

Guidance on completing a self-assessment

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Summary

- Member landlords must comply with the Ombudsman’s Statutory Complaint Handling Code “the Code”. Landlords must assess its practices against the Code annually to assure itself that its policies and practices are compliant.
- Landlords are also required to re-assess compliance with the Code where there have been significant changes in operating environments, including mergers, acquisitions and instances where business continuity planning has been initiated.
- The self-assessment ([Appendix A of the Code](#)) requires landlords to assess itself against each provision of the Code. In doing so, landlords can identify areas of operation or policy where changes are required.
- The self-assessment also requires landlords to evidence how it complies with the Code. Landlords may wish to include wider scrutiny arrangements such as using a tenant panel to satisfy itself that its complaints function is operating in compliance with the Code.
- Where a landlord is not able to comply with the Code, it must confirm this in the self-assessment and set out the actions and timescales for achieving compliance or demonstrate how it has made all reasonable endeavours to meet the intentions in an alternative way. The Ombudsman will assess all reports of non-compliance and may take action to intervene to ensure landlords meet the requirements of the Code, even where reasons have been provided.
- Landlord self-assessments forms part of the annual complaints’ performance and service improvement report. This report must be reported to the landlord’s governing body (or equivalent) and published on the section of the website relating to complaints. The governing body’s response to the report must be published alongside this.
- The report and self-assessment provide landlords with an opportunity to be open and transparent with residents on complaint handling performance. Landlords are

expected to provide accurate and complete information about complaint handling and share how complaints have been learned from.

- Landlords are required to make a submission to the Ombudsman, providing a link to its complaints policy, published self-assessment, annual complaints performance and service improvement report and its governing body's response.
- Failure to publish a complete self-assessment and provide evidence of this through the annual submission may result in the Ombudsman finding failure to comply with the Code and a decision of Complaint Handling Failure Notice being issued.

Statutory powers

The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 (the Act) empowered the Housing Ombudsman to issue a code of practice about the procedures members of [the Scheme](#) should have in place for considering complaints. It also placed a duty on the Ombudsman to monitor compliance with a code of practice that it has issued.

The Ombudsman consulted on the [Complaint Handling Code](#) (the Code) and our intended approach to the duty to monitor in late 2023. The statutory Code came into effect from 1 April 2024 and our duty to monitor compliance commenced at the same time.

Compliance with the Code

The Code is mandatory for member landlords (as above) and completing the self-assessment forms part of the annual complaint performance and service improvement report as set out in provision 8.1 of the Code.

Where a landlord's policy does not comply with the Code, it must provide a detailed explanation for non-compliance in its self-assessment and the date by which it intends to comply.

If there are reasons a landlord cannot meet a requirement of the Code, for example a small provider does not have a website, it must make all reasonable endeavours to deliver the intentions of the Code in an alternative way. This must be detailed in the commentary field of the self-assessment under the relevant provision.

Where a landlord is unable to comply with the Code due to exceptional circumstances that have led to business continuity plans being enacted, such as a cyber incident, the landlord must inform the Ombudsman of its reasons, provide information to residents who may be affected and publish this on its website, if it has one. The landlord must provide all parties with a timescale for returning to compliance with the Code and the reasonableness of exemptions to the Code during this period may be assessed by the Ombudsman.

Regardless of the reason(s) for non-compliance with any provisions of the Code, landlords must clearly set this out in its self-assessment and annual submission to the Ombudsman.

Monitoring compliance with the Code

The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 (the Act) placed a duty on the Ombudsman to monitor compliance with the Code. This is fulfilled by monitoring submissions and taking action where a landlord fails to provide this to us.

The Ombudsman also uses the duty to monitor to support landlords in improving complaint handling practices for residents and effective scrutiny and oversight of the service.

To do so, we may review a landlord's self-assessment against the Code to consider the evidence relied on and commentary provided. The review will consider where any non-compliance has been recorded, the reasons and explanations for non-compliance and the timescales for actions required for compliance to be achieved.

We may also review a landlord's complaints policy to ensure that it includes all provisions that residents can reasonably expect to find in a policy. This review is an assessment as to whether the policy is compliant with the Code's requirements, it is not a confirmation of its compliance in practice.

We use findings from this work to develop tools and training for landlords to access via our [Centre for Learning](#). By doing so, we aim to support landlords to implement effective scrutiny and oversight of complaints that ensures that they are learned from, and the outcomes of these activities are communicated to residents.

The self-assessment

The purpose of the self-assessment is to support landlords to set out how the complaint handling service complies with the provisions of the Code. In addition, the self-assessment also supports landlords to inform residents about service provision.

The self-assessment must cover all services that are delivered either directly or indirectly by members of the Scheme in their capacity of a landlord. This includes any services delivered by a third-party, such as a contractor, managing agent or another social landlord. Landlords with such arrangements in place should refer to [appendix 1 of this guidance](#) which provides more information on how these should be reported. [Appendix 2](#) provides information for group structures.

The self-assessment is separated into the nine sections of the Code and each provision is listed individually, allowing landlords to review its policies and procedures against them.

Landlords must provide evidence of compliance with the provisions of the Code within the assessment. By setting out clearly how it complies with each provision, landlords can demonstrate that it is being open and accountable to residents. It also supports the Ombudsman's assessment of compliance in policy and practice.

Where a landlord is unable to comply with a provision of the Code, an explanation must be provided detailing any alternative approach the landlord is taking, and how this fulfils the intentions of the Code. It must also provide dates for achieving compliance where appropriate.

Self-assessments must be completed annually and submitted to the Ombudsman. However, landlords should expect to review and make changes to its complaints policy or processes more frequently, such as in the event of significant organisational restructures or in response to an order, or recommendation by the Ombudsman.

If a landlord reviews and updates its self-assessment before the annual submission is required, it must inform the Ombudsman by re-submitting the assessment.

Completing the self-assessment

Landlords must ensure that they complete the self-assessment against [the Code 2024](#). Previous versions of the self-assessment will not be accepted.

Landlords should consider the completion of the self-assessment as an opportunity to reflect on approaches, and to make any necessary changes to policy, process or practice to ensure effective complaint handling.

In preparation for completing the self-assessment, landlords should ensure they are fully aware of the provisions and requirements for handling complaints effectively and fairly. Landlords can refer to our [Centre for Learning](#) for more information about the Code and the provisions included.

Completion of the self-assessment will typically require landlords to:

- review current practices to identify any gaps or actions required to comply
- take any necessary action to ensure that Code requirements are met
- gather and document evidence to support the assessment of compliance
- scrutinise and challenge the assessment, to provide assurance
- publish the self-assessment and wider documentation
- communicate and embed changes made through the self-assessment

The above is not an exhaustive list of the actions needed to complete the self-assessment; landlords should utilise internal governance and scrutiny channels to assure the governing body, and residents that it complies with the Code.

Review of current practices

Landlords should review current approaches against each section and provision listed in the self-assessment. By doing so, landlords can more easily identify if there are any gaps in policy, or actions needed to modify practices to handle complaints in line with the Code. This may include reviewing:

- the complaint handling policy (and any associated policies)
- any training or guidance provided to staff handling complaints
- any templates and/or example correspondence related to complaints
- system arrangements for recording and tracking complaints
- wider resource arrangements such as staffing or approvals

Landlords should also consider feedback from residents who have recently reported a complaint; this may be through surveys, comments made during the process or through other engagement activities. This will help landlords ensure that resident experience is a foundation of the review.

Landlords should approach the review process with an open mind and a willingness to learn; this should be valued as an opportunity for continuous learning and improvement.

Taking action to ensure compliance

Through the review, landlords may identify action(s) required to ensure that it meets the requirements of the Code.

Landlords can refer to the Centre for Learning which highlights key topics including [knowledge and information management](#), and [attitudes and respect](#) for recommendations on service delivery. They can also refer to the Ombudsman's wider publications such as [guidance on remedies](#) and [apologies](#) to inform decision making.

Depending on the extent of the changes required, landlords may decide to develop a comprehensive action plan for implementing improvements or changes to the complaints function in order to achieve compliance.

Landlords should regularly monitor progress against any action plans required to achieve compliance with the Code and must report activities to the governing body, usually via the [Member Responsible for Complaints \(MRC\)](#). The landlord should also ensure that residents and staff are informed of the action plan and provide regular updates on progress.

Gathering and documenting evidence

When completing the self-assessment, landlords must publish evidence that supports its decision that it meets the requirements of the Code, or clear commentary that details how compliance is achieved.

When referring to evidence, landlords should be clear and specific, referencing sections of associated documents or providing relevant links. Landlords can also include further contextual information about complaint handling approaches.

Evidence which may be used to support the assessment includes (but is not limited to):

- formal publications such as policies, procedures or reports
- explanations of activities undertaken to achieve compliance such as training undertaken, any independent reviews and scrutiny activities
- data and/or information that provides additional context such as volumes of complaints received, outcomes of complaints and responses times

When referring to evidence, landlords must ensure that it clearly specifies what information has been included as evidence and how this demonstrates compliance with the Code. Landlords are encouraged to involve residents in considering how evidence is documented and referenced; this will help ensure that the self-assessment is accessible and clear when published.

Scrutinising and challenging the self-assessment

When completing the self-assessment landlords should continually consider if it is a true reflection of the complaint handling service. Governing bodies are responsible for assuring that this is the case.

The MRC is responsible for ensuring that the self-assessment is scrutinised and challenged. This forms part of the role in embedding a positive complaint handling culture across the organisation. MRCs may wish to consider:

- examining the evidence referred to and ensuring that this is complete and accessible to readers including staff and residents.
- scrutinising any data and performance information included to ensure the governing body is satisfied that it is accurate, reliable and repeatable; and
- challenging any commentary or context, to ensure that it is a fair and reasonable assessment.

Landlords should also use any formal scrutiny arrangements such as tenant panels to review its self-assessment or relevant policies to satisfy themselves that the complaints function is operating in compliance with the Code. By taking this approach, landlords can demonstrate how residents have been involved in assessing service delivery.

Publishing the self-assessment

Publication of the self-assessment is a requirement of the Code as set out in Section 8: self-assessment, reporting and compliance. The purpose of publishing the self-assessment is to support landlords to be transparent and accountable to residents.

Landlords must ensure that the self-assessment is included as part of the complaint handling and service improvement report, and that all relevant documents are published on its website by the relevant submission deadlines.

The self-assessment should use plain English and be as clear and direct as possible in its use of language when assessing each provision. The self-assessment should be easy for all residents to read and understand. Landlords should also set out how any alternative formats (such as translation, braille or similar) can be requested.

Landlords must ensure that the self-assessment is published on its website (if it has one) in a clear and accessible format. Landlords should ensure that residents are able to locate the document, and any associated documents such as policies or wider reports easily.

Governing body's response

When publishing the self-assessment as part of the annual complaint handling performance and service improvement report, landlords must include the governing body's response to the report. For group structures, it must be clear which subsidiaries have been included – both in the self-assessment and analysis within the report.

The purpose of publishing the governing body's response to the self-assessment is to demonstrate to residents that the board (or equivalent) has assured that the self-assessment is a true reflection of the landlord's complaint handling. Copies of minuted meetings are not sufficient.

The response should set out how the board (or equivalent) has scrutinised and challenged the self-assessment and how any risks identified as part of the review have been addressed. Landlords should also include any lessons learned through the self-assessment process and actions taken as a result.

The response can also highlight areas of achievement and any challenges that the landlord has faced during the reporting year. When doing so, landlords are encouraged to take an open and transparent approach to demonstrate accountability to residents and other stakeholders.

Landlords can refer to the Ombudsman's [Effective Involvement of Governing Bodies: Best Practice Guidance for Landlords \(PDF\)](#) for more information about effective involvement and assurance.

Communicating and embedding change

Where changes to policy and/or processes have been made through the self-assessment review, landlords should ensure that this implemented effectively across the organisation. This should be a key focus for landlords after publication of the self-assessment.

Landlords should ensure that any changes are communicated to all relevant staff members and not just those responsible for complaint handling. When doing so, landlords may wish to roll out updated complaint handling training or arrange for staff to access online training offered via the [Centre for Learning](#).

Landlords should also communicate any changes to residents, ensuring that they are aware of their right to have a complaint investigated and how a complaint will be handled. Landlords can refer to the toolkit for raising awareness for guidance and support.

Beyond communication of changes required, landlords must ensure that any changes made are embedded in complaint handling in practice. This could include:

- a focused period of quality checking and assurance of complaint responses
- 'Spot checks' of complaint records and associated documentation
- close monitoring of resident feedback after complaints are closed
- regular engagement with staff responsible for handling complaints
- more frequent complaint handling performance reporting to the MRC

The above is not an exhaustive list of the actions needed to embed change; landlords should utilise relevant quality assurance and/or continuous improvement approaches already in place.

Submitting the self-assessment to the Ombudsman

Landlords are required to provide an annual submission to the Ombudsman to demonstrate compliance with the Code. This must be provided via our dedicated electronic form unless an alternative method has been agreed with the Ombudsman in advance.

To simplify the process, the electronic form asks landlords to confirm compliance with each statement and a landlord is only required to provide additional information if it does not comply.

The electronic form also asks landlords to provide electronic links to key information and documentation required to support the submission.

Further information about the submissions process is set out in our Guidance on Annual Submission.

Failure to complete or submit the self-assessment

If a landlord is unable to provide the self-assessment as part of the annual submission by the relevant date it must contact the Ombudsman immediately, outlining the reasons why and to engage in discussions with the Ombudsman on the next steps and actions required.

Landlords that fail to provide an updated self-assessment by the relevant date may be issued a Complaint Handling Failure Notice. All notices will be shared with the Regulator of Social Housing. We may also refer notices not resolved through action to the governing body where landlords have not engaged with us.

Appendix 1 – Third party arrangements

Services provided by third parties on behalf of landlords

The Ombudsman recognises that members of the Scheme may contract third parties to provide services on their behalf. This includes arm's length management organisations (ALMOs), tenant management organisation (TMOs) and managing agents and contractors.

Where a landlord chooses delegate services to a managing agent, it remains responsible for fulfilling its obligations in its capacity as a landlord, regardless of who is contracted to deliver the service(s). This includes the recording, handling and reporting of complaints about these services.

Such arrangements include, but are not limited to:

- repairs and maintenance contractors to provide repairs services
- managing agents to provide estate or block management services
- another landlord to provide housing management services

Landlords with such arrangements in place must ensure that all complaints made about these services by residents, either made to the landlord directly or the third party are raised and responded to in line with the Code.

Landlords may choose to make arrangements for the third party to handle complaints at either, or both stages of the complaints process. Should a landlord decide to implement this approach, it must ensure that this forms part of the two stage complaints process set out in the Code (provision 5.4) and that its policy is clear.

These complaints, regardless of who has handled them, must be included in the annual complaint handling and service improvement report.

This will help ensure that landlords have complete and accurate information relating to complaints about services provided to residents.

When completing the self-assessment against the Code, landlords are required to set out how complaints made about services provided by third parties are handled in line with the Code. This will usually, but not always, be evidenced through:

- referring to the relevant section(s) within the complaint handling policy
- setting out how these complaints are monitored and acted on
- detailing any training, monitoring or assurance activities undertaken

Landlords can refer to the Ombudsman's [Spotlight report on managing agents](#) for more information about best practice in third party arrangements.

Services provided by member landlords on behalf of another organisation

The Ombudsman also recognises that member landlords may enter into agreements to act as a third party and provide services on behalf of another organisation. This could include members of the Scheme, or organisations who are not.

Where a landlord is acting as a third-party provider of services (including complaint handling), it is the responsibility of the organisation that has contracted the member landlord as a third party.

If a landlord chooses to include information about how any complaints about services it provides as a third party are handled in the self-assessment or in its annual complaint handling and service improvement report, it must ensure that it is clear that these complaints are from non-residents.

Other services provided

Landlords may also provide additional services outside its capacity as a landlord. This could include:

- homelessness related services provided by councils
- social enterprises or ventures
- commercial activities such as community shops or activities
- befriending or home help services

Unless these services form part of the landlord's obligations as set out in the tenancy agreement(s), landlords are not required to set out in the self-assessment or annual complaint handling and service improvement report how complaints will be handled in line with the Code.

Should a landlord wish to provide information about complaints relating to other services, it must clarify that these are provided outside its capacity as a landlord. This will ensure that residents are clear how the landlord is handling complaints about services provided in its capacity as a landlord separately from any other services.

Appendix 2 – Group structures

The Ombudsman recognises that there are a variety of arrangements in place across the sector. This includes group structures that have more than one legal entity (subsidiary) within its governance structure.

Landlords have a legal responsibility to ensure that all individual subsidiaries handle complaints in line with the Code and provide evidence of compliance. In turn, the Ombudsman is obligated to monitor compliance with the Code by each individual member, regardless of the wider operating structure.

Group structures operating one policy across all subsidiaries

Where a group operates one policy, the Ombudsman may accept a single annual submission. For a single submission to be accepted, landlords must ensure that:

- the self-assessment and published policy clearly state which subsidiaries this applies to
- the governing body statement sets out clearly how the Board (or equivalent) has assured itself that the policy is applied to each subsidiary, and the self-assessment and annual report accurately reflects complaint handling practices for each subsidiary
- the annual report sets out clearly which subsidiaries are included if data is consolidated

If a landlord has one complaint policy but cannot provide assurance that the same procedures are applied across all subsidiaries, it is expected to provide an individual submission for each. For these to be accepted, landlords must ensure that:

- individual self-assessments are provided for each subsidiary
- the governing body statement clearly confirms that the individual self-assessments have been assured
- the annual report sets out information about each subsidiary separately; consolidated data only will not be accepted

Group structures operating more than one policy across its subsidiaries

If a landlord has more than one policy in place, covering one or more subsidiary it must provide an individual submission for each organisation separately.

In the submission, landlords may refer to one governing body statement in each submission.

For this to be accepted, landlords must ensure that the governing body response sets out clearly how it has assured that the self-assessment and annual complaint handling and service improvement report, for each subsidiary is accurate.

Landlords may also refer to a single annual report in each submission. For this to be accepted, landlords must ensure that information for each individual subsidiary is set out clearly – consolidated data only will not be accepted.