



Customer Service and Complaints Policy & Procedure

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Introduction

Empowering People Inspiring Communities Ltd (EPIC) is committed to providing high quality services for all of our customers. This includes all tenants, leaseholders, applicants, contractors and agents or anyone else who may use our services, or is affected by our decisions.

The policy should be used for complaints about EPIC and the service that we deliver, including contractor's performance. The policy is not to be used for complaints relating to a tenancy (e.g. nuisance neighbours etc). However, it can be used to complain about our failure to deal with a tenancy appropriately.

Aims of the Policy

The aim of the policy is to ensure that we have an approach to complaints that is clear, simple and accessible. All complaints will be resolved promptly, politely and fairly in line with the appropriate national standards.

Policy Statement: Customer Care

- To assist in achieving our levels of customer service we operate an efficient, helpful and customer orientated reception service during normal office hours for all of our customers whether they be in person or on the telephone. A standby service will also be available to respond to repairs and maintenance emergencies outside office hours.
- We set Local Standards, in conjunction with our customers, which aim to deliver a high quality service that is continuously improving.
- We communicate with our customers and seek feedback via a number of methods as detailed in the Resident Involvement Policy and Local Standards, on all of our key policies and services.
- The Local Standards set out the minimum standards that you should expect when dealing with us and a copy can be obtained upon request.
- Where our services do not meet these standards we want to hear from you.
- We will consider the needs of our customers and residents and stakeholders when implementing our policies and procedures.
- To encourage complaints, compliments and suggestions about our services, we will have an area in our public reception where customers can submit their comments easily. This area will be clearly marked by a 'comments box' and will be checked on a regular basis. Customers can also submit their comments via our website at www.epichousing.co.uk.

Performance Monitoring

- We will establish performance targets for key services and monitor their achievement.
- Our Management Board will review performance targets regularly and will receive information detailing actual performance against targets.
- We will publish our accounts and performance against our key performance indicators annually.

Customer Satisfaction Surveys

- We will seek suggestions from our customers via feedback questionnaires and other appropriate methods on improvements and use the information provided in future policy and procedure reviews.
- All feedback will be collated independently of the service, for instance, Anti-social behaviour feedback questionnaires will be collated and monitored by the Housing Assistants and not the Housing Officers.
- Any feedback received of a negative nature will be treated as a complaint and dealt with as such.
- We will conduct a comprehensive Star customer satisfaction survey every 3 years.

Policy Statement: Complaints

By investigating and processing complaints, we will learn from customers where mistakes have been made and where genuine grievances have arisen. We will ensure that these are rectified to the satisfaction of the customer wherever possible and that the circumstances do not recur. This learning will be reported to the Board on a half yearly basis.

EPIC's Definition of a Complaint:

"An expression of dissatisfaction, about the standard of service, action or lack of action by the Company or their staff affecting an individual or group of customers on a matter which is the responsibility of EPIC."

The following list gives examples of the types of things that people may complain about:

- How your application has been dealt with,
- Discrepancies or dissatisfaction with your tenancy or lease,
- Dissatisfaction with repairs or the way that they have been carried out,
- Dissatisfaction in how we have dealt with discrimination or harassment,
- Unsatisfactory treatment by members of staff, contractors or agents,
- Discrepancies with your rent or arrears,
- Dissatisfaction in how we have dealt with nuisance,
- Missed appointments,
- Dissatisfaction in the way EPIC has carried out its policies (but not dissatisfaction or criticism of the policy itself),
- Failure to provide a good quality service / achieve its standards,
- Failure to fulfil a statutory responsibility.

We feel that all complaints are important; therefore, we have decided not to distinguish between formal and informal complaints and will handle all expressions of dissatisfaction that fall within the above definition as complaints under this policy unless the complainant specifically requests not to proceed through the system.

EPIC's Promise

We respect your rights:

- To be treated fairly and with dignity and respect.
- To receive an acknowledgement of your complaint.
- To have your complaint dealt with quickly.
- To confidentiality at all times.
- To representation.
- To have your complaint dealt with within the timescale set out.
- To receive a formal response explaining the actions we have taken or will be taking.
- To be taken seriously and to have your complaint investigated thoroughly.

- We will take a fair and impartial approach in order to resolve the complaint as quickly and amicably as possible.
- Complaints can be made in writing (via email, letter or online), or via an authorised advocate. We will not accept verbal complaints.
- All complaints received will be treated in the strictest confidence.
- The making of a complaint will not affect in any way, any other application or other contact with us.

Full details of our procedure for receiving, investigating and responding to complaints can be found later in this document.

Equality and Diversity Statement

EPIC will consider all complaints in line with this policy and will not discriminate on grounds such as race, religion, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, disability, age, or other any unjustifiable criteria.

Monitoring and Reporting

All complaints received will be logged, analysed and reported to the Board on a regular basis.

Responsibilities

- The Executive Assistant will act as the 'Complaints Administrator' and will ensure that all complaints are recorded and handled in accordance with this policy and in an impartial and objective manner. The Estate Officer will undertake this role in the absence of the Executive Assistant.
- All staff are responsible for promoting this policy to customers and should ensure that any complaints they receive are passed onto the Executive Assistant without delay.
- The Management Team are responsible for ensuring that all complaints are thoroughly investigated and responded to in line with this policy.
- The Executive Assistant is responsible for ensuring that all new staff receive training on this policy as part of their induction programme and that refresher training for all staff takes place at least every 3 years.
- The Management Team are responsible for ensuring that all complaints reported to them have been dealt with satisfactorily.

Review Mechanism

- The ongoing implementation of this Policy will be monitored through regular reports to the Board.
- This policy will be reviewed every three years unless changing circumstances require an earlier review.
- Wherever possible we will involve customers in the review of this policy via the Tenant Board Members and representatives.
- All comments received on feedback questionnaires will be used in the next review of this policy.
- Any complaints that are upheld will result in action being taken to ensure that similar complaints are avoided. This action will be reported to the Board as part of their report.

Complaints Procedure

Complaints will be dealt with as efficiently and effectively as possible, keeping the complainant informed fully throughout.

This procedure may be used by users of any of EPIC's services including tenants, stakeholders, leaseholders, etc.

Anonymous complaints will also be accepted for initial investigation in order to encourage people who would not otherwise lodge a complaint for fear of reprisals. However, unless the complainant can be identified it is impossible to take the matter further.

The General Complaints Procedure has 4 stages which are as follows (A summary can be found at Appendix 1):

Stage 1

Where a customer is not satisfied with the response from front line staff, he/she may complain to a member of the Management Team (excluding the Chief Executive). All complaints will be acknowledged in writing within 3 working days of receipt. We will respond to the complaint within 10 working days. Where a complaint cannot be resolved within 10 working days, a further holding letter should be sent out with a new intended date of resolution.

Where a complaint is about Damp or Condensation or requires an in-depth investigation which would not be complete within 10 working days. The person investigating the complaint may respond within 28 calendar days. However, the complainant must be notified of this within the acknowledgement letter. Therefore, the investigating officer must inform the Executive Assistant immediately of their intention to take the extended investigation period.

Stage 2

Where a customer is not satisfied with the response at Stage 1, they may complain in writing to a Senior Member of the Management Team (or the Board if the Chief Executive is involved in the complaint). All complaints will be acknowledged in writing within 3 working days of receipt. We will respond to the complaint within 10 working days. Where a complaint cannot be resolved within 10 working days, a further holding letter should be sent out with a new intended date of resolution. If the Board have to be involved in a Stage 2 complaint then the complainant must be informed that it is likely to take up to 28 days to resolve.

Stage 3

Where a customer is still dissatisfied they have a final right of appeal. This should be done by writing to their MP, Tristram Hunt at:

88 Lonsdale Street
Stoke on Trent
ST4 4DP

The MP is the designated person as set out by the Localism Act 2011. When a tenant has exhausted stage 1 and 2 of our complaints system, they are then able to take their complaint to the MP. The MP then works with us to resolve the complaint. Their role is to provide fresh and independent insight into the complaint although they do not have any formal powers.

Stage 4

In the small minority of cases where the complainant is still not happy they should then pursue the matter with the Independent Housing Ombudsman.

The MP is permitted to submit a complaint to the Housing Ombudsman at any time, however, a tenant must wait 8 weeks from the Stage 3 complaint being closed before they are able to submit a complaint to the Housing Ombudsman themselves.

The Independent Housing Ombudsman can be contacted at 81 Aldwych, London, WC2B 4HN or via email at info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk.

Recording Complaints

All complaints should be dealt with as follows:

- All complaints, should in the first instance be passed to the Executive Assistant (or Estate Officer in her absence).
- The Executive Assistant should then log all details onto the Complaints Log Database, ensuring that each complaint has a unique reference number so that they are easy to track.
- Once it has been logged the Executive Assistant will pass the complaint onto the most appropriate member of staff depending on service responsibility or which stage within the procedure it falls.
- The Executive Assistant should on a fortnightly basis chase progress regarding the complaint and record any details on the database as required.
- A half yearly report on the Complaints received should be presented to the Board for information.
- An annual overview of complaints received during the year will be presented to the Board, usually in May or June each year.

Investigating and Responding to Complaints

Investigations should include contact with the complainant to clarify the issues, clarify the outcome being sought and to check their understanding of the process. This can be done either by telephone or post but should where possible be undertaken via a face to face meeting with appropriate notes taken.

Once the investigation is completed the final response letter should be written in clear, plain language. If possible, it should stand alone, avoiding references to previous correspondence that may not be readily available to the complainant. If there has to be a reference to previous correspondence there should be a copy attached. Final letters ought to include:

- a summary of the complaint;
- a summary of the outcome of the investigation;
- whether we uphold the complaint or not, any offer made to settle the complaint and how long that offer will remain open;
- an apology or, if an apology would not be appropriate, an expression of regret that a complaint was necessary to raise an issue, whether the complaint was justified or not;
- A clear statement that the letter is a final response and that complainants who are dissatisfied with the final response may refer to the next stage of the procedure.

When a complaint has been investigated and an outcome offered to the complainant, a period of 10 working days must be given before the complaint is considered closed.

For all complaints received, investigated and closed a feedback text will be sent seeking the Customers views on how we handle complaints including time scales for responses etc. This will be done by the Executive Assistant.

If a complaint is forwarded to the Independent Housing Ombudsman for consideration, EPIC will co-operate fully and comply with all reasonable findings or recommendations.

Remedies

Where a complaint investigation identifies that things have gone wrong an appropriate remedy will be determined. Appropriate remedies include:

- An apology
- An explanation of what went wrong
- Delivery of a service
- Action to put things right
- Financial compensation in exceptional cases in line with our Compensation Policy.

Unreasonably persistent or vexatious complaints

EPIC define an unreasonable and persistent complainant as:

“Complainants who, because of the frequency or nature of their contacts with [EPIC], hinder our consideration of their or other people’s complaints.”

(Local Government Ombudsman, 2007)

Although unreasonable or persistent, the complainant may have justified complaints which they are pursuing in inappropriate ways, therefore, before treating a complainant as such we must be satisfied that:

- Their complaint is being or has been investigated in line with our procedure.
- The decision reached at the end of this was the right one.
- All communication with the complainant has been adequate and reasonable.
- The complainant is not providing any significant new information that may affect EPIC’s decision.

If the above conditions have been satisfied, the decision must be taken by the Chief Executive as to whether to treat this complainant as unreasonable, persistent or vexatious. If we do decide to proceed, the following steps must be taken:

- In the first instance, a warning letter must be sent (see Appendix 3) explaining why their behaviour is causing concern and what actions we may take if the behaviour continues.
- If the behaviour continues, a decision must be taken by the Chief Executive as to the action to be taken and a letter (Appendix 4) sent to the complainant to inform them. The following options are available:
- Limit the complainant to one form of contact (i.e. telephone contact only).
- Limit the complainant’s access to staff (i.e. provide them with one named contact only who should deal with all communication in the first instance).
- Refuse to register and process any further complaints from this person on the same subject and notify them that all future correspondence will go unanswered.
- In more serious cases and where the complainant is a tenant steps could be taken to end their tenancy.
- In more serious cases and where the complainant is a contractor or other customer type, all communication may cease (i.e. end the contract, remove from the waiting list etc).

Any restrictions imposed on complainants must be reviewed every 6 months and a decision taken as to whether to continue or lift the restrictions. All decisions must be communicated to the complainant in writing.

The following criteria are designed to be a check list against which all potentially unreasonable, persistent or vexatious complaints are assessed (this is not an exhaustive list):

- a) Refusing to co-operate with the complaints investigation process while still wishing their complaint to be resolved.

- b) Refusing to accept that issues are not within the power of EPIC to investigate, change or influence.
- c) Making groundless complaints about staff members investigating their complaint and seeking to have the complaint investigated by someone else.
- d) Changing the basis of the complaint during the course of the investigation or denying statements they have previously made.
- e) Introducing trivial or irrelevant information.
- f) Making unnecessary and excessive demands on the time and resources of EPIC (i.e. numerous calls, letters etc).
- g) Submitting repeat complaints about issues already resolved / investigated and refusing to accept the decision.
- h) Making accusations against EPIC or staff members that are unfounded or found to be untrue or fictitious.

How to Make a Complaint

Stage 1

If you are not satisfied with the response from front line staff, you may complain to a member of the Management Team (excluding the Chief Executive),
All complaints will be acknowledged in writing within 3 working days of receipt.
We will respond to the complaint within 10 working days. In some circumstances, the investigating officer may take 28 calendar days to investigate but the complainant must be informed of this in the acknowledgement letter.

If you are still dissatisfied you can go to:



Stage 2

A Senior Member of the Management Team (or Board)
All complaints will be acknowledged in writing within 3 working days of receipt.
We will respond to the complaint within 10 working days unless the Board are hearing it in which case we will respond within 28 calendar days.

If you are still dissatisfied you have:



Stage 3

Where a customer is still dissatisfied they have a final right of appeal. This should be done by writing to their MP, Tristram Hunt at:

88 Lonsdale Street
Stoke on Trent
ST4 4DP

If you are still dissatisfied you have:



Stage 4

Contact the Independent Housing Ombudsman.
An MP may take your complaint to the Ombudsman at any time, however, you must await 8 weeks from the response of your Stage 3 outcome before submitting it yourself. EPIC will co-operate fully and comply with any findings or recommendations made.

Warning Letter for Unreasonable, Persistent or Vexatious Complaints:

Dear.....

Re. Your Complaint

EPIC welcomes complaints, compliments and suggestions about its services and will endeavour to treat everyone who submits such comments in a fair and equal way.

Having received your complaint, I must inform you that we regard it as (unreasonable / aggressive / threatening / excessive / uncooperative etc) and as such this is hindering us in complying with our procedure. Although your concerns will be investigated I must advise you at this point that the nature of your contact means that you are running a risk of being made an unreasonable or persistent complainant.

I must warn you that such behaviour is a breach of your tenancy agreement and where appropriate we will take further action in relation to this. In addition, such behaviour will result in the loss of your customer reward.

I enclose a copy of our Customer Care and Complaints Policy for your information, which includes our definition and procedure for handling unreasonable and persistent complaints. We advise that you take note of the definitions listed within the document. Please be aware that should you continue to communicate in this manner your contacts with EPIC on this matter may be restricted.

Yours sincerely

Name
Title

Action Letter for Unreasonable, Persistent or Vexatious Complaints:

Dear.....

Re. Your Complaint

Further to my letter dated XXXX you have now been identified as an unreasonable and persistent complainant. This means that your behaviour has been identified as being (unreasonable / aggressive / threatening / excessive / uncooperative etc).

In line with our policy for dealing with unreasonable behaviour by complainants we are now taking the following action:

- Explain the action being taken in line with the suggestions in the policy or any other action deemed appropriate by the Chief Executive.

I must warn you that such behaviour is a breach of your tenancy agreement and where appropriate we will take further action in relation to this. In addition, such behaviour will result in the loss of your customer reward.

We will review the status of these restrictions in 6 months and advise you on the outcome.

Yours sincerely

Name
Title