

## 1 Scope

- 1.1 Aster aims to get it right first time. However, we do accept that sometimes we may fall short of what we would expect, and customers may complain. We understand that complaints (and the circumstances around them) may cause distress or upset for customers and aim to deal with complaints in a sensitive and timely manner to reach an amicable resolution.
- 1.2 Further to this, we will use complaints as an opportunity to put things right and improve the way we deliver our services.
- 1.3 This policy is for all customers who receive a service from Aster or where an application is being made for a tenancy with Aster. This includes where contractors or agents are providing a service on Aster's behalf.
- 1.4 The policy does not apply to complaints that are related to our commercial relationships with other parties; or to appeals regarding letting decisions, which are dealt with by the relevant Lettings Manager. We recognise that a complaint may follow a lettings appeal if a customer is dissatisfied with the outcome.
- 1.5 Everyone at Aster is responsible for the service we deliver and when something goes wrong the way we respond to a complaint will reflect our values. We value the opportunities complaints provide us to review our processes and make any changes needed.
- 1.6 Aster is a registered Restorative Organisation; this means we meet the standards of the Restorative Justice Council for applying restorative practice throughout our organisation. We will use these restorative principles in complaint resolution to build positive relationships within our communities. More information can be found on the [Restorativejustice.org.uk](https://restorativejustice.org.uk) website.
- 1.7 Our Complaints Policy, Procedure and Process is aligned to and follows the requirements and principles of the [Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code](#) and our obligations set out in the [Housing Ombudsman Scheme](#) and the [Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Regulatory Consumer Standard](#).

## 2 Policy Statement

- 2.1 We will ensure everyone is treated fairly throughout and following the complaints process, and without discrimination, in line with Aster's Diversity and Inclusion Policy.
- 2.2 We will promote a positive, no-blame complaint handling culture.
- 2.3 We will proactively assess and analyse complaints to identify any trends, causes or systemic issues to learn and make improvements to our services, policies, and procedures.
- 2.4 We will listen and discuss complaints with our customers to understand where our service has not met expectations, or agreed standards and policies, and respond appropriately. We will ensure the management of complaints is a customer focused and friendly process that enables customers to be heard and understood to try and resolve issues as early as possible. Customers will be given a fair opportunity to set out their position and comment on any finding or outcome before a final decision is made by Aster.

- 2.5 We will ensure a consistent approach to dealing with complaints across all our teams promoting a positive, accountable, and transparent complaints culture.
- 2.6 We will ensure colleagues are trained, empowered, and confident when responding to our customers and in accordance with our published standards and procedures.
- 2.7 A complaint is defined in the Housing Ombudsman Service's Complaint Handling Code, providing a clear understanding of what is considered a complaint. For the purposes of this policy a complaint is -
- An expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions, or lack of action by Aster, Aster's staff or those acting on Aster's behalf, affecting an individual customer or group of customers
- A complaint will not be recorded for matters that have previously been considered under the complaints process (i.e. a repeat complaint about an issue that has been addressed, not a complaint about the process); or about an issue which Aster has not previously been told about, for example
- Reporting a repair
  - Reporting neighbourhood issues
  - Reporting anti-social behaviour.
- 2.8 When a third party; such as a family member, support worker, or carer, acts for a customer wishing to make a complaint, we will ensure, after getting the customer's permission, the relevant paperwork is completed and shared, in line with data protection regulations.
- 2.9 All complaints will be reviewed and processed fairly and honestly.
- 2.10 We will ensure we are approachable and helpful throughout the complaints procedure, measuring our adherence to this policy through internal audit and compliance checks.
- 2.11 Involved customer groups will periodically review our approach to complaint management, making recommendations to improve the service where appropriate. We will consult with customers on the formation of complaint policies, and where appropriate include customers in dispute resolution through the Designated Complaints Panel.
- 2.12 We will accept and record a complaint unless there is a valid reason not to do so and, in these circumstances, a detailed explanation will be given setting out why the matter is not suitable for the complaints process.
- 2.13 Where it is assessed a complaint can be dealt with quickly and efficiently as part of usual 'day to day' business it may be logged as a Fast Track complaint and dealt with outside the Formal complaints process. This approach will be taken if it is felt it will offer the best outcome for the customer. If a customer is dissatisfied with this proposed approach, or it fails to reach a resolution, the issue will be dealt with as a Formal complaint.
- 2.14 We recognise that from time to time those who complain to us may behave unreasonably. In those circumstances, we will consider whether it is reasonable to persist in engaging with the complainant further. This will be considered in line with the Unreasonable Complainers Guidance within the Complaints Procedure, and advice from the Housing Ombudsman Service where appropriate.

- 2.15 If during a complaint investigation, or at any point, a customer or a third party on the customer's behalf brings any legal proceedings against Aster, we will stop our complaints process. This is to ensure our actions are in no way prejudicial to any such proceedings.
- 2.16 Should a customer seek compensation for injury, this will be dealt with as a personal injury claim via our insurers and not through the Complaints Procedure.
- 2.17 We will usually only investigate complaints made within six months of the event becoming evident.
- 2.18 The Complaints Policy and Complaints Procedure will be accessible on our website and publicised where possible, including in leaflets, newsletters, and other correspondence with our customers. Copies of the Policy and the Procedure can be provided when requested.
- 2.19 We will be clear about how the process works, the steps and the timescales involved, and the escalation process should a customer remain dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint.
- 2.20 We will acknowledge, log, and allocate a complaint to the relevant service area for investigation within 2 working days of receiving it.
- 2.21 There are 2 stages to our Formal complaints process, each with clear time scales:

#### **Stage 1**

- A written decision will be given within 10 working days from logging and allocation of the complaint.
- If this is not possible, an explanation and a date by when the stage 1 response will be given.
- This should not exceed a further working 10 days without good reason (for example if a customer cannot be contacted; or has made a request to be contacted at specified times which are outside of the complaint response timescales.)

#### **Stage 2**

- When a customer is dissatisfied with the outcome of the stage 1 response, they will be given the opportunity to explain why they feel the complaint has not been resolved.
- A written response will be given within 20 working days from the request to escalate.
- If this is not possible, an explanation and a date by when the stage 2 response will be given.
- This should not exceed a further working 10 days without good reason.

- 2.22 If a customer remains dissatisfied following the exhaustion of Aster's complaints process as set out in 2.21, they will be provided with an opportunity for the complaint to be reviewed by the Designated Complaints Panel. For more information on the DCP see our website - <https://www.aster.co.uk/existing-customers/customer-voice>
- 2.23 Customers have the right to refer their complaint to the Housing Ombudsman at any point during the investigation and details of how to do this will be included in the complaint correspondence.

- 2.24 We will consider discretionary compensation on a case by case basis and where a complaint is upheld, in line with our Compensation Policy.

### 3 Monitoring and Review

- 3.1 Policy overview sessions will be delivered to relevant teams following implementation of this policy to ensure the content and responsibilities are understood.
- 3.2 The effectiveness of this policy will be scrutinised after 12 months by the Customer Experience Panel.
- 3.3 We will regularly monitor our performance on complaints, reporting this annually to the Customer and Community Network, quarterly to involved customer groups and regularly to senior teams and service managers across the business.
- 3.4 Senior leaders will be kept informed of cases referred to the Housing Ombudsman Service with details of the decision reached and any recommendations provided.
- 3.5 This policy will be reviewed in at least 3 years' time unless a change in legislation or business need prompts an earlier review.

### 4 Related Policies and Procedures

- 4.1 Complaints Procedure
- 4.2 Compensation Policy
- 4.3 Honesty Policy
- 4.4 Diversity & Inclusion Policy
- 4.5 Data Protection, Privacy & Confidentiality Policy

### 5 Governance

<b>Effective From:</b>	01/05/2021	<b>Expires:</b>	30/04/2024
<b>Policy Owner:</b>	Customer Experience and Strategy Director		
<b>Policy Author:</b>	Policy & Assurance Officer		
<b>Approved by:</b>	<i>Customer Community Network</i>		
<b>Delegation Matrix Reference:</b>	R068	<b>Version Number:</b>	7.0