

Plus Dane Scrutiny Panel

Review the Effectiveness of Plus Dane's Complaints Process

JANUARY 2021



Plus Dane Scrutiny Panel

Together we make a difference

Table of Contents

	Page
Introduction	3
Scope	4
Methodology	5
Overview of current complaints service	8
Findings and recommendations	
1. Do Plus Dane follow their Policy and does it meet the regulatory Requirements?	12
2. How easy is it for customers to make a complaint?	13
3. What is the customer experience of reporting a complaint and seeking resolution?	16
4. Is the complaints policy embedded in Plus Dane and is it understood by staff and customers?	21
5. Does Plus Dane learn lessons from complaints?	23
6. Are the complaint responses of good quality?	25
Conclusion	26
Appendices	28

'This is the fifth review carried out by the Plus Dane Scrutiny Panel.'

The Panel has a membership of 12 customers who bring with them a diversity of backgrounds, skills and experience.'

Introduction

The scrutiny approach at Plus Dane ensures relevant staff teams work closely with the Panel throughout their reviews.

This involves:

- briefing the Panel about the service area
- highlighting concerns
- developing possible solutions
- refining the recommendations

This approach ensures that there is good quality technical input and advice from staff throughout the process, this in turn, helps the Panel produce practical solutions, taking into account staff thinking, advice and recommendations for improvement.

The final report includes the Panel's recommendations and Director's Action Plan and is presented to the Board for sign-off and monitoring by the relevant delegated committee and the Scrutiny Panel.

We elected to review the Complaints Process as:

- We were aware that customer satisfaction with the complaints outcome was low and we wanted to understand this further
- We also were interested to find out how the process was faring following the changes carried out in 2017 (from the previous review carried out by Plus Dane Voices), how it has impacted customers and to gain an understanding of the efficacy of the current policy.
- We wanted to provide assurance to Board whether Plus Dane are meeting the current regulation and help them prepare for the new complaints code.

Scope

The overall scope of this scrutiny was to:

'Review how effective the current Complaints Process is; Investigate and understand how it meets the customer and business expectations; and to assess the Complaints Process from the customers perspective'.



Using Plus Dane's formal complaints process, we reviewed the following:

In Scope:

1. How easy is it to make a complaint?
2. Do Plus Dane follow their complaints policy and does it meet the standards set down by the regulator?
3. What is the customer experience of making a complaint and having it resolved?
4. What is the culture around complaints and how do Plus Dane learn from complaints?
5. Are there any recommendations to improve complaint handling?
6. Are there any areas of positive/best practice to be highlighted?

Out of Scope

For the purposes of this review we did not feel that the reasons why customers complain was in scope at this time.

Methodology – What we did

To undertake this review, and in light of the current situation regarding COVID-19, we used a mixture of:

- Desk top work, which included a review of the website
- Reality and data checking
- Focus groups
- Survey
- Meetings facilitated via MS Teams.

This involved:

- Reviewing the Customer Feedback and Complaints Policy and Procedure to see if it is being followed consistently across Plus Dane
- Identifying trends and opportunities for improvement
- Looking at what the Complaints process is trying to achieve
- Investigating whether the Complaints process provides value for money
- Considering whether the Complaints process is adequate and accessible to all customers of Plus Dane
- Investigating customer satisfaction with the Complaints process and whether it meets customers' expectations
- Investigating what a 'good' complaints process looks like
- Considering what the Complaints process should look like in the future

Survey

We completed 62 surveys with Plus Dane customers who had been through and completed the Complaints Process during the last 12 months from both Merseyside and Cheshire. This included shared owners, tenants, and family members whose complaints had reached one of the three stages (0, 1 and 2) in the complaints process. Their complaints covered a range of service areas including, Repairs, ASB, Environmental, Income, Customer Services, Housing Management, Homes Hub and Development.

The survey was carried out by phone and online using Survey Monkey. The Scrutiny Panel completed a third of the questionnaires, the rest were completed by the Engagement Team and email.

Focus Groups

We held four Focus Groups on Teams with:

- Customer Relations Team (CRT)
- Front line staff
- Complaints Investigating Officers
- Customer Access Team (CAT)

Each Focus Group were asked questions about the following:

- The Customer Experience
- The internal process
- Training including induction
- Possible service improvements

Discussions took place in confidence and staff were honest and open about concerns they had, things that worked well and suggestions for improvement.

Tracking Complaints

We tracked 16 Complaints from the first point of contact with the customer through to completion. We selected the complaints ourselves from customers who had been through the process during the last 12 months making sure that we had a good selection of complaints at different stages and for different service areas. Some of those we tracked had also completed the survey.

We saw a file for each complaint which included all correspondence to and from the customer, from external sources e.g. MPs and internal staff e-mails.

Desk Top Review

We looked at relevant information including:

- Customer Feedback and Complaints Policy and Procedure
- Compensation Policy
- Unreasonable, Vexatious or Persistent Complainant Framework
- Regulatory Requirements
- Lessons learned from complaints
- Housing Ombudsman Code
- Plus Dane External Audit of Complaints
- Complaints Handling Guide and Annual Complaint Summary
- Plus Dane website, App and response letter templates

Website Review

We looked at websites from a range of other organisations, including other Housing Associations and we conducted a review of the Plus Dane website. Specifically we looked at:

- Ease of findings complaints on the website
- Information relating to complaints and the process
- Documents that sit on complaints pages and the relevance of that information
- Comparison with other websites

Benchmarking

We looked at how complaints are handled in a range of organisations from across the public and private sector including:

- 10 Housing Associations and Local Authorities
- NHS
- Chambers of Commerce
- Educational Sector
- Private sector – e.g. department stores, phone companies, car industry, food industry

Overview of current complaints service

We are aware that there is a small Customer Relations Team that has oversight of the complaints service and day to day management of the complaints Plus Dane receives. We were informed that the current customer feedback policy (of which complaints is a part of) was revised back in 2017 with the aim of increasing the customer experience and improving performance. Prior to the development of the 2017 policy, Plus Dane undertook customer consultation which resulted in the following customer feedback on how Plus Dane could improve:

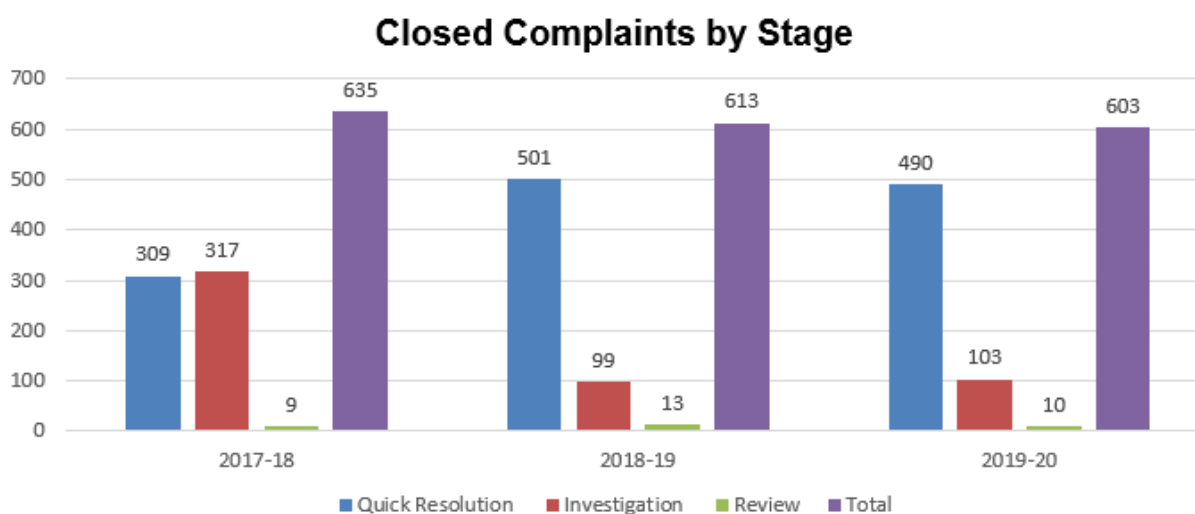
- Learn from the issues that customers are complaining about
- Keep complainants up to date with progress
- Take complaints seriously
- Improve communications
- Make vulnerable customers feel at ease
- Do what you say you are going to do, follow up on promises
- Improve complaint handling training

As a result of the feedback customers were told that the above feedback would be *'considered and included in the full version of the revised policy'*.

We were informed that Plus Dane considers a complaint to be an

'expression of dissatisfaction requiring a response'

and that it has received a consistent amount of complaints (over 600) each year since 2017. From 2017 there has been an increase in stage 0 complaints and in 2019/20 we know that there was a total of 603 closed complaints with the highest amount of complaints about the repairs service and that in 19/20 59.7% of complaints were upheld.



We know that the 2017/18 figures are prior to the new Policy being introduced.

In terms of performance against targets we know that performance in responding to complaints in timescale has improved but that customer satisfaction with the outcome of complaints has not met target for four consecutive years.

Year	17-18		18-19		19-20		20-21 Q1	
Description	Target	Outturn	Target	Outturn	Target	Outturn	Target	Outturn
KPI035 Complaints responded to in timescale (%)	80	69.0	80	82.1	90	99.5	90	91.8
KPI036 Customers satisfied with the outcome (%)	70	32.3	70	40.5	80	67.6	70	63.6
KPI018 Complaints upheld (%)	-	59.5	-	67.7	<=66	59.7	<=65	44.7

We heard that the following documents support the delivery of the complaints service

- Complaints and Feedback Policy
- Complaint Leaflet
- Unreasonable, Vexatious or Persistent Complainant Framework
- Compensation Framework

We heard that there is a variety of ways that customers can complain and that both the policy and the complaint leaflet can be found on the Plus Dane website.

We heard that the current complaints policy aims to:

- Provide a clear, accessible and structured process for customers to follow when they are dissatisfied with a service they have received
- Find appropriate solutions quickly and effectively
- Ensure all staff are equipped to deal with complaints
- Ensure lessons are learned to improve services
- Comply with the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard

And that it has the following principles:

- Customers are listened to and treated with courtesy and empathy
- Complaints are acknowledged, recorded and monitored
- Complaints are investigated promptly thoroughly, honestly and openly
- Customers are informed of the outcome of the investigation
- Action to rectify the cause of the complaint is identified, implemented and evaluated
- Apologies are given as appropriate
- Complaints are handled confidentially and in accordance with data protection principles
- Learning from feedback informs service development and improvement
- All staff handling complaints receive appropriate support and training

We were informed Plus Dane attempts to resolve complaints at stage 0 but there are a further two stages if complaints need to be escalated. We were informed that complaints are recorded on the CX system and that staff are encouraged to communicate with customers throughout the complaint process. We understand, currently, that the following timescales are in place to respond to complaints:

- Stage 0 – Informal (5 working days)
- Stage 1 – Formal (10 working days)
- Stage 2 – Formal (20 working days)

And staff are encouraged to follow up any actions that arise from complaints.

In terms of training we heard that in rolling out the 2017 Policy to staff, a campaign which encouraged staff to put themselves in the shoes of customers was delivered along with some briefing sessions for the CAT Team and the Investigating Managers. We understand that there is a toolkit to support staff in dealing with and responding to complaints. This includes:

- Induction training
- CRT Intranet pages
- Letter templates
- Facebook Workplace posts
- Team Meetings
- Specialist Meetings
- Daily email
- 1-2-1's

In terms of resolving complaints we heard that staff are encouraged to follow the checklist below:

- Assess the problem
- Contact the customer
- Agree the outcome
- Take action
- Prevention
- Response
- Implement learning
- Communicate outcome (informal/formal)

And that there is an opportunity for Plus Dane to uphold, partially uphold or not uphold a complaint and that the following is a guide for how staff should communicate with customers throughout each complaint.

Stage	Acknowledgement	Telephone Call	Visit	Written Response
0	Verbal	Yes	Yes	Informal
1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

In terms of complaint reporting, we understand that there are annual and monthly reports and weekly complaint tracking. We also heard that there is an agreed method to collect, record, promote and publicise the lessons learned to avoid similar complaints occurring and reference is made in the policy to a 'Learning Lessons Framework'

We heard that over the past couple of years the complaints customer satisfaction has been collected by both a third party (Voluntas) and then later was brought in-house to try and increase the number of customers contacted. We understand that since October 2020 a text message from a company called Delighted is sent to customers following the closure of their complaint asking one question which is 'if they are satisfied with the outcome of their complaint'. We heard that any customer saying 'No' to this question are recorded and sent to Customer Relations Team and shared with the relevant service manager who responds directly to the customer.

Following the planned introduction of the new Housing Ombudsman Code, we heard that Plus Dane have completed a self-assessment confirming that they meet the revised requirements and this is now on their website.

Findings and Recommendations

1. Do Plus Dane follow their Policy and does it meet the regulatory requirements?

Findings

1. Whilst we agree with the standards that Plus Dane has set out in its Policy and can see how they align with the requirements the regulator has set, we believe there are inconsistencies in how these are being delivered across Plus Dane. We have used this report to share with you areas where we think compliance with the policy aims and regulation can be strengthened.

Recommendations

1.1 That Plus Dane shares on its website, App and all relevant social platforms how it is meeting, excelling and surpassing its policy aims and the requirements, including those placed on it by the Housing Ombudsman and the Regulator. In addition, this information should also be reflected in the annual report.

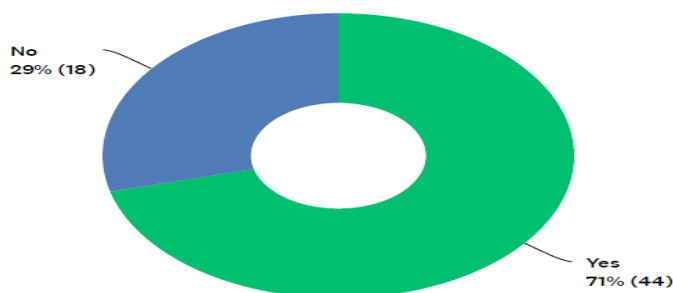
2. How easy is it for customers to make a complaint?

Findings

1. From our survey we found that it was relatively easy for customers to make a complaint using the various channels that Plus Dane provides. However we heard from customers who were frustrated in having to chase progress and customers who had not received what actions were agreed as part of the complaint resolution.

Q2 Was it easy for you to make your complaint?

Answered: 62 Skipped: 0



2. We found that the majority of customers we spoke to made their complaint either by phone or via email.
3. We found that there is not a dedicated button on the App for customers to complain.
4. From the 62 customers we heard from we found that:
 - Customers had experienced inconsistency in who they can and cannot communicate with during the complaints process, which has resulted in customer frustration.
 - Customers didn't always understand the complaints process
 - Customers felt they had not been kept informed as often as they would have liked during the complaints process. Customers said that they would have liked to have more contact with Plus Dane throughout the process.

“My complaint has had to be raised on more than one occasion and there were no records showing the original complaint”

“E-mails came at first to tell us what was happening – then they just stopped.... Plus Dane should have contacted us rather than the other way round”

5. We found that the complaints page on the website was not intuitive and difficult to navigate. Specifically we found it was
 - Too busy on the landing page (Homepage)
 - Difficult to locate 'Complaints'
 - Sends the wrong message to customers
 - Points customers to irrelevant information

- Does not provide the 'right' information – lessons learnt link incorrect
6. We understand from our conversations with customers that they feel Plus Dane is missing opportunities to understand the original source of the complaint because they are not capturing enough information at the outset.

Recommendations

2.1 To identify a member of staff from the relevant service to be the key contact throughout the entire complaint and give the customer reasonable access to them by providing their work contact details.

2.2 To investigate the possibility of setting up a complaints handling hotline for customers.

This hotline would provide more support to those tenants who require it the most. (Leeds CC already do this and it seems to support the residents quite well).

2.3 To investigate which points in the process customers would like to have more regular contact and what information they would like to receive.

2.4 To create an easy to follow flow chart of the complaints process as a useful tool for customers which can be uploaded on your website.

2.5 To add a dedicated button on the landing page of the App for those customers who would like to use this channel to comment, criticise or complain.

2.6 To train staff in how to carry out full investigations at the first point of contact with the complainant.

2.7 To review and update the complaint pages of the website and improve how customers navigate to the complaints page. The review should take place as soon as possible and the pages should be updated periodically by a member of the CRM team, providing updates and amendments, removing outdated content and dead links. Specifically we recommend that you:

- Make the landing page (Homepage) less busy
- Place 'Complaints' plainly and obviously on the landing page - perhaps in its own box
- Provide useful documents such as compensation policy and annual complaints report
- Update 'Complaints' area to be more:
 - User friendly
 - Word friendly
 - Open
 - Honest
 - Accessible
- Point customer at information directly relevant to complaints (nothing else)
- Make the Housing Ombudsman information more obvious and accessible with clear instructions and working links
- Provide a dedicated 'online team' to answer questions directly from the website, in real time. (Several other Housing Association do this now and it being well received by customers)

3. What is the customer's experience of reporting a complaint and seeking resolution?

Findings

1. Through our conversations with customers we found that there appears to be a disconnect between what customers told us/how they experienced the complaints process and how Plus Dane believed the complaints service was being delivered.

“No-one contacted me throughout and I would have appreciated it if they had kept me regularly updated. Felt like I was chasing Plus Dane. An apology would have been nice and just talking to me to keep me informed”

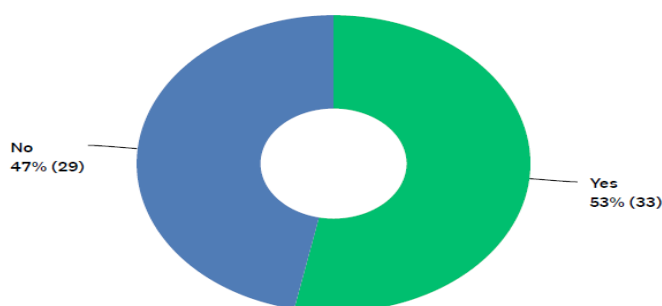
2. Currently there is no customer involvement in overseeing complaints. We found examples of other Housing Associations (such as Accent Group, Stockport Homes and Barnet Homes) who have set up a Panel so customers can have an input into the monitoring of the service and ensuring changes are embedded and services improve.

3. We found that 53% of customers felt the Complaints Process was explained to them and they had a clear understanding of it. When we spoke to customers we found that although they had the process explained to them, this did not necessarily mean that they understood it. This lack of understanding led to unrealistic expectations – 63% of customers did not think their complaint was dealt with promptly or thoroughly. The tracking of complaints showed that Plus Dane were clear about when a complaint had been closed but this did not mean the customer understood it to be the case.

“Too procedure driven – not seeing the bigger picture – they need to understand that all complaints are different and therefore requires unique case by case approach as everyone's situation is different.”

Q3 Was the complaints process explained to you and did you have a clear understanding of it (timescales, what will happen when etc).

Answered: 62 Skipped: 0



Q5 Did you think your complaint was investigated promptly and thoroughly?

Answered: 62 Skipped: 0



- 4. When speaking to customers we found that they felt their expectations had not been met.

“No-one kept me informed – except at the end when a young man called me and dealt with it. I felt like no-one was listening to me”

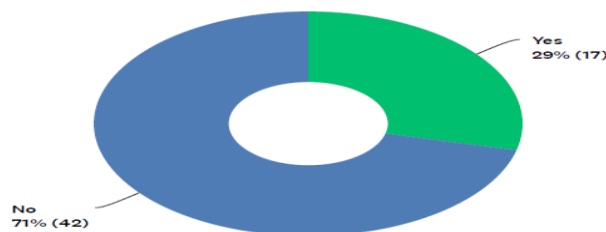
- 5. Staff sometimes struggled to identify the main issues of a complaint at the first point of contact which often led to customers feeling dissatisfied with both the process and the outcome

- 6. Staff do not always do that they say they will at all stages of the process. We found that 71% of customers did not receive an apology if Plus Dane had acknowledged that they had made a mistake.

“The Surveyor was brilliant – really happy with him, but still waiting to hear about my floor – it’s been two months”

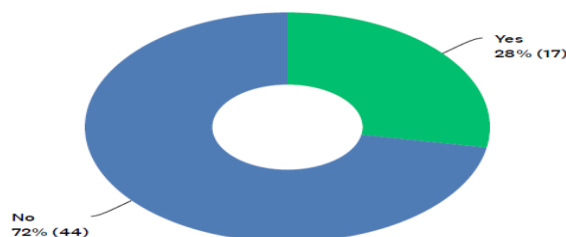
Q12 If we acknowledged that we made a mistake did you receive an apology?

Answered: 59 Skipped: 3



Q13 Do you feel Plus Dane completed everything they agreed to in relation to your complaint?

Answered: 61 Skipped: 1



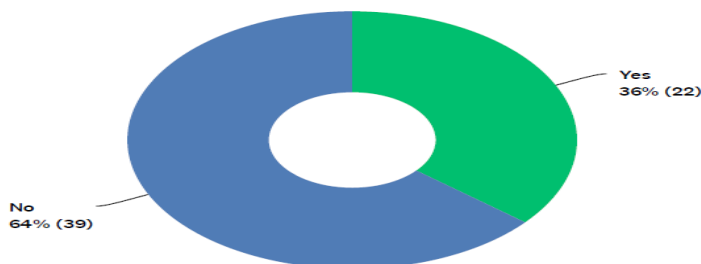
7. We found that communication and the flow of information was poor. PD were not proactive with updating customers – generally or as agreed - and keeping them informed. There was a considerable amount of customer effort involved throughout the process which meant customers were having to chase staff for information. Customers were not aware who they should contact leading to frustration when speaking to CAT. This frustration was also felt by staff who were often aware which staff would be more likely to keep a customer informed.

“I asked for someone to ring me back – no-one has – it’s just not good enough”

“Listen to what tenants are saying. Complete jobs you are supposed to. Deal with the complaints as they arise instead of leaving them until they are un- manageable”

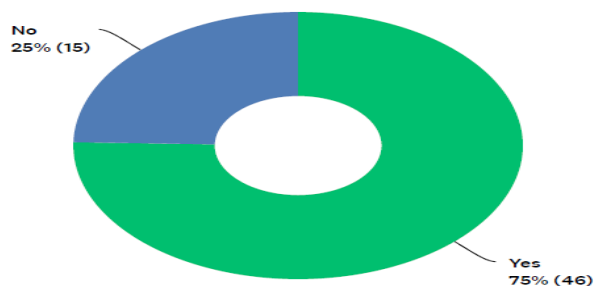
Q7 Were you kept informed about the progress throughout your complaint?

Answered: 61 Skipped: 1



Q8 Would you have liked more contact with Plus Dane throughout the process?

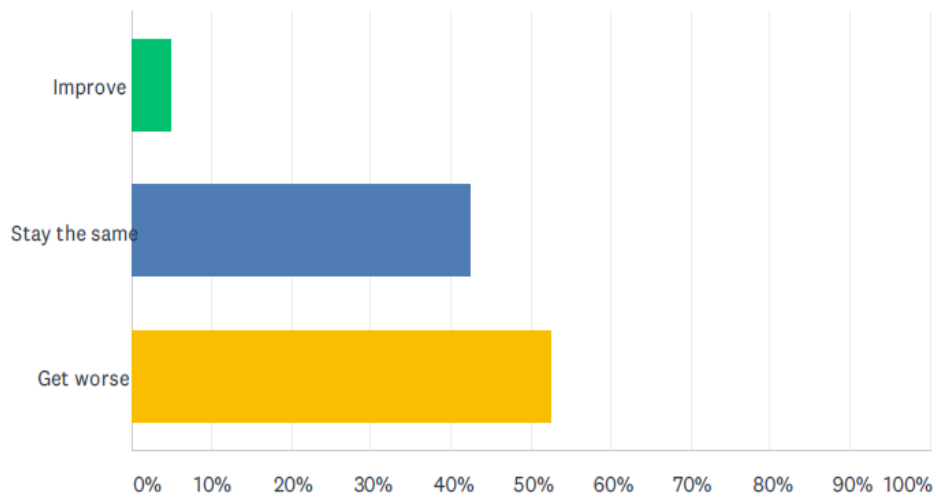
Answered: 61 Skipped: 1



8. Not all customers were aware of the options open to them when they were dissatisfied with the outcome.

Q15 Thinking of your experience as a whole – at the end of the process did your impression of Plus Dane.....

Answered: 59 Skipped: 3



Recommendations

3.1 Investigate the feasibility of setting up a Customer Complaints Panel which consists of staff and customers to help Plus Dane manage complaints. The role of the Panel could be:

- Review the lessons learnt and highlight good practise and areas for improvement.
- Oversee and monitor the implementation of service improvement to ensure Plus Dane does what it says it will.
- Look at ways to publicise examples of complaints and changes to both tenant and staff including producing a customer friendly document to share on the website.
- Look at ways to encourage customers to make complaints
- Review performance information about the service and ensure Plus Dane are meeting the requirements of the New Code.

3.2 To avoid customers not knowing when their complaint has come to an end Plus Dane should develop a more personal touch by speaking to customers in addition to sending formal letters. This is especially important at the end of the process.

3.3 To be as upfront as possible at the beginning of a complaint so the customer is clear about what they can expect and investigate ways to better get this message over to customers. We suggest the flow chart recommended in the previous section of the report could be helpful here.

3.4 To better communicate the existing complaint standards to customers and staff so that they are consistently applied and customers know what to expect and what to do if these are not met.

3.5 To have regular contact with the customer to ensure they understand the progress as the investigation progressed.

4. Is the complaints policy embedded in Plus Dane and is it understood by staff and residents?

Findings

1. We found that the complaints policy isn't as embedded as it should be and there are different levels of understanding across the organisation. From our focus groups with the Investigating Managers there appears to be some confusion over the definition of a complaint and the response timescales and some of them shared that they needed to brush up on their knowledge and awareness.
2. In the staff focus groups, we heard from staff who felt that they are doing their best for the customer, unfortunately, they all seemed to do that in different ways. Many said that they 'just use common sense' but we felt whilst initiative should be encouraged the worry is that it creates inconsistency in delivering the policy.
3. We are aware that in 2017 there were workshops held with both the Customer Access Team and the Investigating Managers and that the Customer Relations Team led on a campaign to encourage staff to put themselves in customer's shoes. However we couldn't find any evidence that formal training has taken place for new staff or new managers as part of an induction programme or a promotion. We could not find any evidence of ongoing formal training or that training is provided to all staff. We think that this is a missed opportunity to embed the complaints service across the organisation and help to set the right culture.
4. We know that there is a toolkit on the intranet that can be used as a resource for staff but we saw little evidence that staff knew this existed or used it to support them in resolving complaints.
5. We found that in some teams there is an over-reliance on the Customer Relations Team to investigate and respond to complaints. We found that the CRM team act as the safety net for meeting policy and the agreed standards. We think this creates a dependency on the Customer Relation Team which is an already small resource and that there should be more focus on Managers taking responsibility in investigating and resolving complaints so that the CRM team can focus on quality control and ongoing improvement.
6. From our focus group with the CAT team we discovered that they select who to forward stage 0 complaints based on who they know will respond in a timely way and they shared that not all Managers are equally as responsive. We believe that this is an inconsistent way to deliver the service and that Plus Dane should ensure that all Managers take equal responsibility for solving customer's complaints and enquiries as this would help to spread the work load for all Managers.
7. From the 65 customers (who had complained in the last year), 47% said that the complaints process was not explained to them and they didn't understand the process. 69% did not think their complaint was investigated promptly and thoroughly

and 64% did not feel they were kept informed about the progress throughout their complaint. We feel that there is more to be done to embed the complaints service with customers and our recommendations are focused on how Plus Dane can improve this experience for customers and for Plus Dane to really deliver on their agreed Policy aims.

“ Complaints Process was not explained to me so I feel my complaint was not investigated to my satisfaction”

“No-one has been in touch – I did not know if the complaint had been sorted or resolved”

Recommendations

4.1 To use the existing toolkit for staff and the new requirements placed on Plus Dane by the Housing Ombudsman as a basis to deliver refresher training to all staff within the next 6 months. We suggest that the training is tailored to the relevant roles staff have for reporting and dealing with a complaint.

We suggest that all staff will require a basic understanding of the complaint process but that those who take complaints, and those who investigate and provide a resolution, will require more detailed training which should include:

- Changes to the complaints process as a result of the new code
- How to recognise a complaint, diffuse difficult situations and getting to the root of a problem
- How to write a complaint response using good practice templates
- How the functionality in CX works to deal with complaints and how to record lessons learned

We suggest Plus Dane reviews the success of SHOES – (Show empathy and understanding, How can I make it right, Own it, Empower staff, Success) and look at innovative ways to train staff about the complaints process by using videos and interactive sessions.

4.2 To ensure that complaints process is included in any induction programme for new staff and that new managers are supported in their role as Investigating Managers.

4.3 To re-introduce the Investigating Officers meetings to discuss issues, complaint trends, share good practice and explain how to record the lessons learned from complaints.

5. Does Plus Dane learn lessons from complaints?

Findings

1. We could see no evidence that feedback from lessons learned is used effectively to improve services. Staff attending the focus groups struggled to tell us how they have improved their service as a result of complaints they had received.
2. We could not see any evidence of how Plus Dane effectively records lessons learned to demonstrate service improvement and that these are shared with customers.
3. Plus Dane Investigating Officers no longer meet to share experiences or to support each other.
4. Plus Dane response rate to complaint satisfaction surveys are poor.
5. 'Delighted' surveys only ask one question which is satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint so satisfaction with the process and feedback from customers about their experience is not collected - customers feel that the surveys Plus Dane conduct are more outcome based rather than focussing on the customer experience.
6. Following on from the customer consultation on the new Complaints Policy in 2017 we saw little evidence of how the views customers gave at this time have been taken into account, given that similar themes and frustrations have been reported by customers in our review. Customers in 2017 said that improvements should include:
 1. Keeping complainants up to date with progress
 2. Taking complaints seriously
 3. Improving communications
 4. Making vulnerable customers feel at ease
 5. Do what you say you are going to do, follow up on promises
 6. Improving 'complaint handling' training.

Recommendations

- 5.1** To develop a Lessons Learned Framework. This can then be shared with staff and on the 'Complaints' webpage, demonstrating active listening and engagement with customers.
- 5.2** To reinstate the Investigating Officers meetings and focus on sharing lessons learned, exchange ideas, offer support and identify trends so that the same mistakes do not repeatedly occur across service areas.
- 5.3** To look at ways to encourage staff to identify, record and share how complaints have made a difference, e.g. better utilise Team Meetings and Team training.
- 5.4** To consider adding questions to the end of process satisfaction surveys so that you can hear whether customers are satisfied not just with the outcome of the complaint but the process, to help Plus Dane better identify where improvements in the process can be made.
- 5.5** To develop a new way to monitor that actions that were promised to customers as part of a complaint resolution actually happen and ensure that someone has oversight of this.
- 5.6** To look at what action was taken following on from the 2017 survey/review and investigate as to why the issues raised then are the same issues that the Panel has identified in this 2020 review.

6. Are the complaint responses of good quality?

Findings

1. There were some good examples of where a complaint had been dealt with well. The tools that have been created appear to work well, the use of templates and guides re "tone of voice" are good but only when they are used with empathy and used consistently. We have included good examples in the appendix.
2. Plus Dane do not always carry out actions agreed upon completion of the complaint such as:
 - Customers making the same complaint twice as agreed actions as a result of a complaint have not been delivered following the closure of a complaint

“At the time I thought everything had been resolved from my complaint but the same thing happened again”

3. We could find no evidence of any checks that are in place to ensure the agreed action has been followed through and actually completed. The final letter states the resolution and this is accepted by Plus Dane as the end of the process.
4. Plus Dane’s final response upon completion of a complaint is by a formal letter which customers did not always understand. This sometimes led to customers thinking the complaint was still ongoing.
5. We found evidence of where some staff had been proactive in dealing with complaints and as a result they had been able to find an effective solution so that they complaint did not need escalation. We also found evidence of good investigations and polite diplomacy in letter writing. We have included these examples in the appendix.

Recommendations

- 6.1** To share examples of good complaint responses among all staff across Plus Dane to ensure consistency and share the standard expected.
- 6.2** To have checks and has oversight in place to monitor and make sure what has been agreed upon completion of complaints is actually carried out.
- 6.3** To investigate alternative methods of explaining the outcome of a complaint to a customer upon completion. Just including it in a letter is not good enough. Customers preferred to be contacted by phone or spoken to face to face.
- 6.4** Although we understand that letters have to be professional they should also adopt a more personal tone tailored to the individual customer and demonstrate more empathy and understanding. We have provided some examples of what we think the right tone and style should be in the appendix

Conclusion

We have concluded that:

1. By accepting the recommendations in this report, Plus Dane will be able to improve the current Complaints Process. This report identifies areas for improvement to support Plus Dane to meet **and exceed** the current and future regulation and be aligned with the spirit of the Social Housing White Paper. Furthermore, we feel that our recommendations are aligned with good practice shared by the Housing Ombudsman which advises that a good complaints should:
 - Get it right at the start
 - Deliver effective and continuous improvement
 - Use the complaints process effectively
 - Develop a culture of learning from complaints
2. Plus Dane need to examine the culture around complaints so that all staff see complaints as an opportunity to learn and improve. Complaints should be welcomed, encouraged and used as a driver for change to strengthen service delivery. Furthermore, all staff involved in resolving complaints need to take collective responsibility and we believe that this shift **in culture must be led by the Board**.
3. Plus Dane knows how to deliver an effective complaints service and that its Policy and supporting documents are fit for purpose. However we found that it is being applied inconsistently in its delivery. There appears to be a disconnect between what the Policy says and the customer experience of the process/service delivery.
4. Staff training is key to delivering a successful Complaints Process and getting the customer centric culture right. An on-going training programme (basic and advanced) should be developed for all staff to address the differing levels of understanding of the process and to ensure consistency from Induction onwards.
5. Plus Dane should develop and implement a Lessons Learned Framework to clearly demonstrate what works well, how changes have been made and how services have been improved. Customers should be involved with this by creating a Complaints Panel.
6. There is too much customer effort throughout the Complaints Process - demonstrated by poor communication and flow of information at the various touch

points throughout a complaint. Staff also need to ensure that they always do what they say they will and keep customers informed.

7. When customer consultations are carried out and recommendations for service improvement are made they need to be implemented and monitored to ensure change has taken place. In 2017, Plus Dane Voices carried out a similar consultation and we found little evidence of how those customer recommendations had brought about change or service improvement.

Following the findings from this Review, and the connections with the recommendations from the 2017 consultation, the Panel respectfully request that Plus Dane Board provide oversight to ensure the changes recommended in this Review are delivered in a timely way.

APPENDICIES

APPENDIX 1 – Customer Survey Results – attached PDF document and summary of the survey findings (below)

**Scrutiny Panel
Customer Complaint Review
What the Customer review told us
62 Customers completed Survey**

A series of 5 questions were put together by the Panel

1) Did you feel listened to and treated with Courtesy? And understanding?

Common Issues

Poor Communication, Not Listened to, Not taken seriously, PD staff not getting back to me, Defensive, Rude Staff.

2) Did you feel your complaint was investigated thoroughly and Promptly.

Common Issues

Took too long tenant had to chase, left hand doesn't know what right hand is doing, Feeling PD just wanted to get complaint out of the way, too procedure driven and CAT should not decide if complaint is a valid complaint it should be a manager.

3) Were you kept informed about progress throughout your complaint?

Common Issues

Didn't get a response, Had to chase PD or didn't get any response, Given incorrect information, thinking complaint still open (when it was closed)

4) Did PD respond in the agreed time?

Common Issues

No timescales given, had to chase PD for responses. Complanint closed before resolved.

5) Did PD do everything they said they agreed in relation to your complaint

Common Issues

No Apology when they admitted they were wrong. Compensation not paid (They didn't have my bank details!) Not learning from mistakes .. same thing happened next month!

Statistical Summary of Customer Survey

50% made their complaint by Phone **40%** by email

71% found it easy to make their complaint.

36% Thought their complaint was generally dealt with satisfactorily

53% Felt the process was explained to them and they had a clear understanding of the process.

66% Felt PD didn't listen to them or treat them with courtesy and understanding.

69% Did not feel their complaint was investigated promptly and thoroughly.

64% Felt they were not kept informed throughout the process.

75% Said they would have liked more contact from PD.

54% Felt their complaint wasn't handled within the agreed timescales

71% Did not receive an apology even when PD acknowledged they had made a mistake.

72% Felt the complaint process was continuing despite PD having closed the complaint.

5% Felt their impression of PD had improved as a result of the process.

APPENDIX 2 – Good Practice Table

Org	Name	Details
Guinness Partnership	Tim	Have live chat for complaints which is available Mon to Fri 8 to 8. Stages and reporting similar to PD
Amazon/Ebay	Shaf	Have the same reference number throughout making it easy for the customer to follow
Curries	Shaf	A transcript of the live chat/videos is sent via email to the complainant. This can then be tracked.
Cobalt Housing	Irene	They feel that involving a tenant in the 10 day process would slow a complaint down. Have a Support Officer for tenants making a complaint
Great Places	Irene	Have a nip it in the bud approach
Salix(New Charter)	Irene	Have a buddy service but it's not used much
Southway	Irene	Panel meet quarterly and look at 6 complaints in detail, performance information and carry out spot check audits
THT	Irene	They have a Complaint Panel who meet quarterly and look at lessons learnt. Invite a Complaint Panel member to Stage 2 if the tenant requests it
AJH - Amanda	Irene	Tenants sit in on Stage 2 hearings

Leeds City Council	Irene	Have a complaints helpline
Berneslai Homes - Claire	Irene	Training for all staff about the process and included in induction Have a game at induction
Stockport Homes	Joanna	Self-aware and transparent with Complaints. Produce a twice-yearly feedback report which is like a shorted version of PD's Annual Summary. Published on website. Stage 1 officers or managers deal with complaint. Stage 2 is dealt with by 2 customers who are trained and the Head of Service. One allocated person which ensures fluidity. It's very clear on website who should be looking at each stage
Nandos	Joanna	No publicised Complaints process found - other than they are dealt with quickly by speaking to the Manager
Motor Industry/Car dealerships	Craig	No publicised Complaints Process found. Seem to be lackadaisical
South Yorkshire HA	Joanna	No good practise found
NHS	Chris	Clear distinction between feedback about a service and a complaint. Importance of feedback first – complaint follows - compensation/other actions then follow.
Telephonica	Peter	Just one sheet of paper. Service Teams deal with complaint. If not happy ask to speak to Manager.

AA/RAC	Peter	<p>Response the following day after complaint made. Dealt with in 5 days and finalised within 8 weeks (call or write to you either with a final response).</p> <p>Forums for these organisations indicate the neither stick to these agreed timeframes.</p>
PHSO (formally Public Health England)/NHS	Peter Chris	<p>Produce a roadmap of the Complaint Process which is easy to follow.</p> <p>Consists of 40-50 organisations. I- statements used to gather positive experiences of complaints which are then linked into a matrix. Very customer centric.</p> <p>Produces promises. Approach is to deal with feedback first, putting the issue/complaint right then deal with everything else after (eg compensation etc).</p> <p>Main principles;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on outcomes for patients and service users rather than on the process itself. • Outcomes are not only to the specific outcomes of individual complaint cases, but rather to the impact on patients and service users of making a complaint and of the ways in which it was handled. • Documentation is incorporated into staff handbook. Used for induction also • Have a complaint Trusted point of contact for each complaint • Innovative learning from mistakes Maternity dept uses videos of complaints services that went wrong to use in training. See link below. <p>https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=complaints+procedure&docid=608050490478823416&mid=2739E8B7B9F0AB5AC00D2739E8B7B9F0AB5AC00D&view=detail&FORM=VIRE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The policy is not designed to apportion blame, to consider the possibility of negligence or to provide compensation. It is not part of the disciplinary policy • Simplicity
Practical Car and Van Hire	Peter	<p>https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=complaints+procedure&docid=608038327162766270&mid=79D2B0E648DD5C03A95F79D2B0E648DD5C03A95F&view=detail&FORM=VIRE</p>

Three	Irene	Use of Live Chat. Alternative to write in. No email facility or ability to speak on phone		
Argos	Irene	Encourage Live Chat. Alternative to phone, write in. No email facility		
Yvonne Davies Scrutiny Net notes	Irene	<p>Notes on good practise following Complaints Code</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-assessments and lessons to be published for tenants • Needs to be tenant input in when reviewing complaints policies/process/lessons learnt • Don't have to use the word 'complaint' • Should accept social media as a method for making a complaint • Needs to be publicised everywhere and need to consider methods for vulnerable and hard to reach groups • Housing Ombudsman should be mentioned in 1st and 2nd stage letters • Include tenants in Panel hearings – could slow down process • Information should be clear in the Annual report • LLord should issue lessons learnt for tenants to 		
<p>There are currently 93 Tenant's Panels registered with the Ombudsman so the customer can have input into monitoring services and ensuring changes are embedded and services improved.</p>	Carol	<p>Examples</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>Landlord</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accent Group • Barnet Homes • City of Stoke on Trent • City South Manchester Housing Trust • Croydon Council • East Devon District Council • Stockport Homes </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>Tenant Panel Name:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accent Residents' Complaints Panel Barnet Homes Tenant Panel City of Stoke Complaints Panel Bentley House Tenants & Residents Assn Croydon Council Complaints Panel East Devon District Council Designated Panel Stockport Homes Designated Tenant Panel </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Landlord</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accent Group • Barnet Homes • City of Stoke on Trent • City South Manchester Housing Trust • Croydon Council • East Devon District Council • Stockport Homes 	<p>Tenant Panel Name:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accent Residents' Complaints Panel Barnet Homes Tenant Panel City of Stoke Complaints Panel Bentley House Tenants & Residents Assn Croydon Council Complaints Panel East Devon District Council Designated Panel Stockport Homes Designated Tenant Panel
<p>Landlord</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accent Group • Barnet Homes • City of Stoke on Trent • City South Manchester Housing Trust • Croydon Council • East Devon District Council • Stockport Homes 	<p>Tenant Panel Name:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accent Residents' Complaints Panel Barnet Homes Tenant Panel City of Stoke Complaints Panel Bentley House Tenants & Residents Assn Croydon Council Complaints Panel East Devon District Council Designated Panel Stockport Homes Designated Tenant Panel 			

APPENDIX 3

Examples of good and bad responses via email and the tracking activity.

1. Example of good response email

From: Paul Crisford <Paul.Crisford@plusdane.co.uk>

Sent: Friday, November 20, 2020 12:02:22 PM

Subject: RE: Fitting lounge fire.

Good Morning Mr X,

Thank you very much for your email.

You are very welcome and once again I can only apologise for the various mishaps that have occurred. It has highlighted weaknesses in our processes that I am going to work on. It is very important that we use these experiences to improve our service delivery.

This morning I have highlighted to the merchants in detail what went wrong and how it has resulted in a service failure from ourselves.

Moving forward I have suggested that we receive confirmation rather than speculative emails from the suppliers about when an item will be in stock.

Certainly with the current pandemic it would appear that usual delivery times from suppliers are very unpredictable and varied so therefore a predicted date just isn't sufficient.

I am going to suggest that the best way to improve and progress our service delivery is to wait for confirmation from the merchants before raising the job.

This will obviously need discussing with the scheduling team but it's something that I feel would be beneficial.

I have forwarded your complaint onto a member of our scheduling team. They will contact you in due course to discuss this further.

I will liaise with this member of staff also.

I have raised the works to cap off the chimney and that has been raised by the scheduling team this morning, please see the attached raised works form.

I wish you all the very best and I would like to thank you for your structured feedback.

Kind regards,

Paul Crisford

Examples of proactive investigations highlighted through the Tracking activity

Example 1

Complaint: Regarding a customer who felt he had had his car damaged by the gardener's strimming by the car.

Action: The appropriate Manager immediately visited the customer, viewed the damage and came to the conclusion that the damage was, in fact, there prior to the gardeners' visit. The customer agreed with this and the complaint was closed. An excellent example where being proactive and dealing with the complaint immediately, rectified a complaint.

Example 2

Complaint: A young woman who had applied to be housed within the Plus Dane area and on her application she said she had family also housed within the Plus Dane area.

Action: The Manager dealing with this, investigated as she should, and found the young woman did not, in fact, have any relatives living in the area and as such her application was turned down. The letters sent from Plus Dane dealing with this were polite, informative and in good time. Again, this complaint was dealt with very well indeed.

Example 3

Complaint: The complaint was made by using the Tell Us Form on the website regarding lack of gardening services.

Action: Plus Dane apologises for the lack of Garden Services not delivered to its tenants due to Covid19 Lockdown. Email sent to the Tenant who made the Complaint demonstrates empathy and understanding. Plus Dane responded on the same day they received the Complaint.

Plus Dane contacted the Contractor who was responsible for Garden Services and also the window cleaner and conveyed lack of Services over the Lockdown period. Window cleaner will be providing a work schedule and this will be communicated to all Residents so they can open rear gates for access. The Garden Services contractor has assured Plus Dane that they are working hard to get back on schedule.

Examples where improvements could be made highlighted through the tracking activity

Example 4

Complaint: Issue of car parking spaces relating to land borders.

Action: Although the customers were informed of the outcome in a timely manner there was no real apology given. There were examples of Plus Dane have not accepting responsibility, poor note taking, records and lack of evidence.

Staff dealing with the complaint did not appear to have access to all the information.

An issue, noted early on in the complaint was not picked up until the Complainant pointed it out in their communication prior to the last service provider communication (which finally addressed this point).

Example 5

Complaint: Customer requesting new bathroom and being told by Plus Dane staff that they would get one when this was not correct.

Action: A response to the Customer was made within the timescale for this stage and there does appear to be supporting evidence to show a prompt, thorough, honest and open investigation took place within timescale. Plus Dane also explained the situation and the reasoning behind their final decision. However, there was a mis-communication from a worker/contractor resulting in the complainant being given incorrect information. It was not clear or accurate. Although the cause of the complaint was identified, what action to be taken was not provided.