

SAXON WEALD

COMPLAINTS POLICY

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1.0 Introduction and aim

- 1.1 We work hard to make sure our customers receive a good quality service. However, we acknowledge that instances may arise where customers have reason to complain. Where this happens, we will always aim to resolve complaints quickly and, wherever possible, to the complainant's satisfaction.
- 1.2 This policy highlights the importance of complaints to our business and clarifies how they are treated. The policy is supported by a two-stage procedure, which clearly explains the process for complaints handling.
- 1.3 For the purpose of this policy, the term "customer" (unless there is a reason for referring to a specific tenure group) includes tenants; leaseholders; shared owners; applicants for housing and any other person or organisation to which we provide a service or have a legal or contractual obligation.
- 1.4 Saxon Weald is a member of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme. We will comply with the Ombudsman's complaints handling code and abide by any findings or recommendations they make. We will inform all residents of the Ombudsman service and how they can use it.

2.0 Definition of a complaint

- 2.1 Saxon Weald has adopted the Ombudsman's definition of a complaint, namely:

"an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the organisation, its own staff, or those acting on its behalf, affecting an individual resident or group of residents."

3.0 What is not a complaint?

3.1 The following instances will not be dealt with through our complaints procedure:

- Where customers are complaining about each other (e.g. a dispute between neighbours - these issues are dealt with under our anti-social behaviour policy)
- Where the matter concerned is not our responsibility
- Where legal proceedings have started. Where a customer initiates the Pre-Action Protocol for housing condition claims, our complaints process will remain available until proceedings have been issued in court.
- Where an insurance claim is being made against Saxon Weald
- Where a matter has already been investigated, responded to and closed by Saxon Weald, under our complaints process.

4.0 Our Policy

4.1 We welcome complaints and use them as a valuable source of learning. We aim to make the complaint process as easy and customer friendly as possible. To achieve this, we will:

- Allow access to our complaints process to any person or organisation to whom we provide a service, or with whom we have a legal or contractual obligation.
- Accept complaints via whichever channel the customer prefers, such as letter, email, through our website, over the phone, via social media or in person.
- Accept complaints made by an individual or organisation acting on a complainant's behalf, providing they have their authorisation to do so.
- Treat all complainants seriously and courteously.
- Be fair and reasonable in our responses to complaints, providing clear and honest responses and explanations.
- Ensure that no customer suffers any disadvantage as a result of making a complaint.
- Provide appropriate staff training on complaints handling and the implementation of our policy and procedure.
- Use complaints to identify areas for service improvement.

4.2 **Providing information on how complaints are dealt with:** We will promote our complaints policy and procedure and make them available in our residents' handbooks, from our offices and on our website.

4.3 **Who can complain?** We will acknowledge and respond to all complaints as above. However, we are not obliged to allow complaints from people or organisations with whom we do not have any legal or contractual obligations (e.g. complaints from owner occupiers or applicants for housing whose applications have been declined). Where complaints are received from these sources, a member of our Leadership Team will make the final response on the company's behalf.

4.4 Complaints submitted via a third party or representative, such as an MP, must follow our standard complaints procedure.

- 4.5 **When to complain:** Complaints should be made within eight weeks of an event occurring or coming to the complainant's attention. This is to ensure that the matter is fresh in the complainant's mind and to assist with our investigation. Saxon Weald may exercise discretion where complaints are received outside of this timescale.
- 4.6 **Complaints via social media:** where a customer complains via a public post on social media, we will contact them via private message wherever possible to ask for full details of the problem and begin the complaint process from that point. We will not make a detailed response on a public post to ensure that the confidentiality and privacy of the complainant is maintained as far as possible.
- 4.7 **Helping with complaints:** We will make reasonable adjustments to ensure that all customers can access our complaints process. We will discuss requirements with the individual concerned and seek to reach agreement on what may be reasonable in the circumstances. For example, where someone may have difficulty communicating their complaint to us, a staff member may offer to help the customer make their complaint.
- 4.8 **Anonymous complaints:** We will do our best to follow up anonymous complaints, as they may highlight problems that we are unaware of. However, we recognise that this may sometimes create practical difficulties, due to our inability to obtain further information.
- 4.9 **Managing complainants' expectations:** We will always ask complainants to identify the outcome/s they would like to see, to help us identify the most appropriate solution. However, we may not always be able to meet their expectations and, where this happens, we will explain why.
- 4.10 **Responding to complaints (our procedure):** To ensure that complaints are dealt with efficiently, we have adopted a two-stage process. If exhausted, this process has a start to end timescale of 20 working days. The stages of our procedure are:

Initial contact (stage one):

Our aim is to resolve as many complaints as possible at stage one. Stage one complaints will be handled by the appropriate service manager. All stage one complaints will be acknowledged within five working days. We allow 10 working days from receipt of the complaint to deal with and resolve issues at this stage.

Where residents raise additional complaints during the investigation stage, these should be incorporated into the stage one response if they are relevant. If this would unreasonably delay a response, the complaint should be logged as a new complaint.

The complaint response must be sent to the resident when the answer to the complaint is known. It must not be delayed until any outstanding actions are completed. Outstanding actions should be tracked and updates provided to the resident.

Escalation (stage two):

If the customer is unhappy with our stage one response, they must tell us within three weeks of receiving our reply. The complaint will then be escalated to the Performance and Insight Manager, supported by the customer experience team. We allow a maximum of 10 working days to investigate and respond to the complaint at this stage. The stage two response represents Saxon Weald's final response to complaints. Following this they are closed on our system.

A complaint may only be escalated to stage two once it has completed stage one, and at the request of the complainant.

4.11 Complaints against a Board member

Should we receive a complaint which concerns a Board member, the investigation at stage one will be carried out by either the Chief Executive or the Executive Director – Resources. If a stage two investigation is required, this will be conducted by the Chair of the Board. If the complaint concerns the Chair, the stage two investigation will be completed by the Chair of Audit and Risk Committee.

4.12 Disrepair claims:

Due to the complex nature of disrepair claims they will be handled by the Asset and Sustainability team. Upon receiving a notification of a disrepair claim, we will advise the customer's solicitor we wish to treat this as a complaint. This is in line with pre-action protocol and a recognised alternative dispute resolution (ADR) technique. If the customer's solicitor agrees the complaint will be raised at stage one and handled by the relevant surveyor. If the complainant remains dissatisfied, then it will be escalated to stage two. The stage two complaint will be handled by the Assistant Director - Property. If the customer's solicitor is unwilling to engage in the complaints process, then the matter will be referred to our own solicitors.

4.13 Delays to complaint responses: If we are unable to provide a response or resolution to complaints within the timescales we promote, we will contact the complainant to explain our reasons for the delay. We will also give an indication as to when they can expect to receive a response.

4.14 The Housing Ombudsman Service: If, after exhausting our procedure, the complainant remains unhappy, they have the right to take their complaint to the Housing Ombudsman Service. The Ombudsman may offer to mediate, arbitrate, or recommend that we:

- Formally apologise
- Offer compensation
- Stop doing a particular thing
- Review and alter a policy or procedure
- Reject the complaint

The Ombudsman can be contacted at: Housing Ombudsman Service, PO Box 152, Liverpool L33 7WQ.

Telephone: 0300 111 3000;

E-mail: info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk

4.16 Closing complaints: We will close complaints when:

- The complainant identifies that they are satisfied with the outcome.
- The complainant specifically states that they do not wish to take the matter further.
- Where no further communications are received from a complainant within three weeks following a response under stage one of our procedure.
- The complaint has exhausted our procedure and received a final response under Stage two.
- A legal hearing has taken place and a judge has made a ruling.
- The matter has resulted in litigation and is now being dealt with by solicitors.
- There is nothing more we can do to resolve the matter.
- The complainant acts in an unreasonable or offensive manner and/or refuses to cooperate with our investigations.

5.0 Compensation and payments

- 5.1 Our compensation and payments policy sets out what compensation or other recompense may be awarded in relation to service failure. The main purpose of providing any form of redress is, wherever possible, to restore the customer to the position they would have been in had the service failure not occurred. This often means providing a practical solution, but there are times when a gesture of goodwill or a compensation payment is appropriate.
- 5.2 Saxon Weald must also comply with statutory requirements regarding compensation for customers, for example in relation to home loss or home improvements. The compensation and payments policy explains those obligations.

6.0 Unacceptable and unreasonable behaviour by complainants

- 6.1 All incidents of unacceptable or unreasonable behaviour, caused by complainants or their representatives, will be recorded and dealt with in accordance with our Unacceptable behaviour Policy.
- 6.2 Saxon Weald reserves the right not to consider cases when they are being pursued in an unreasonable manner or are frivolous, over-demanding, persistent or seek to raise again and unreasonably, in the opinion of our customer experience team, matters which we have already decided upon.

7.0 Performance monitoring and review

- 7.1 We have a robust system for monitoring and reporting on our complaints handling performance. The system enables us to record the reasons for complaints; recognise any trends or recurring problems; identify learning points or service gaps and gauge customer satisfaction levels with our complaints handling process.
- 7.2 Regular performance information relating to complaints is reported to the Board, Leadership Team, staff and residents.

- 7.3 We monitor our compliance and performance in relation to the delivery of this policy, which will normally be reviewed under the company's policy review timetable. However, if, at any time, shortfalls are identified, they will be addressed straight away.

8.0 Equality and diversity

- 8.1 Saxon Weald aims to achieve equality of opportunity in relation to the services we provide as a landlord and as an employer. This means that no person or group seeking housing, jobs or contracts with us will be treated less favourably because of their or their partner's, family's, friend's or associated person's protected characteristics. In law, protected characteristics specifically cover: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. In addition to these, Saxon Weald will not treat anybody less favourably for any reason which causes a person to be treated with injustice.
- 8.2 We will monitor complaints received by customer segment to check that our procedure is widely accessible and that customers are receiving a service appropriate to their needs.

Version	Amendment	By	Date
5.0	Three-year review.	Rachel Richards	November 2020
5.1	4.9 amended to incorporate timescales that are consistent with the Housing Ombudsman's complaint handling code. New section 4.10 to include how disrepair claims will be handled. Following sections re-numbered.	Jeremy Oliver Jones	December 2021
5.2	Amendments following review of Housing Ombudsman complaint handling code: 4.4: new section added remaining sections renumbered 4.10: new paragraphs added clarifying the complaints process. This includes amending who will handle stage one complaints, adding a timescale for complainants to say they are unhappy with our initial response and clarifying that no stage of the process should be skipped.	Rachel Richards	April 2022
5.3	Amendments following internal audit recommendations. New paragraph added at 4.11 regarding complaints against board members and reference made at 5.0 regarding compensation.	Rachel Richards	October 2022
5.4	Minor amendments to sections 3.1 and 4.14 to reflect that the Ombudsman has removed the need for customers to seek help from a designated person before having the Ombudsman consider their case and to reflect recently issued guidance from the Ombudsman regarding the pre-action protocol for housing condition claims.	Rachel Richards	December 2022