflation, skill shortages or contractors are valid, this should not obscure fundamental intelligence failures in repairs services. How sometimes a repair issue that could impact other residents, like a leak or heating loss, can be treated in isolation without that information driving wider action. Listening to residents who live in the building and can have valuable knowledge about their home is vital too. It is positive landlords are investing more into repairs, but without good data management they cannot meet obligations under the Landlord and Tenant Act, nor potentially any new obligations under Awaab's Law.

Knowledge and information management (KIM) encompasses how data is: • created • stored • used, and • shared.

https://hact.org.uk/tools-and-services/uk-housing-data-standards/

The NHF also publishes guidance on document retention and disposal lists the documentation housing associations should keep, and gives recommended retention periods for documents relating to (for example) ASB case files, and property maintenance records. For local authority landlords, there is the Code of Practice on the management of records published by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. The Information Commissioner's Office has also published a Code of Practice which includes good practice recommendations on records management. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman recently published a guide for care providers on good record keeping, available on its public website. While the focus is on records in the provision of health and social care services, the principles are easily applicable to housing and property management.

Issues with effective information and knowledge management are apparent across our casework. Even where we do not uphold the complaint, problem with information management are often present. Approximately two thirds of the cases we uphold have some issue or other with the data and information available to assess. Our casework highlights issues with data and information management by landlords in the following ways: A. Directly complained about B. A key issue in the service provision complained about C. A key issue in progressing the complaint through the landlord's complaint process D. A key issue in progressing the complaint through the Ombudsman. Between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, there were 191 cases which fell into groups A or B. We made 242 orders and 147 recommendations on the 191 cases where KIM was either directly complained about, or was a key issue within the service provision complained of. We investigated 38 cases where a specific complaint about a landlord's information and data management was made (group A). We made 39 findings2 about information and data management across those cases and found maladministration in 51% of those findings.

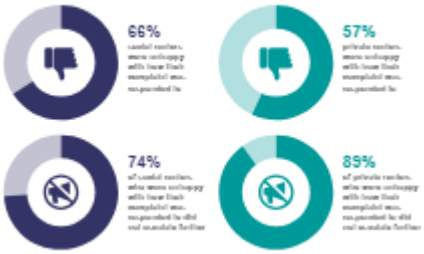
We asked whether issues with accessing or being provided with records (data) to respond to complaints was present in the organisation. Follow-up questions focused on how this impacted their complaint handling. • 56% of respondents told us they were having issues accessing or being provided with records in order to respond to complaints • 82% of those having issues said that it impacts their ability to fully address complaints • 77% of respondents told us it impacted their ability to meet their complaint handling timeframes. However, of the respondents who initially said that they had no issues accessing data to answer complaints, 18% subsequently acknowledged that data issues impacted their ability to fully address complaints or to adhere to complaint handling timescales. This is concerning as it suggests these landlords failed to fully recognise that a lack of access to data was affecting their complaint handling. As evidenced in our casework, complaints about the repairs service were the most affected by data access issues with 195 respondents citing repairs as affected, 88% of whom stated it was this service area that was the most problematic.

chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/KIM-report-v2-100523.pdf

https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-housing-survey-2021-to-2022-satisfaction-and-complaints/english-housing-survey-2021-to-2022-satisfaction-and-complaints#:~:text=Around%201.2%20million%20(31%25),%25)%20considered%20making%20a%20complaint.

- Around 1.2 million (31%) social renting households and 726,000 (16%) private renting households considered making a complaint in the last 12 months. Within the social rented sector, similar proportions of local authority and housing association tenants (both 31%) considered making a complaint.
- Around 188,000 social renters (15%) decided not to make a complaint; the remaining social renters decided to complain. Across all social renters, 70% complained directly to their landlord, while 17% complained to their Tenant Management Organisation (TMO).
- Of those private renters that considered making a complaint, a quarter (25% or 181,000 households) decided not to complain. 44% complained directly to their landlord, while 34% complained to their estate agent.

Households living in poor quality dwellings who considered making a complaint, were less likely to do so.



https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/tsm-survey-reveals-just-34-tenant-satisfaction-with-complaint-handling-83830

A survey shared exclusively with *Inside Housing* has found that only 34% of social tenants are satisfied with their landlord's complaint-handling, according to the first comprehensive research on tenant satisfaction measure (TSM) scores.
https://blog.insidegovernment.co.uk/housing/unveiling-the-top-complaints-of-social-housing-tenants-in-the-uk-a-comprehensive-analysis

Maintenance
Statistics from the social housing residents survey report (2022) show that a fifth of residents (21%) were dissatisfied with the level of maintenance in their homes.
There are several reasons why residents claimed to be unsatisfied with the maintenance of their homes. Most commonly (55%), residents were dissatisfied with mould, damp and condensation. Additionally, 33% were unhappy with their home insulation and a further 23% took issue with the ventilation in their homes.

Electrical wiring was also an issue, with 16% claiming it to be unsatisfactory.

Safety
Another area of concern for tenants was the safety of their homes. Although most residents felt their homes were safe to live in, a small percentage stated they were dissatisfied with the level of safety.
The most common safety issues reported by tenants mirrored those who reported problems with their home maintenance:

- Mould, damp, and condensation (56%)
- Home insulation (20%)
- Ventilation (19%)
- Electrical wiring (17%)

Safety issues are a pressing concern which should be dealt with quickly and efficiently.
According to the government website, new laws are being established to help protect residents through the Charter for Social Housing Residents and the Social Housing Regulation Bill, including Awaab's Law.
Awaab Ishak tragically lost his life due to poor living conditions in his social home. Awaab's Law enforces strict time constraints on social housing associations to fix issues with damp and mould.

Repairs
Repairs are another issue at the forefront of tenants' minds, with around 3 in 10 (29%) of residents claiming to be unhappy with the resolution of a repair request. This is due to the quality of the repair carried out and the time taken to do it. Around 14% of residents claimed to be dissatisfied with the time taken to complete a reported repair.
Issues left unresolved can often create a knock-on effect, with further issues arising due to the damage caused by the original problem. This causes frustration for many tenants who can see the damage being caused.

Complaints and anti-social behaviour
A quarter (26%) of residents claim to have been affected by anti-social behaviour in the last 12 months and most instances were reported. However, some tenants didn't report the behaviour as they didn't feel reassured that their housing association would take action.
More than half of those who did inform their housing association about the behaviour were dissatisfied with the outcome and felt the situation wasn't handled adequately.

Contact and information sharing
Regarding contact, this can be a point of contention for tenants. When the individual finds it challenging to contact their housing association, frustrations can arise.
This is particularly the case if the tenant wishes to contact their housing association to report other issues in their home.

Engagement and influence

For a tenant to feel satisfied with their current living situation, an essential factor for consideration is the engagement from the housing association or housing association. Tenants who feel like their views and requests are listened to and acted upon are much more satisfied with their living situation.
In contrast, tenants who feel like they can't trust their housing association to carry out tasks are much more dissatisfied.
When making decisions impacting the residents and their homes, housing associations must be transparent for tenants to feel valued and respected.

Acceptable standards for social housing
To keep residents safe and content, a minimum standard for housing should be made accessible to all. The Charter for Social Housing Residents dictates that every resident, as a minimum, should:

- Be safe in their home
- Have their complaints dealt with promptly and fairly
- Be treated with respect
- Have their voice heard by their housing association
- Have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in
- Making smoke alarms mandatory in all social homes, and carbon monoxide alarms mandatory in all social homes with a gas supply

Room for improvement
It's clear from the statistics that there's still scope for improvement when reducing the number of annual social housing complaints. In fact, as the number of complaints appears to be rising, housing associations must take fast action to ensure the safety and happiness of their tenants.
House maintenance and safety appear to be the most crucial matter, with good communication from housing associations also paramount.
To ensure tenants are content and feel secure in their homes, housing associations must take a proactive approach with their properties and work alongside tenants to ensure that the property is safe for inhabitation, well maintained and that communication is clear and transparent.
To learn more about social housing complaints and how to address issues appropriately, consider attending our upcoming event where experts will guide you to expand your knowledge and learn about the standards for good complaint handling.
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