



RELATIONSHIPS OF EQUALS

SUMMARY REPORT

Housing
Ombudsman Service

SETTING THE SCENE

Effective communication is critical in maintaining positive relationships between landlords and residents. Unfortunately, poor communication is often the root cause of housing complaints, eroding trust and leading to escalating issues. In fact, in 68% of cases reviewed over 15 months, poor communication was a key issue.

The Housing Ombudsman's 'Relationships Of Equals' report focuses on the importance of clear and respectful communication to prevent complaints and create positive relationships.

The Ombudsman has identified three cross-cutting themes that commonly arise in complaints - communication issues, staff behaviour, and bias/prejudice/discrimination by the landlord.

Regardless of demographics or service type, communication between landlords and residents is consistently the main concern in all complaints. Insensitivity, dismissiveness, and an accusatory tone are primary areas of concern, which can lead to allegations of discrimination and unfair treatment.

I want to support the sector to find a common language and understanding of housing and human rights. Although its obligations should be the starting point when considering its approach to vulnerabilities and individual circumstances, meeting legal requirements should be the baseline, not the aspiration.

When complaints are not taken seriously and residents feel ignored, their trust in landlords is eroded, leading to a breakdown in the relationship.



Richard Blakeway, Housing Ombudsman

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CULTURE, VISION AND VALUES

In order to improve the quality of service you provide for social housing residents, we recommend focusing on your culture, vision, and values. Here are three important steps to take.

- 1. Review your mission statement:** Create a mission statement that accurately reflects your current and future service. This can be done through a review at the board level
- 2. Evaluate your approach to vulnerabilities.** Determine whether your current approach addressing vulnerabilities is effective. If not, identify the barriers to offering a centred around people service and decide what needs to happen to introduce and strengthen this culture and ethos
- 3. Adopt a values-based recruitment model:** Consider adopting a values-based recruitment model to improve resident/landlord relationships by focusing on the resident's needs

VULNERABILITY POLICY

It is essential to review, implement, and test a vulnerability strategy and policy that aligns with current legislation and good practice guidance.

- 1. Review your vulnerability policy** in conjunction with current practice. Is the policy being implemented? If not, identify where the disconnect lies
- 2. Implement a vulnerability strategy** that is in line with The Equality Act, the Human Rights Act, and the Care Act. The strategy should be co-produced with residents and consider any future good practice guidance published by the Housing Ombudsman
- 3. Implement a specific reasonable adjustments policy,** and test the vulnerability and reasonable adjustments strategy and policy against the '3Rs' on vulnerable residents – recognize, respond, and record
- 4. Introduce minimum staff training requirements** such as Dementia Friends, customer care, mental health, learning disabilities, and sight and hearing loss
- 5. Consider a dedicated task force** for vulnerability

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COMPLAINTS HANDLING

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1. **Effective complaint handling is crucial** for maintaining positive relationships between social housing professionals and tenants. Here are five recommendations to support complaints being handled efficiently and effectively
2. **Examine your complaints policy** to ensure that it allows complaints regarding staff behaviour, attitudes, and approaches. This will make tenants feel more comfortable voicing issues about staff behaviour, and you will have a framework in place for investigating discrimination. Establish and enforce a clear process for investigating complaints about bullying and discrimination. This will help ensure that such complaints are taken seriously and dealt with appropriately
3. **Ensure that your contact restriction policies** include clear timescales, review processes, and appeals processes. This will help ensure that tenants understand how contact restrictions will be applied and have the opportunity to appeal any decisions made
4. **If you have a single point of contact for tenants**, make sure that this is applied consistently across all staff members. This will help ensure that tenants receive consistent and fair treatment

5. **Record all calls with tenants**, either through physical recordings or contemporaneous telephone records. This will help ensure that there is a clear record of any conversations with tenants, which can be used to address any disputes or misunderstandings that may arise.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

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2. **Consider the ageing communities specifically** in rural and coastal areas, with reference to Professor Whitty's report. This will help you understand the specific needs of this demographic and how you can prepare to meet them
3. **Devise an action plan** for what you need to start putting in place from now onwards to enable you are ready to meet the needs of your future residents. This should include the anticipatory requirement regarding reasonable adjustments. For example, you may need to consider adapting properties to make them more accessible for people with mobility issues or installing assistive technology

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