

Introduction

Milestone is committed to providing high-quality homes and excellent customer service. We are a registered provider of shared ownership homes in the South East of England.

We understand that sometimes things may go wrong, and when they do, we are dedicated to resolving any issues as quickly and efficiently as possible.

This policy outlines our approach to handling complaints, ensuring they are dealt with fairly, promptly, and in accordance with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.

As per the statutory nature of the Code, Milestone is required to submit an annual assessment of its performance against the Code to ensure compliance. Milestone will also publish a copy of its self-assessment, and this complaints policy on its website, ensuring easy accessibility for residents.

Our Complaints Policy provides a clear and concise overview of how we handle your concerns. It outlines what you can expect from us throughout the process. We aim to resolve any issues promptly and to your satisfaction.

1. Scope

This policy applies to all Milestone customers.

Any reference to "we," "our," or "us" refers to Milestone. "You" and "your" refer to any Milestone customer.

2. Purpose and Objectives

Our aim is to provide the best possible service to our customers. However, we acknowledge that issues may arise. When they do, we are committed to rectifying them swiftly and learning from your feedback to improve our services.

This policy sets out how we manage complaints, ensuring a straightforward and accessible process for all customers. It has been developed in line with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, as well as our regulatory and legal obligations.

3. Policy Statement

We strive to ensure that no customer experiences a situation where they feel let down by our service. However, if this does occur, we are committed to putting things right.

When a customer raises a concern, we will attempt to resolve it immediately. If an immediate resolution is not possible, we will agree on the necessary actions and timelines, keeping you updated throughout the process using your preferred communication method.

Our staff are expected to take all possible steps to assist and support customers, working diligently to resolve any issues encountered.

We will investigate the root cause of any problem to prevent it from happening again.

We will not close a complaint until we have exhausted all reasonable efforts to resolve it or until we have a mutually agreed action plan in place. Once we have reached an outcome or have an agreed plan, we will communicate with you about all the issues raised.

Building and maintaining our customers' trust is fundamental to our approach, and we will ensure that you feel your concerns are taken seriously.

4. Policy

What is a Complaint?

We adopt the Housing Ombudsman's definition of a complaint: "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."

Even if you do not explicitly use the word "complaint," if it is evident that you are dissatisfied, we will always offer you the opportunity to make a formal complaint.

From time to time, Milestone may seek customer feedback on its service and performance and where we do so, we will make recipients aware that they can pursue their dissatisfaction as a complaint, if they wish to.

Raising complaints in good time

We request that complaints be made within 12 months of the incident. Complaints made after this period may not be considered unless there are compelling reasons for the delay.

We will exercise discretion when deciding whether to accept a late complaint, always considering the specific circumstances.

If we decide not to accept a complaint, we will provide a clear explanation and inform you of your right to contact the Housing Ombudsman.

Stage 1 Complaints

When we receive a complaint, it is initially classified as a "Stage 1" complaint. We will log and acknowledge your complaint within 5 working days of receipt.

We aim to provide a full response within 10 working days of logging the complaint. If this is not feasible due to the complexity of the complaint, we may require an additional 10 working days. We will inform you of any delays and agree on the extended timeframe.

Stage 2 Complaints

A complaint can only proceed to Stage 2 after a Stage 1 response has been issued. If you are dissatisfied with the Stage 1 decision, you have the right to request a review. This is known as a "Stage 2" complaint. We will acknowledge any Stage 2 complaint within 5 working days.

A senior manager, overseen by a director, will review the handling of the complaint and the decisions made.

If you wish to have your Stage 1 complaint reviewed, you should request this within one calendar year from the date of our Stage 1 response.

We aim to provide a decision on Stage 2 complaints within 20 working days. As with Stage 1 complaints, we may occasionally need additional time, up to a further 10 working days. We will inform you of any such delays and agree on the extended timeframe.

In cases of exceptional complexity, an extension beyond the additional 10 working days may be necessary. If this occurs, we will ensure you understand the reasons and arrange to update you at agreed intervals. We will also provide you with the Housing Ombudsman's contact details.

Follow-on Responses

In some instances, we may issue a follow-on response instead of logging a new complaint or escalating to Stage 2. This may occur if we believe there is little merit in restarting the process or if we can address the matter quickly and to your satisfaction. When we decide to issue a follow-on response, log a new complaint, or escalate to Stage 2, we will contact you to confirm our decision, ensuring we understand your complaint and your desired resolution. This will form the basis of our complaint investigation.

Using a Third Party or Representative

We understand that some customers may prefer to have someone else make their complaint. We will support this and handle such complaints in accordance with this policy.

To protect your best interests, we will require written authorisation specifying who can act on your behalf.

Anonymous Complaints and Confidentiality

An anonymous report concerning our services, a member of staff, or a customer will be reported to a Director for follow-up and investigation if appropriate.

All staff members must adhere to our code of conduct and maintain confidentiality as appropriate. Colleagues managing complaints should seek support when handling sensitive matters or if asked not to disclose the complainant's identity.

We need to manage customer expectations, ensuring we can adhere to our complaints process for investigation and resolution while also having regard to our duty of care to our customers, employees, and third-party contractors.

It may not always be possible to fully investigate a complaint without disclosing the complainant's identity. If this is the case, we will seek your permission to do so. While we respect your right to confidentiality, if we do not have this permission, we may be unable to conduct a thorough investigation.

How We Will Try to Put Things Right

Our priority is to put things right, typically by restoring you to the position you were in before the issue arose.

In most cases, a sincere apology and immediate corrective action will suffice. However, if resolving the issue takes longer than expected or if the problem recurs, we may offer compensation.

We will consider the following:

- Your individual circumstances, including any need for additional support.
- The extent of the disruption caused.

- The time taken to resolve the issue.
- Any distress or inconvenience experienced.

If a service fails:

- We will make it easy for you to report the issue.
- We will ensure we understand what happened from your perspective and seek a solution that works for you.
- We will be transparent about what we can and will do, and we will follow through on our commitments.
- We will assign a dedicated contact person to assist you with complex issues.
- We will maintain regular contact until the matter is resolved.
- We will acknowledge any failings on our part and, where appropriate, consider whether to compensate you.

When We Cannot Reach an Agreement

If we have exhausted all reasonable efforts to resolve a complaint, but you remain dissatisfied, you can refer the matter to the Housing Ombudsman.

If we do not consider or escalate a complaint, we will inform you of your right to take your complaint to the Housing Ombudsman.

You have one year from the date of our Stage 2 response to raise the matter with the Housing Ombudsman. You can also appoint a designated person, such as an MP or councillor, to act on your behalf. We will handle such complaints in accordance with this policy.

Housing Ombudsman

The Housing Ombudsman is a free and independent dispute resolution service. You can contact the Housing Ombudsman at any stage during the complaint procedure.

The Ombudsman cannot formally investigate while complaints are undergoing our internal process but can offer advice and support to help reach a resolution.

The Ombudsman will contact us to obtain our perspective on the case and will then make a final decision.

Housing Ombudsman Contact Details:

Housing Ombudsman Service, PO Box 1484, Unit D, Preston, PR2 0ET

Email: info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk

Phone: 0300 111 3000

Other Complaint Handling Avenues**Consumer Code for Home Builders**

If you have purchased a home from us before 2nd August 2023 and remain dissatisfied, you should contact the Consumer Code for Home Builders instead of the Housing Ombudsman:

Consumer Code for Home Builders, Westgate House, Royland Road, Loughborough,
Leicestershire LE11 2EH

Email: enquiries@consumercode.co.uk

Phone: 0345 608 9797

New Homes Quality Code

If you have purchased a home from 2nd August 2023 onwards, you are covered by the New Homes Quality Code (NHQC). For more information on the NHQC please visit <https://www.nhqb.org.uk/>.

First-Tier Tribunal (Property Chamber)

For shared owners and long leaseholders with complaints about service charges and lease terms:

Southern Region:

First-Tier Tribunal (Property Chamber) Southern Region, Havant Justice Centre, The Court House, Elmleigh Road, Havant, Hampshire PO9 2AL

Email: rpeastern@justice.gov.uk

Phone: 01243 779394

This office covers the following unitary authorities: Bath and Northeast Somerset, Bristol, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire, Bournemouth, Plymouth, Torbay, Poole, Swindon, Medway, Brighton and Hove, Portsmouth, Southampton and the Isle of Wight.

It also covers the following counties: Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Devon, Dorset, East Sussex, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Kent, Somerset, Surrey, West Sussex, Wiltshire.

Eastern Region:

First-Tier Tribunal (Property Chamber) London Region, 10 Alfred Place, London, WC1E 7LR

Email: London.Rap@justice.gov.uk

Phone: 0207 446 7700

This office covers the following unitary authorities: Bracknell Forest, West Berkshire, Reading, Slough, Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham, Luton, Peterborough, Milton Keynes, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock.

It also covers the following counties: Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire and Suffolk.

London Region:

First-Tier Tribunal (Property Chamber) London Region, 10 Alfred Place, London, WC1E 7LR

Email: London.Rap@justice.gov.uk

Phone: 0207 446 7700

This office covers all the London boroughs.

Financial Ombudsman (Debt Advice Complaints)

For complaints about debt advice for third-party creditors:

Financial Ombudsman, Exchange Tower, London E14 9SR

Phone: 020 7964 1000

Website: <https://www.financial-ombudsman.org.uk/make-complaint>

Complaints we may not consider or escalate

While we welcome complaints and do not typically restrict the number of complaints or level of contact from customers, there are circumstances under which we may not consider or escalate a complaint. In such cases, we will explain our reasons and provide assistance where possible. In the event that a customer considers that we should have considered or escalated a complaint, then they are entitled to refer the matter to the Housing Ombudsman, whose details are above.

Examples include, but are not limited to:

- **Service Requests:** Many concerns can be resolved at the first point of contact and do not require the full two-stage complaint process. These are termed "Service Requests." Unless you request otherwise, we will not initially register a service request as a complaint. If you are dissatisfied with how we handled the service request, we will log it as a complaint. In line with our definition, you do not need to use the word "complaint." When we log a complaint related to a service request, it will not halt our efforts to resolve the service request.
- **Matters already considered:** If you raise an issue that has previously been addressed under the Complaints Policy, it will not be reconsidered. We will explain this to you.
- **Service Charges:** Complaints about figures or data in a service charge notice may not be covered by this policy. We will explain this and outline the appropriate process and referral rights.
- **EWS1 certification, cladding, and general building safety:** Complaints about building safety requirements may fall outside the scope of this policy. We will explain this and provide information on escalation rights.
- **High-Risk Residential Building (HRRB) Complaints:** Complaints about building safety risks in HRRBs will be handled under this policy but will be prioritised based on risk level rather than receipt date. Examples include:
 - Petrol cans left unattended in HRRB grounds.
 - Flammable materials in communal areas.

- Exposed electrical wiring.
- Structural issues like buckling or leaning.
- Excessive corrosion of external walls.
- Concerns about the Principal Accountable Person.

Each case will be assessed individually to determine the risk level and handled accordingly. We will explain our approach to you, and each case will be managed by the appropriate department.

- **Court Proceedings:** Complaints concerning matters subject to or previously subject to formal court proceedings may not be investigated. We will explain this to you.
- **Matters outside our control:** Complaints about matters outside Milestone's control, such as Local Authority responsibilities, cannot be investigated. We will explain this to you.

Unreasonable Customer Behaviour

We expect customers and any representative(s) which they nominate or appoint to help them with their complaint, to treat our staff respectfully and to behave in a manner that does not hinder our ability to resolve their complaint or assist other customers. However, we may occasionally encounter customers whose behaviour or frequent contact impedes resolution or adversely affects our teams' ability to help others.

In such cases, we will engage with them to understand the reasons for their repeated contact and liaise with external agencies to determine if they need support.

We will clearly explain the steps we have taken to resolve the complaint and decide on our course of action for future contact regarding the same issue. This may include:

- Acknowledging the contact but not offering further responses.
- Requesting that they contact only a designated employee.
- Asking them to use a specific communication channel.
- Agreeing on specific contact times.

We will review customers managed in this way annually. If a customer wishes to challenge this approach, they can request a review by the complaints team, which will be conducted once.

5. Compliance

We will ensure that all complaint handling staff are trained and familiar with the Complaints Policy and our commitment to excellent service standards.

We record all complaints, regularly monitor our progress in handling them, and measure our performance against targets.

We will carry out an annual self-assessment against the code to ensure our complaints handling remains in line with its requirements.

Annually, we will review any complaints which we receive and consider and implement any improvement which we identify as a result of such review.

6. Sustainability

At Milestone, we recognise the critical importance of sustainability in our operations and services. We are committed to embracing sustainable practices that contribute to environmental protection, social equity, and economic viability.

7. Responsibilities

Milestone Executive Board: Ultimately responsible for determining and directing Milestone's response to service failures and Ombudsman complaints and have responsibility and ownership over the Complaints Policy and related processes.

All Colleagues and Contractors: All colleagues should be aware of this policy. Colleagues dealing with compensation and/or complaints must read and comply with this policy.

Customers: Please read this policy carefully.

Inform us if you need assistance understanding this policy or making a formal complaint or compensation claim. We encourage you to contact us as soon as an issue arises.

We will endeavour to redress the problem before a formal complaint is required, and there may be discretion to offer some form of compensation depending on the circumstances.

If you are dissatisfied with our proposed solution or wish to formally complain about the service failure, please follow the steps on our website or speak to a customer agent for guidance.

If you remain dissatisfied after the formal complaints process has concluded, a complaint should be made through the Housing Ombudsman website.

Formal complaints should be raised within 12 months of the incident.

8. Equality and Diversity

We will apply this policy consistently and fairly, without discrimination based on any relevant characteristics, including those outlined in the Equality Act 2010.

We will be transparent about our equality responsibilities and treat everyone fairly and respectfully, regardless of their age, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, disability, religion, race, nationality, ethnicity, or national origin.

We will ensure our services and workplaces are as inclusive and accessible as possible and will take any concerns about unfair treatment seriously, addressing them promptly.

We are committed to helping residents access information about their homes and services in a way that suits their individual needs. We will apply this policy consistently and fairly and will not discriminate against anyone based on any relevant characteristics, including those set out in the Equality Act 2010. We will also consider any reasonable adjustment requests in line with our Reasonable Adjustments section, below.

9. Requesting a Reasonable Adjustment with Milestone

When you contact Milestone, we'll ask if you require any adjustments to help you use our services effectively. We'll record this information on our systems. You can also request a reasonable adjustment at any point during our interactions with you.

We're also happy to suggest alternative or additional adjustments if we believe they could further assist you.

Milestone's Response to Reasonable Adjustment Requests

Before approving an adjustment, we'll consider factors such as:

- The potential disadvantage if the adjustment isn't made.
- The adjustment's effectiveness in reducing the disadvantage.
- The practicalities of implementing the adjustment.
- Whether it would unduly disrupt our other operations.
- The cost and availability of resources, including external support.
- Any other relevant factors.

We aim to agree on reasonable adjustments promptly. If necessary, we'll take additional time to review the request thoroughly.

We'll assess each request individually and strive to reach an agreement with you to ensure we understand your needs correctly. If we cannot agree to an adjustment, we'll provide a clear explanation. When an adjustment is agreed, we'll notify you via your preferred or agreed method. We'll document the agreed adjustments on our systems, accessible to all customer-facing Milestone staff.

Examples of Adjustments which Milestone may offer

Depending on the situation, reasonable adjustments may include:

- Providing documents in larger print or with specific colour contrasts.
- Offering telephone communication instead of written correspondence.
- Translating documents into Braille.
- Communicating through your representative or advocate.
- Assigning a dedicated point of contact.
- Providing easy to read versions of key documents.
- Arranging for a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter.
- Allowing extended time for providing information or feedback.