



# How Complaints are Dealt With by EFDC Housing

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*Findings and Recommendations*

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## **1. Introduction**

1.1 In April 2012 the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) published its document; The Regulatory Framework for Social Housing in England, placing greater emphasis on landlords to involve tenants in the inspection and scrutiny of their services. The framework states that:

**“tenants should have the ability to scrutinise their provider’s performance, identify areas for improvement and influence future delivery”**

1.2 In response to the framework, Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) in consultation with the Epping Forest Tenants and Leaseholders Federation (Federation) developed a Tenant Scrutiny Panel to carry out some of the housing scrutiny functions previously undertaken by the Federation Executive Committee and to undertake reviews of specific areas of the housing service on behalf of the Federation.

1.3 Members of the Panel were selected following a recruitment campaign and information evening and received training in January 2013 to prepare them to conduct effective scrutiny exercises.

1.4 Following a review of performance data, specifically the 2012 Customer Satisfaction Survey, the Panel decided that its first scrutiny exercise would be to investigate how resident’s complaints were handled within Epping Forest District Council Housing Directorate.

1.5 This report details the findings and recommendations of this scrutiny exercise which took place between March 2013 and September 2013. The exercise included the following:

- Scrutiny of information and data about compliments and complaints received by EFDC Housing during 2012 -2013
- Comparison of EFDC Corporate Compliments and Complaints procedure with that of other local authorities
- Interviews with members of EFDC staff including the Corporate Complaints Officer
- Investigation of complaints procedures used by other agencies and corporations.

## **2. Scope and Methodology**

2.1 The Panel received support from the Tenant Participation Officer throughout the scrutiny process.

2.2 The Panel was mentored during the early stages of the exercise by an independent consultant (Alan Jones – Hendre Housing) who had also provided the initial training for the group. The Panel was advised that it should focus on systems and procedures rather than individual complaints and to look for trends in the type of complaints received and whether the Council was learning from its mistakes.

2.3 The Panel was given a detailed explanation of how complaints made by resident’s were dealt with by the EFDC Housing Directorate and provided with the following documents to assist with the exercise:

- EFDC staff booklet - Dealing with Complaints

- EFDC publication – Compliments and Complaints
- EFDC publication – How to Complain to the Housing Ombudsman
- Housing Compliments and Complaints monitoring information for quarters 2/3 2012/13
- Blank copies of Housing Compliments and Complaints monitoring forms
- Housing Directorate Structure
- Report from LB Croydon Housing Scrutiny Panel – Scrutiny of Housing Customer Contact Centre

2.4 The Council's Principal Officer (Housing Information and Strategy) attended the first two meetings of the Panel to answer questions on the Housing Directorate's Compliments and Complaints process.

2.5 Panel members were each assigned tasks at the end of each meeting to gather information from other local authorities or outside agencies.

2.6 The Panel took part in a 'reverse brainstorming' exercise in which members were asked to decide what constituted a really poor complaints procedure and then come up with solutions to turn the poor procedure into a good one.

2.7 Complaints procedures from the following organisations were compared with EFDC's:

- Harlow District Council
- Brentwood Borough Council
- London Borough of Enfield
- London Borough of Havering
- London Borough of Tower Hamlets

2.8 Two members of the Panel spent time with the Council's Corporate Complaints Officer to receive information on the Council's Corporate Complaints procedures.

2.9 Panel members attended a Housing 'Meet and Greet' evening where they were able to speak informally to housing section managers about the work of each area of the Directorate.

### **3. Findings**

3.1 The Panel felt that the procedures for dealing with complaints were comprehensive and clear and produced the following initial thoughts and questions:

- Would it be possible for 'Step One' complaints to be recorded?
- Are complainants surveyed after their complaint has been dealt with to assess their views on the procedure?
- How easy is the Council's complaints system to use?
- Can social media be used to make a complaint?
- How easy is it to move through the stages of the complaints system?

- How were complaints reviewed to ensure members of staff were learning lessons?
- Complainants can feel powerless and don't know which way to turn or who to speak to;
- Personal contact/involvement is preferable to a standard letter

3.2 The Panel found that the corporate publications on 'Compliments and Complaints' and 'How to Complain to the Housing Ombudsman' were clear and easy to understand.

3.3 Results of the 'reverse brainstorming' exercise. The Panel was asked to consider 'What Makes a Really Poor Complaints Procedure?'

- Generic Response
- Disinterested Staff Member
- Complaints department is in another country
- Saying "I'll get back to you in the afternoon" then don't bother to ring for another 2 days – or worse, just forget!
- If you telephone to make a complaint and are asked to leave your complaint on an answerphone
- Premium rate phone no
- Waiting too long to be connected
- Hard to understand
- Not returning calls
- Bad English
- Silly music playing for five minutes followed by press 1,2,3,4,5,6 blah blah blah
- Over complicated system – I give up!
- If complaining in person – staff member doesn't acknowledge you & flutters around doing other things – "Hello, I'm here!"
- Not listening
- Being disinterested
- Not taking details down correctly
- Phone options
- Bad manners
- Getting an outcome

The Panel was then asked to expand on these comments and explore ways to prevent any of this bad practice.

The following conclusions were reached:

- I. Complainants should be treated as individuals
- II. Staff at all levels should receive complaints handling training. This would resolve a number of the issues identified
- III. Complaints systems should be designed for ease of use by complainants – not made so complex that the complainant gives up
- IV. There should always be an outcome – even if complaint is not upheld, a proper explanation should be given
- V. There should not be a telephone answering system for customers to make complaints as this just makes the complainant more frustrated
- VI. Calls should be recorded for future reference
- VII. A member of staff should be designated in each section to collate complaints to avoid confusion

3.4 The Panel agreed that EFDC complaints procedures were similar to those of other local authorities.

3.5 The Panel felt that the following should be in place to ensure a good complaints procedure:

- Assessment of what is the customer's expectation – not necessarily recompense or money!
- Simple system – Needs to be easy for everyone to understand and follow
- Speed – complaints need to be dealt with promptly to reassure the complainant and avoid further complaints!
- Confidentiality – ensure that only those who need to know are involved
- Named officer – important to ensure one person is collating information to avoid confusion and to make it easier for complainant
- Satisfactory conclusion – try to ensure a win/win situation where the complainant is happy and the council can learn from its handling of the complaint
- Avoid repetition – if the complaint is upheld, it is important that steps are taken to avoid a repeat of the same problem
- Resolution/Customer Satisfaction – even if the complaint is not upheld, it is important that the complainant is satisfied that their views have been listened to, the complaint has been dealt with in a proper manner and the matter has been closed without leaving issues unresolved
- Lessons learned from complaints should be publicised within the organisation to ensure there is no repeat

#### **4. Conclusions**

4.1 The conclusions of the Panel were:

- Overall the Panel was impressed with the way complaints were handled.
- The Panel was impressed with the knowledge of the Council's Corporate Complaints Officer.
- EFDC Complaints procedures compared favourably with other local authorities.

4.2 However, a number of areas of concern were identified:

- Too many people were involved in the complaints process leading to an inconsistent approach.
- The use of standard replies made the complainant feel unimportant. People should be treated as individuals. Sometimes just a phone call would do the trick!
- All staff should be aware of and familiar with the corporate complaints procedure which should form the blue print for the way complaints are dealt with.

- All members of staff should be aware of what constitutes a complaint and trained to deal with handling complaints.
- The Panel held concerns that there was no process for helping vulnerable people with through the complaints process.
- There didn't appear to be a follow-up process for learning from complaints.
- Some areas of the service didn't appear to receive any complaints – was this correct?
- Not all complaints were being logged (Step 1?) which prevented a completely accurate picture from being formed.

## **5. Recommendations**

The Panel makes the following recommendations to help improve the way complaints are handled within the Council's Housing Service.

#### Recommendations

1. Introduction of a dedicated member of staff within the service to collate all complaints, speak 'one to one' with customers and to ensure consistency of approach across the service.
2. Take an individual approach to complainants – avoid use of standard letters or generic response. This will foster good relations and make the customer feel that they are being listened to.
3. Log all complaints from the earliest stage to ensure a true pattern emerges.
4. Introduce corporate complaints handling training for all staff to ensure consistency of approach at stage one.
5. Introduce an advocacy service to ensure vulnerable people are able to access the complaints process.
6. Ask the complainant what they would like the outcome of their complaint to be. Sometimes there may be a simple solution.
7. Carry out post-complaint surveys to assess customer satisfaction with the process.
8. Ensure lessons learned from complaints or changes made as a result of complaints are fed back to staff to ensure the same mistakes are not repeated.
9. Ensure that the complainant is kept informed and involved at every stage of the process to avoid misunderstanding.
10. Consider recording telephone calls. This would help with staff training and may prove vital in any future 'you said, we said' dispute.
11. Think about the final outcome. Would a simple hand written card be better than a letter of apology?
12. Ensure that the complaints procedure is as simple as possible to avoid putting people off.

#### Recommendations continued:

13. Treat dealing with complaints as a way of improving services – not as a chore!
14. Ensure that all parties are happy with or understand the outcome before filing the complaint as dealt with.

Epping Forest District Council Tenant Scrutiny Panel would like to thank the following people for their help and co-operation:

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Alan Jones – Consultant (Hendre Housing Consultancy)  
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Lyndsay Swan – (EFDC Assistant Director of Housing – Private Sector and Resources)  
Jenny Filby – (EFDC Corporate Complaints Officer)



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