

Findings from The Abbeyfield Society's self-assessment of our complaint handling procedures in 2021



The Abbeyfield Society's Complaints, Concerns and Compliments Policy (3.0) was approved by the Board in December 2020. See our [Making a Complaint](#) guide for residents and their representatives for full details.

Definition of a complaint

Abbeyfield has adopted the standard definition of a complaint as:

“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.”

The exclusions from the policy are clearly set out, and deemed to be reasonable and fair. Where an issue cannot be addressed via the complaints procedure, details of an alternative means of resolving the issue would be given to the complainant instead.

Accessibility

There are multiple routes available to make a complaint, including by email, telephone, by post, by speaking to any member of staff or via a representative.

Information on how to make a complaint is included on the [abbeyfield.com](#) website.

Abbeyfield has a commitment to make any reasonable adjustments necessary, where an individual has any difficulty in raising a complaint, in line with our Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, Aids & Adaptations, and Accessible Information policies.

We regularly advise residents about our complaints process. Our Making a Complaint guide is given to all prospective and current residents, and displayed in all of our houses and homes.

Complaints team and process

We have a named Complaints Officer, who administers and coordinates any complaints received. The Complaints Officer works within our Legal and Compliance team to ensure complaints are resolved quickly and fairly.

Our complaints procedure has an optional Stage 3; complainants may take their complaint directly to the Housing Ombudsman (where it relates to a housing service) or the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (where it relates to a care service) following Stage 2.

Our final response letter sets out the right of complainants to refer to the matter to the relevant Ombudsman for an independent review.

We hold a record of all correspondence related to a complaint in line with the requirements of data protection legislation.

Communication

We keep complainants informed and updated during the complaints process. In 2021, 99% of complaints (all bar one) were acknowledged and logged within five working days by the Complaints Officer. It is a requirement of our policy that any changes to our timescales for responding to a complaint must be communicated and agreed with the complainant.

The complainant will also be offered a phone call or a meeting to discuss our findings before receiving a written response, to enable any areas of dispute to be challenged prior to the final decision.

Residents are advised of how to escalate their complaint further, should they wish, via the standard template letters in use at the end of each stage. The use of our standard response template letters is monitored by the Complaints Officer. At each stage, if the complainant remains dissatisfied, they can ask for the complaint to be escalated by letting the Complaints Officer know – they do not need to put this request in writing.

In 2021, 86% of complaints received were resolved at Stage 1, with 9% resolved at Stage 2.

76% of Stage 1 responses in the last year were sent within the Housing Ombudsman's Code's timescale of 10 working days - an improvement of 20% from the previous year. An additional 10% of Stage 1 responses were within an agreed extension period (usually no more than 10 additional working days).

Of those resolved at Stage 2, 63% were resolved within the Housing Ombudsman's timescale. A further 12% of Stage 2 responses were sent within an agreed extension period (usually no more than 10 additional working days).

Where timescales were extended, there were good reasons, including:

- the annual leave of staff members key to investigation.
- additional time being required to fully investigate complex matters.
- a request by the complainant for an alternative Investigating Officer.
- the need to seek Legal advice in relation to the complaint.
- awaiting confirmation from a resident that a complainant had permission to act on their behalf.
- requirement to follow disciplinary procedure timescales where a complaint involves a staff member.

The need to agree extensions to our set timescales is clearly outlined within our policy, and covered within our Complaints Handling training for staff members.

Our complainant satisfaction survey, sent to all complainants one week after the final response letter, suggests 80% of complainants are satisfied with how their complaint was handled - although it is recognised that some complainants are satisfied but do not wish to complete the survey.

Cooperation with Housing Ombudsman Service

We have historically responded to all requests from the Housing Ombudsman within 15 days, as required.

Fairness in complaint handling

Complainants may choose to make a complaint via a representative – we will co-operate with anyone formally authorised to act on behalf of a complainant.

Where advice is given, we seek to ensure it is accurate and easy to understand. All response letters are monitored by the Complaints Officer.

Where a complainant's request to escalate to Stage 2 preceded the receipt of the Stage 1 response letter, we would explain to the complainant that we are unable to escalate. One request to escalate to Stage 3 was also placed on hold (with the complainant's agreement) pending planned developments at the house which which then resolved the issues raised.

Outcomes and remedies

Where something has gone wrong, we take appropriate steps to put things right. The template response letters include a section on what actions have been taken as a result of the complaint. Going forward, the Complaints Officer will monitor and log the actions taken as a result of complaints centrally.

Continuous learning and improvement

We have implemented improvements to our organisational policies, ways of working and staff training as a result of learning from complaints – a central lessons learned log is maintained by the Complaints Officer.

An example of a lesson learnt in 2021 relates to a complaint about visiting arrangements in our houses resulting in reissuing guidance and making it clear to staff members that residents' families must not be refused entry if they are unwilling to take a COVID-19 test (in line with the government's guidance).

We will share lessons with residents via this annual summary, while key information is also shared at regular resident meetings.

We share details of our complaints handling performance with our Quality Committee, a sub-committee of the Board, on a quarterly basis, while details will be included in the Annual Report for the year ending 21/22.

The Housing Ombudsman's Code resulted in significant overhaul of our complaints handling procedures. The changes made are now becoming embedded across the organisation and, we hope, will make a real difference to residents and others who may have cause to make a complaint.