



Complaints Policy

Policy statement

At Canopy, we welcome feedback from anyone who uses our services; whether tenants, volunteers, self-helpers or housing applicants. We view complaints positively as a way of improving the services we provide.

Purpose and Scope

This policy is designed to support people who wish to complain about Canopy's services, policies, staff, contractors or anyone else who acts on Canopy's behalf. It is not intended to cover complaints about third parties:

- If you are a tenant and want to complain about your neighbours, please refer to our antisocial behaviour policy.
- If you are a member of staff and want to complain about a fellow member of staff, please refer to the disciplinary and grievance policy.

Service standards

- We will accept complaints in writing, by e-mail, by phone or by any other method of the complainant's choice.
- We aim to give a full and frank response to complaints within one week. If the complexity of the investigation slows things down, we will give an estimate of how long the complaint will take to handle.
- We will report the outcome of complaints quarterly to our Board.
- We will keep the general public informed about how complaints have been used to improve things.
- We will respect individuals' rights to privacy and confidentiality.
- We will offer a non-judgemental and client-centred approach.
- We will ensure this policy is publicised widely.

Equality and Diversity

Staff should adopt an individualised approach to dealing with complaints and ensure that nobody is disadvantaged or treated less favourably as a result of complaining.

Staff should recognise that some people find it difficult to express themselves clearly or assess the impact their behaviour might have on others, especially when anxious or upset. Patience should be exercised in such circumstances and staff should consider carefully the best method of communication for the complainant. Notwithstanding this, Canopy has a procedure for handling unacceptable complainant behaviour, which is outlined in Appendix 2.

Complaints should be monitored against the diversity strands cited in the Equality and Diversity Policy to ensure fair treatment for all.



Value for money

Canopy strives to provide services that offer value for money to **all** of our tenants, volunteers, self-helpers and housing applicants. To enable us to do this, our procedure for handling unacceptable complainant behaviour (see Appendix 2) contains sections on people who are over-demanding or otherwise unreasonable.

Monitoring

Frontline staff are responsible for recording details and informing their manager of any complaints received. This information should be passed in turn to the Operations Manager by e-mail.

Correspondence associated with complaints should be accessible through both (1) the complainant's records and (2) a centralised record of complaints maintained by the Operations Manager.

The Operations Manager is responsible for ensuring complaints are handled within the timescales set out in the attached procedures.

People who have filed formal complaints should be contacted within one month of resolution to formally close the case and ascertain their satisfaction with the way their complaint has been handled. This stage may be bypassed if it is likely to unduly aggravate the complainant, but the reason for doing so must be clearly recorded.

The Operations Manager will report quarterly to Board, outlining the number of complaints received; performance against timeframes; the nature of the complaints; the outcome of the complaints; and how feedback has been used to improve things. Care should be taken within the reports to ensure that the anonymity and confidentiality of the complainants are protected.

Statutory or regulatory framework and good practice

This policy should be read in conjunction with Canopy's Data Protection and Equality and Diversity Policies. Relevant guidance and legislation includes:

- Regulator of Social Housing: Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard.
- Housing Ombudsman Service: Fact Sheets.

Acknowledgements

This policy has been adapted from the complaints policy of People First Housing Association. The policy on unacceptable user behaviour has been adapted from the Housing Ombudsman Service's guidance.

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Appendix 1: Complaints Procedure

Initial contact

If you have a complaint, the first thing you should do is to contact a member of staff. You can express your complaint in any way you choose: in writing, by phone, in person or by e-mail. Don't forget to tell us:

- Who you are and how we can contact you.
- What your complaint is about; and
- What you would like us to do to resolve things.

If you complain by phone or in person, a member of staff will take the details down and give you a written summary for your records.

In most cases, we will speak to you and confirm in writing what we have done to address matters within one week. If that is not possible (due to complex investigations), we will give you an estimate of how long the complaint will take to handle.

Escalating complaints

There are three scenarios in which your complaint may be escalated:

- If you are unhappy with the response you have been given;
- If it has taken longer than we said it would to resolved; or
- If your complaint is both serious and urgent*

* Allegations of abuse by staff or any complaint that could seriously damage Canopy's reputation should be accelerated swiftly to Stage 2 or 3. The Director must be advised immediately about any complaints from solicitors or regulatory bodies.

There are five levels of complaint, culminating in an appeal to the Housing Ombudsman Service or the Local Authority:

1. Initial contact with frontline staff
2. Formal complaint to a Manager
3. Formal complaint to the Director
4. Internal appeal to a Panel convened by the Board of Management
5. External appeal to the Housing Ombudsman Service or Local Authority.

We recognise that for most people, the time taken to resolve a complaint is seen as a whole. If a complaint cannot be resolved during the early stages, we aim for Level 3 complaints to be resolved within four weeks of the initial contact and Level 4 complaints within five weeks. These timescales may be extended if delays are due to waiting for you to respond or in certain other situations with your agreement.



Level 4: Internal appeals

Internal appeals should be held at a mutually agreed time and place and be heard by a panel of 3-4 designated persons convened by the Board:

- At least two of the panel should be Board Members.
- For tenants, one of the Board Members should also be a tenant.
- For volunteers, one of the Board Members should also be a current or former volunteer.
- The Board may second an independent person with appropriate expertise onto the panel where deemed appropriate.

Aside from the panel, the hearing should be attended by the complainant (who may bring a friend or advocate along for support), any staff who have been involved with the complaint and any witnesses (if applicable).

You should inform Canopy one week in advance of any witnesses, friends or advocates you intend bringing to the hearing.

Level 5: External appeals

If you are unhappy with the outcome of the internal hearing, you may appeal to an external body.

Tenants should appeal to:

- The Housing Ombudsman Service, PO Box 152, Liverpool L33 7WQ

Volunteers, self-helpers and housing applicants should appeal to the appropriate local authority department. Staff should advise complainants about the most appropriate external body.

In most cases, external bodies will only accept complaints once Canopy's own internal procedures have been exhausted.



Appendix 2: Unacceptable Complainant Behaviour

Canopy believe that tenants, volunteers, self-helpers and housing applicants have a right to be heard, understood and respected. We work hard to be open and accessible to everyone.

However, there are four types of complainant behaviour that may hamper our ability to investigate a complaint effectively. These are:

- Being aggressive or abusive towards staff or others working on Canopy's behalf;
- Being over-demanding on Canopy's limited resources;
- Refusing to co-operate with an investigation; and
- Attempting to block Canopy from pursuing a legitimate aim.

In such situations, we will give complainants due warning that we find their conduct unreasonable and will offer them the opportunity to modify their behaviour. If the unacceptable behaviour continues, we may write to them again, suspending the investigation or refusing to investigate further.

The following sections explain in more detail what we mean by these four types of behaviour and why we find them unacceptable.

Aggressive or abusive behaviour

We understand that complainants might feel angry about the issues they have raised in their complaint. We also understand that people can act out of character in times of trouble or distress. We will exercise patience where this is the case.

However, in very rare cases, anger and aggression can overstep the mark and become distressing for those who work for Canopy. It is our duty as an employer to protect our staff from abuse.

Unacceptable behaviour that can cause distress includes:

- Violence or threats of violence directed towards our staff, contractors or volunteers;
- Behaviour or language (whether verbal or written) that may cause staff to feel offended, afraid, threatened or abused;
- Racist, sexist or homophobic abuse; and
- Making serious allegations that individuals have committed criminal, corrupt or perverse acts without evidence.

Over-demanding behaviour

Sometimes the volume and duration of contact by a complainant can cause problems. This may occur over a short period of time (e.g. several calls over the course of a day) or over a longer period (e.g. repeatedly making long calls or inundating us with information we have already or that is irrelevant)

We consider the level of contact has become unacceptable when the amount of time spent talking to a complainant, investigating minutiae or writing detailed correspondence affects our ability to either deal with the complaint at hand or deliver quality services to others.



Unacceptable behaviour of this nature also includes:

- repeatedly demanding a response within an unreasonable timescale;
- insisting on seeing or speaking to a particular member of staff, when that is not possible; and
- repeatedly changing the substance of a complaint or raising unrelated concerns.

Refusing to co-operate with an investigation

When we are investigating a complaint, we need the complainant to work with us. We may need them to provide additional information, evidence or comments; or we may need them to clarify or summarise their complaint. If a complainant repeatedly refuses to do this, we may find it difficult to proceed with the investigation.

We will always seek to assist someone if they have a specific, genuine difficulty complying with a request. However, we consider it unreasonable to file a complaint and then not respond to fair requests.

Blocking a legitimate aim

Canopy's plans are driven by three things: the law, our finances and the wishes of our members, tenants, volunteers and self-helpers. Before making significant changes to the services we deliver, we try to consult widely with the people who use them.

We often receive complaints or suggestions from people who think we should do things differently. If we can improve our services by making reasonable changes, we will always aim to do this. However, we sometimes receive complaints from people who:

- Want us to do something that is prohibited by law (or by our regulators);
- Want us to do something we cannot afford to do; or
- Want us to do something that most of our tenants, volunteers or self-helpers would prefer us not to do.

In such circumstances, we will explain why we cannot effect the change they might want. We accept that people may continue to object, but we consider it unreasonable to use the complaints system to harass Canopy or prevent us from pursuing our legitimate aims.