Post course resources - High quality written responses to complaints - values into action

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hqn TRAINING

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1 Message from Caroline

Hello

Thank you for attending the course on complaint responses. I hope you got some good ideas for writing clear, human responses.

I've enclosed the slides and a few example responses

And below is a list of useful resources on plain language and more.

Wishing you all the best

Caroline

Plain language resources to help you

A guide to writing in plain English (from the Plain English Campaign)

The A to Z of alternative words	**A PDF from the Plain English Campaign** **http://plainenglish.co.uk/files/alternative.pdf**
Advice on how to write well for your reader - including specialists from GOV.UK	https://www.gov.uk/guidance/content-design/writing-for-gov-uk
A US government guide to plain language	V useful place to find practical guidance - aimed at government employees) https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/
A guide to whether your words will be understood	You can look up a word in the lexicon to see how often it s used and who s likely to know it. https://www.clearest.co.uk/plain-english-lexicon
Useful books	1. Oxford Guide to Plain English, by Martin Cutts 2. Complete Plain Words by Sir Ernest Gowers (the first edition of this appeared in 1954, Ernest had been a civil servant since 1903. This is an interesting read that highlights how long this has been an issue.

Help with punctuation

A guide to punctuation	Helpful reminders of rules we ve all forgotten! http://www.sussex.ac.uk/informatics/punctuation/
BBC Skillswise	Videos and downloadable worksheets on English for adults – helpful if you want to refresh your knowledge https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/skillswise/english/zjg4scw
Useful books	1. Eats, Shoots and Leaves, by Lynne Truss 2. The Penguin Guide to Punctuation, by Penguin Reference Books 3. Everyday English for Grown-Ups, by Michelle Finlay

Other helpful books

1. **Visual Thinking, empowering organisations through visual collaboration** by Willemien Brand https://www.bispublishers.com/visual-thinking.html
2. **Business Writing for Dummies** by Natalie Canavor
3. **Switch - How to change things when change is hard** by Chip and Dan Heath - read the first chapter for free at their webs
4. **How to Have a Good Day** by Caroline Webb - lots of useful ideas about using what we know about how the brain works to have a better day at work (and elsewhere) www.howtohaveagoodday.com/ uses the work of Daniel Kahneman (Nobel Prize winner) who wrote the book "Thinking, Fast and Slow" about the two system brain.

A few notes on unreasonable/unacceptable behaviour
The ombudsman recognises the importance of managing unreasonable behaviour. It's a requirement of the new code that you have a policy for this that covers what is considered unreasonable behaviour and then what steps you will take to manage it.

It is helpful to identify what is unreasonable behaviour, for example:
- Excessive contact - often adding issues in. Not co-operating in helping you to help them.
- Verbal abuse - using language that is intended to insult or degrade (includes telling people they are no good at their job etc). Racist, sexist, homophobic etc
- Physical threat
- No access to property
- Excessive demands

Steps to take:
- Follow your policy

- Try and reach informal agreement before you take any further action
- Involve an advocate or representative to act as an intermediary
- Warning letters with examples of where people have overstepped the mark
- Mediation

Formal actions might include:
- Single point of contact (and frequency)
- Limit contact to particular channels (email/phone)
- Restrict contact and responses to certain times
- limit the number of issues (eg one issue a week)
- Draw a line under closed complaints (the ombudsman wouldn't expect you to look at things you've already dealt with)
- Only respond when they provide new information on new evidence

There's guidance on the Housing Ombudsman site here including the advise not to use the term vexatious!
They also have some good e-learning on this and on compensation/putting things right.

2 Dear Mr Smith model

Complaint ref xxx

Dear Mr Smith

Our response to your complaint

Thank you for contacting us.

You complained to Anytown Housing on *(date/s)* about:

1. Being put in an embarrassing position at the Dulux store when the voucher we gave you could not be used as our account had been suspended
2. Us not returning your phone call or providing an explanation about what had happened .

I understand that to resolve your complaint you are seeking:

1. An apology and an explanation about what happened.
2. Information about what action to take now.

Summary of our response

Thank you for letting us know you were unhappy with our service.

I apologise for the embarrassing situation that you were put in when you went to the Dulux store. I'm also sorry that nobody returned your call or explained what had happened. I can see that our service was below standard, and uphold your complaint. I have provided more details below.

I understand that our account at the store has been restored and you will now be able to use the voucher.

This section answers your reader's three questions of:
1. Why am I reading this?
2. What do I need to know?
3. What do I need to do?

Further details:

1. **Our mistake led to the Anytown Housing account at the store being suspended**
   Some of our internal processes for signing invoices failed and this meant our account with Dulux was suspended.

2. **You should have received a call back within 24 hours**
   This was missed because of staff holidays. Managers have been asked to make sure better systems are in place to prevent this from happening again.

   We should have called you back rather than relaying a message to our receptionist and asking them to tell you when you called. We have let staff know that this was not an acceptable level of service.

Our learning and changes made
Your complaint has helped us to identify things we need to do better. We have let managers know about the poor service you received and asked them to make improvements to systems to prevent this from happening again.

This response is the end of stage one of our complaint process
I hope that this letter has given you the information you need. If you are not satisfied with this response, you can ask for it to be reviewed by a senior manager. That review is stage two of our complaint process (the senior manager will be new to this case).

For a stage two review please explain how this response falls short and what you would like us to do. You can find more information about our complaints process on our website which is **www.anytownhomes.co.uk/complaints**

Help and information from the Housing Ombudsman
The Housing Ombudsman's website has helpful information on how complaints to social housing landlords should be handled. You can also contact them for advice and support. The Ombudsman can only become formally involved when your complaint has gone through both stages of our complaint process.

There are a range of ways that you can contact them:

- Their website is www.housingombudsman.org.uk.
- Phone 0300 111 3000 (Mon – Fri 09:15 am – 5:15 pm).
- Email: info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk
- Postal address: Housing Ombudsman Service, PO Box 152, Liverpool L33 7WQ

Thank you again for contacting us

Yours sincerely

Complaint ref xxx

Dear Ms Chaudry

Thank you for letting us know you have been concerned about the safety of the fire alarm in your building. I'm sorry that you have been worried about this.

You complained to Anytown Housing on *(date/s)* about:

1. You were concerned that there had been no working fire alarm system in your building for two years.
2. Your concerns had been heightened by five recent visits to the building by our fire alarm contractors.
3. Contractors and members of our staff had been rude to you when you'd asked questions about the alarm system.

I understand that to resolve your complaint you are seeking:

1. Information about the state of the fire alarm in your building.
2. An apology about how you were treated by our contractors and staff.

Our response

1. **Your building's fire alarm system has been well maintained**
   Our regular safety check records show that your building's fire alarm has been in good working order over the last two years. I have included details about these checks and your building's safety records in the section below and hope that will put your mind at rest.

   As we have acted correctly in maintaining the fire alarm system, I cannot uphold your complaint about that.

2. **Staff have been reminded of the need to always communicate in a clear and kind way**
   I'm sorry that you felt our staff were rude to you when you spoke with them. It's important to us that our staff are always polite and respectf

   The people involved have told me that they understood you were upset and that they tried to answer your questions in a reasonable wa. As there were no independent witnesses of your discussion I'm unable to reach a conclusion about how you were spoken to and thus cannot uphold that part of your complaint. I have reminded all of the staff involved that they need to always communicate in a clear and kind way with our customers.

   Thank you for letting us know you had concerns about the alarm system. I hope that the details below are helpful in reassuring you that the system is safe and well maintained.

This section answers your reader's three questions of:
1. Why am I reading this?
2. What do I need to know?
3. What do I need to do?

Further details:

1. **Exley Court's safety records show that the fire alarm system has been in good working order over the last two years**

   Weekly checks - carried out correctly
   Our estate manager carries out a weekly check on the alarm system and smoke detectors (at 11am on Wednesdays). The safety records show that this has been done every week in the last two years. The weekly checks are recorded in the system logbook. Any faults are reported immediately so that they can be repaired.

   One manual call point (one of the red boxes on the wall that activates the system) was found to be not working in April 2022. This was repaired four days after the fault was found.

   Monthly checks of backup power – carried out correctly
   The backup power systems (batteries and generators) are checked every month. The results are recorded in the system logbook –
   there have been no problems with the backup power in the last two years.

   Six-monthly checks carried out correctly by our contractor
   Our fire alarm contractors test the system every six months. All the detectors, call points, panels, and circuits are tested every six months by a competent person with specialist knowledge of fire alarm systems and smoke detectors.

2. **Our fire alarm contractors have visited Exley Court twice in the last six months**
   One visit was to carry out the regular six-monthly check (see above). The second visit was to repair the manual call point that had been identified as not working during a weekly check in April 2022.

Our learning and changes made
Your complaint has helped us to understand that we need to clearly explain how we look after fire safety systems and procedures. We will clarify information for residents about what we do and why we do it.

This response is the end of stage one of our complaint process
I hope that this letter has given you the information you need. If you are not satisfied with this response, you can ask for it to be reviewed by a senior manager. That review is stage two of our complaint process (the senior manager will be new to this case).

For a stage two review please explain how this response falls short and what you would like us to do. You can find more information about our complaints process on our website which is **www.anytownhomes.co.uk/complaints**

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Thank you again for contacting us

Yours sincerely

3 Example 4 rewrite 2

Dear XXXXXXX
Your complaint about repairs to your kitchen cupboard doors
Thank you for letting us know that you have been unhappy about the service you have received from us. I've looked into your complaint and can clearly see that we have fallen short. I'm sorry for the frustration and inconvenience that this has caused you. I must also apologise for taking longer than anticipated to carry out this investigation.
I recognise that our service has not been good enough and am able to offer you £550 in compensation. I have explained how I have calculated this offer later in this letter.

Details of your complaint
I received your complaint about an outstanding repair to your kitchen cupboard door on 10th July 2022. I have worked with our contractor (Wights Living Space) to understand what has gone wrong. You let me know that:

1. At your first appointment (18th April) the worker from Wights told you the cupboard door needed new hinges and that he would go and get them and be back in an hour. However, he did not return or call you.
2. At your second appointment (17th May) the Wights worker took your cupboard door with him to match a replacement, said he would be back in an hour but again he didn't return, and you were not contacted.
3. Wights didn't attend the next appointment (14th June). When you called them you were told the worker had been sent to an emergency instead, but nobody had informed you of this.
4. On the 16th June you had an appointment between 14:00-15:00, at 16:55 you received a call from Wights cancelling the appointment saying you would receive a call on Thursday but no call was received.

5. After your initial complaint you let us know that on 9th August 2019 the handyman arrived before the agreed appointment time and carried out the repair while you were not at home. Your teenage child was present, but no adult. Additionally, you were not happy that the new cupboard door did not match the rest of the units.

Information from our contractor

• **You were not told that the hinges needed were not in stock at first two appointments**	• **The hinges needed to complete your repair were initially not in stock. Unfortunately, this wasn't communicated to you at either of your first two appointments.**
• **An administrative error meant no worker was scheduled for your 14th June appointment**	• You were given a third appointment for the 14 June, but an admin error was made and no one was scheduled to come to you on that day. You chased this up (directly with Wights) and an appointment was then booked for the 16 June 2022.
• **Didn't attend on 16 June as hinges still not available**	• Due to the hinges still not being available the joiner ordered a new door front and phoned to tell you this (rather than attend the appointment).
• **Missed appointment on 7 August due to worker needing emergency leave**	• There was a missed appointment on the 7 August 2022, you were contacted to rearrange the appointment. A new appointment was made for 9th August 2022 and a new door was finally fitted.
• **Your door was finally fitted on 9th August 2022**	•

Not good enough – what we will learn from this

Our service to you has not been good enough and I sincerely want to apologise for this. There have been unnecessary delays and poor communication leading to stress and wasted time for you.

We're making sure that all members of our service teams understand how important these issues are as well as reminding them that they need to attend appointments at the agreed time and not carry out repairs unless an adult is present. We can see we need to learn from the mistakes that have been made and improve how we do things.

4 Supporting your team to write clear and effective responses to complaints.

When people complain they want to be heard, understood and dealt with fairly.
You want your team's responses to:

- Be straightforward and clear
- Improve customers' relationship with you
- Enable the speedy resolution of complaints

Writing is a very personal thing and managing other people's writing can be a challenge. Here are some ideas on how to do it supportively:

1. **Make sure everybody knows what good looks like**
    - Agree what a good complaint response looks like. Make sure everyone understands the need for plain English, a clear purpose, structure and consistent style.
    - Circulate good examples and helpful phrases. Discuss them at team meetings.

2. **Be clear about the standards you will use to judge quality**
    - It's important to be consistent and clear when you suggest a change to someone else's writing. It's easy for staff to feel demoralised and that "whatever I write she changes it".
    - Good enough is good enough – only intervene to make important improvements, don't dwell on details that don't matter. If letters are good enough to go, get them sent. Don't aim for perfection or try to make every letter as if you had written it.

3. **Encourage people to plan before they write**
    - Planning content helps to improve style and structure too.
    - Develop a team planning template and encourage people to use it.
    - For new writers or particularly difficult responses ask people to discuss and agree their approach with you at the planning stage, before the first draft.
    - Show the plan and a first and final draft of some of your letters to help your team understand the process.

4. **Create a supportive atmosphere**
    - Writing well takes effort. Provide resources like dictionaries or style guides. Circulate snippets and press articles about effective writing.
    - Encourage staff to approach writing as a skill they can improve.
    - Develop a buddy system of safe constructive criticism and feedback.
    - Show your own drafts and final versions, ask for feedback – be prepared to take criticisms!
    - Ask your team what help they need. Find out what is supportive and what is annoying.

5. **Seek feedback**
    - Survey customers to find out what they thought of the content, structure and tone of the replies they received.
    - Ask an external writing-skills consultancy to audit your team's work.

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