

COMPLAINTS PROCESS (Easy Reference Guide)

Stage One – Initial Complaint

The Lead Officer will seek to resolve the complaint. Customer Services will identify the department responsible for addressing the complaint and pass the complaint on to the Lead Officer. The Lead Officer will send an acknowledgment letter to the complainant within 1 working day of receiving the complaint.

- Customer Services logs and identifies a Complaints Lead;
- Lead Officer sends acknowledgement letter to the complainant within 1 working day;
- Within 5 working days of complaint receipt the Lead Officer sends a progress letter to the complainant;
- Within 15 working days of complaint receipt the complaint should be resolved. If it is not possible, the complainant should be notified;
- Complaint Closure – the Lead Officer sends out a resolution letter to the complainant with a copy of the Action Plan, if required. The Lead Officer should upload copies of all correspondence and any notes / minutes and/or action plans to Open Housing;
- The Lead Officer should inform his/her line manager and Customer Services of the complaint outcome;
- Customer Services will complete complaints process feedback with customer via phone and/or paper form;
- In the first instance all complaints should be addressed wherever possible at a local level, by the member of staff ordinarily dealing with the customer, with the intention of resolving the matter to the satisfaction of the complainant.

Stage Two – Complaints Review Panel appeal

If a Customer is unhappy with the outcome of their complaint, or the manner in which the actions were carried out, they have 10 working days to appeal the decision. This becomes a Stage Two Appeal to the Complaints Panel. The complaint passes on to a new Stage Two Lead Officer (the line manager or an appropriate peer).

- The Stage Two Lead Officer will send an acknowledgment letter to the complainant by the next working day;
- The Stage Two Lead Officer will speak with the customer and seek to resolve the issue;
- If this is not possible then a Complaints Panel hearing will be arranged within one month. An invitation should be sent to all parties along with the Complaints Summary

The Complaints Review Panel is made up of the following members:

- GMT Member or Advance Chief Executive;
- A member of the board as a Chairperson;
- The initial Investigating Officer;
- A representative from the funding body, if required;
- Customer/complainant/advocate
- PA for minuting the meeting

The complainant should be notified the date of the hearing a minimum of 10 working days before, to include the time/place, members of the Panel, a copy of the Case Summary and their rights as a complainant for a representative/advocate to attend with them.

The Hearing

The Panel listens to details of the case presented by the first Investigating Officer, the Complainant or an advocate, and appropriate witnesses. The meeting should not last more than 3 hours. If a decision cannot be reached in this time, another meeting can be scheduled.

The role of the Panel is to draw the case to an acceptable conclusion, which can be given verbally at the Review meeting.

Stage Three (designated person and external review)

- Stage three covers any form of external redress should the customer still be unsatisfied with any resolution.
- The Localism Act 2011 provides that tenants of housing associations, local authorities, and ALMOs will be able to ask for their complaints to be considered by a 'designated person' when their landlord's internal complaints procedure is finished.
- If a customer wants support in making a complaint then they can ask Advance to put them in touch with a Designated Person. This might be a local MP or Councillor, a resident or resident's panel. They can assist in making the complaint but primarily their role is to review the decisions made by Advance at any level of the complaints procedure and offer their impartial review of our findings.
- Advance is able to reflect on the guidance offered by the Designated Person and adjust any findings if appropriate. A Designated Person is able to refer a complaint directly to the Housing Ombudsman if they feel Advance is not dealing with the complaint within its policies and procedures.
- If the complainant remains dissatisfied, they will be given details of how to apply to the Independent Housing Ombudsman. When a case is accepted by the Ombudsman the complainant, case manager, the relevant Director and Chief Executive will be informed by the Complaints panel. Acceptance of a case through the Ombudsman will not prevent case managers continuing to seek to resolve the complaint wherever possible.
- Complainants who are not applying for housing with Advance or who are not paying for a service from Advance do not have the right to appeal to the Housing Ombudsman.
- When the Ombudsman receives a complaint that has gone through our internal complaints procedure they will always ask if it has been referred to a designated person. If it has not then they will provide guidance about designated persons and how the tenant can refer their case to one.
- If a tenant is clear that they do not want to make use of that opportunity for local resolution the Ombudsman will, providing eight weeks has passed from the date of our final stage response letter, consider the case.