

## Thames Valley Housing Resident Auditors Report on Complaints

Date: February 2011

### **Scope of the Audit: Scope of the Audit:** Complaints Service

The Thames Valley Resident Auditors will undertake an audit of TVH Complaints service area and processes; and produce a report of findings and recommendations. The audit and report will be undertaken in 2010-11.

The audit will entail:

- Reviewing policy, procedures, data and guidance documents relating to complaints and the impact of these on the residents
- Examining Link-up and TVH website, and other Housing Associations websites
- Interviewing staff working in the complaints area
- Surveying 600 residents in their communities regarding complaint issues
- The outcome will be a report with recommendations aiming to ensure the service is efficient and effective, delivering a quality Value for Money service to residents.
- TVH management will then respond to, and address the report's recommendations in an agreed timescale.

**Audit team:** The audit team was made up of the following residents: Steve McAllister, Tony Elsom, Andy Meal, Andy Tucker, Tatjana Mitevska, and Sara Cobb. Facilitated by Stephen Beckett-Doyle.

### General Comment from the Chair of Auditors

It is definitely true that Thames Valley Housing and their staff have a very positive attitude towards dealing with and resolving complaints, however there seems to be a lot of confusion as to what constitutes a complaint.

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We would like TVHA to treat complaints this financial year as a positive thing and not shy away from recording them. It is only by recording them accurately that the true levels can be judged and also permanent fixes can be found, whether this lies with contractors, staff, procedures or residents.

From our report and the data that TVH already collect it is obvious that there is a lot of confusion in this area which is leaving residents dissatisfied. We would like to see service failure clearly defined, with required outcomes and timescales. This would then leave everybody clear.

### What Terms and Abbreviations Mean

<b>TVH</b>	Thames Valley Housing
<b>CSC</b>	Customer Call Centre: when you call TVH these are the people you speak with.
<b>Project Cornerstone</b>	This is the new data management system that will be installed in TVH. The project is ongoing and will be up and running in phases between November 2010 and October 2011.
<b>TVHRA</b>	Thames Valley Housing Resident Auditors

**Red Column** = this is below the level expected by residents, action on these points should improve the service and increase customer satisfaction

**Amber Column** = this is acceptable to residents but minor alterations could improve the service and or customer satisfaction and possibly provide a cost saving in some instances

**Green Column** = this is at or above the levels expected by residents.

Colour Code	No	%	Number
Yellow	15	60%	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 21, 22, 25
Green	8	32%	1, 2, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24
Red	2	8%	9, 13
Total	25	100%	

### TVH Management General Statement Concerning Responses

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TVHA would like to thank the Resident Auditors for their efforts in producing this Audit of our Complaints Process.

Some of the findings below will become part of the Complaint Action Plan (CAP) in the coming year, as some of the areas examined were similar to those in the CAP.

**Timescales**

There are some issues raised that can be actioned almost immediately and we will endeavour to do so. Those recommendations requiring changes in TVH processes or requiring training will take longer to work through. Many of the recommendations will form part of the forthcoming CAP for the Complaints Review Group in the coming year.

No	Questions	Evidence	Traffic Light	TL Progress	Auditors Comments & Recommendations	TVH Responses
<b>General</b>						
1	Do residents know how to make a complaint?	Speaking to residents, Resident surveys,			Residents when asked stated they know how to make a complaint if it is a serious issue.	
2	A number of mystery shopping calls were made to the customer service centre. Asking about	Mystery shopping calls.			On every occasion advice was given on how to make a formal complaint and the details of the complaints procedure.	

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	making a complaint and what the procedure is.					
3	Resident perception generally seems to be that complaints are not taken seriously.	Speaking to residents. Resident Surveys. Looking at existing TVH survey feedback.			<p>It is the perception of over 50% of residents that we had contact with that complaints are not taken seriously. Often residents have to call TVH a number of times about a single issue. The problem seems to be that if an attempt is made to deal with the matter outside of the complaints process there is no tracking to ensure issues are dealt with.</p> <p>Often when a resident calls a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> time they are dealing with a different member of staff and have to start or clarify their issue again due to only a small</p>	<p>Agreed: residents think they have complained to us as part of their ongoing communication whereas we refer to 'formal complaints' when discussing these issues. We log 'informal complaints' as 'service failures', and we do track and report on these. The new monthly satisfaction survey shows an average of 65% satisfaction that issues have been dealt with, however the biggest reason for dis-satisfaction (36%) was 'issues not dealt with'.</p> <p>3.1 It was recognised that the current complaint leaflet could mislead residents into thinking the 'Service Failure' was part of the complaints system. This</p>

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					<p>amount of information being available in the notes section</p> <p>This leads them to believe that complaints are not being taken seriously.</p> <p>The only real way presently to track this is as a service failure, if these are no longer reported on what is the harm in putting it into this category so at least it can be tracked until a resolution is found.</p> <p>Examples can be given.</p>	<p>could be redesigned to be clearer.</p> <p><b>Action – PA to be actioned as the current number of leaflets are re-ordered. Estimated date June 2011</b></p> <p>3.3 Staff to be reminded about logging service failures, especially outside of CSC and as part of survey feedback. Meeting between PA, SR and Res Aud to discuss. When we refer to complaints in future we will call them 'formal complaints'.</p> <p><b>Action - PA by end of April</b></p> <p>3.4 Staff are now able to put more notes onto the system since the new database has gone live. CSC will feed back to teams where this is not happening.</p>

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						<b>Action – SR, end of April and on-going.</b>
4	Do residents know what a service failure is?				<p>Generally residents are not interested in the term service failure; they are only interested in what is going to be done to resolve their issue. It is also generally assumed by residents that a service failure is a complaint. "Service failure" is listed in the complaints leaflet and the policy as the first stage before the complaints process.</p> <p>What could be done to make all residents clear on the process?</p>	Agreed – we have already asked staff to stop using the term 'service failure' with customers as part of our ongoing lessons from complaint feedback. We have also dropped this term from our current complaints leaflet. See above for actions.
5	Are complaints dealt with within the defined	Speaking to residents.  Looking at			It was felt by the auditors that some complaints are taking far too long to be dealt with, with TVH just	5.1 Agreed - There are some complaints which do take a long period to resolve, especially in the case of

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	timescales?	<p>existing Complaints.</p> <p>Summarising the average time to deal with a complaint.</p> <p>Looking at complaints feedback questionnaires</p>			<p>moving the deadlines/response times to suit them.</p> <p>Understandably some complaints are not easy to resolve or are not even in the hands of TVH.</p> <p>We should have thought that from the very outset TVH should be clarifying what is being sought to resolve the complaint.</p> <p>If this is something that TVH cannot resolve due to it lying with a third party could this not be put into a category of third party complaints and dealt with outside the normal policy?</p> <p>The auditors feel that the way the complaints process is worded may be misunderstood.</p>	<p>defects and ASB, and we need to manage expectations better. There is a monthly review at director level of all complaints over 30 and 60 days to ensure they are being actively managed. In the case of third party management issues, Staff are expected to keep residents up to date and give realistic timescales. We feel however that it is impractical to have these complaints separated from the normal complaint system.</p> <p>5.4 We will manage expectations better by explaining that the 10 day response may not conclude the matter and that we will try to resolve third party and ongoing issues as soon as possible, whilst keeping the resident up to date. Staff will be notified and the complaints leaflet updated. We will also</p>

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					<p>3 days for confirmation of receipt 10 days for investigation and response.</p> <p>Total of 13 working days from initial complaint to agreed resolution.</p> <p>Looking through old complaints it is seen that this process is rarely fully completed within this time scale, the letter goes out within 10 days accepted but usually saying that the complaint is being investigated etc with new moveable dates from this point, hence the later comments that the average time to deal with the complaint is 50 days not the 13 that it seems to insinuate in the leaflet.</p>	<p>produce a new PI to measure the end to end times for all complaints.</p> <p><b>Action – PA, end of April to update staff, leaflet when it is re-ordered.</b></p> <p>5.5 We have already picked up cases where staff were moving the date forward but this is now monitored and has greatly reduced. This is picked up as part of the 30 and 60 day monitoring.</p>

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					We would like TVH to investigate a sample where additional response dates have been added and see if this was justified (i.e. could not reasonably be completed sooner).	
6	Do residents know when their complaint has been closed?	Resident surveys.  Speaking to residents.  Looking at a sample of closed complaints.  Speaking to officers.			Often TVH feel that a complaint is closed and will close it once they have arranged for an action to take place this is true more so with low level complaints or service failures. However often the final action does not take place or the customer is not satisfied that the issue has been dealt with. We would like TVH to proactively monitor cases and give/have a courtesy call to the customer prior to the case being closed to	Agreed - This is part of the Complaints Procedure and needs to be re-iterated to staff  6.1 To ensure this happens, in future the complaints co-ordinator will carry out a check to ensure the customer has been contacted prior to any complaint being closed. Where it is recorded that a resident is not happy with this decision, the action taken will be reviewed to see if there is anything else which can be done.  <b>Action – PA, by end of April.</b>

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					ensure that the issues have been dealt with.	
7	Is the compensation policy publicised and clear?	Looking on website. Speaking to residents. Meetings with staff.			There seemed to be no clear guidelines on compensation with differing amounts paid by different people/departments for similar circumstances.	7.1 Agreed - There is a new policy and procedure about to be put in place that should deal with these queries. It includes guidance notes for staff, limits and amounts of compensation for specific issues and a new form for use by Finance so that there will be clearer reporting. It also makes the point that Refunds are not paid from the Compensation.  <b>Action - PA March 2011</b>
8	How is compensation allocated?	Speaking to complaints coordinator. Speaking to staff.			We were advised that generally there is a central amount of money put aside for compensation, amongst the examples we were given about when compensation is paid was service failures.	Agreed – contractors do already cover refund payments where services have not been delivered, and the new refunds process for cleaning and gardening is about to be implemented (following the resident auditors review of service charges).

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					We would like clarification as to this as we feel that payment for a service failure is not compensation but is a refund and surely this would be covered by the contractor.	
9	Do residents know who to contact once they have made a complaint?	Resident survey.  Looking at current complaints.  Looking at complaints survey feedback.  Speaking to residents.			Often residents feel that their case is not being taken seriously, they often have to go through things with different members of staff, and nobody seems to take full ownership. We would like TVH to investigate the possibility of having a single point of contact for complaints, one named person with direct contact details given to the resident, if somebody has the ownership and responsibility of the complaint it will be dealt	Agreed – we have already identified the need for some complaints to have a lead person who the resident can contact and who is responsible for keeping them up to date. This is especially important where a complaint involves more than one department.  9.2 We will amend the initial response letter to ensure that it has a lead person and contact number for that complaint.  9.3 In the event of a cross cutting complaint the Complaints Coordinator will designate the

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					<p>with much quicker. The frustration comes with having to contact the CSC to chase it before you can be put through to the particular person or getting through to the named person only to be told that it is now with another department etc.</p> <p>If a complaint is cross cutting areas then the initial named manager has no authority to request responses from other departments within set timescales etc</p> <p>We would like to see that somebody with authority is overseeing the complaint, across all departments, somebody who could coordinate the response and enforce responses</p>	<p>Manager responsible and deal with any issues where information is not delivered in a timely manner.</p> <p><b>Action – PA, end of April.</b></p>

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					<p>within set timescales.</p> <p>Often complaints cannot be fully resolved by the named manager due to waiting or responses from other departments or people.</p> <p>Given the name of complaints coordinator residents felt that this would be the sort of person coordinating the responses, however this is useless if they are not given teeth.</p>	
<b>Management Responsibility</b>						
10	Are appeal hearings truly independent?	<p>Speaking to residents.</p> <p>Speaking to staff.</p>			<p>Appeal hearings are heard by employees of TVH albeit different ones to those who heard the original case. The auditors feel that this is not totally impartial as they are perceived by residents as part of the</p>	<p>Agreed – panels currently only have one TVH employee (usually the Chief Executive) with two other board members. We agree however that this does not feel independent from a resident's perspective.</p>

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					<p>organizational management structure and therefore lacking true independence Looking at what some other organisations do we would like TVH to consider a fully independent panel either made up of residents or industry individuals independent of TVH.</p>	<p>10.3 We will move towards having panels made up of residents who do not need to be Board members (but can also include resident board members) and where residents make up the majority. The recommendation is therefore that we have two residents and a senior member of TVH staff – this will usually be the Chief Executive or the Deputy Chief Executive. A certain level of skill will be required and we will provide support and training for residents in this role.</p> <p><b>PA – End of September.</b></p>
11	Are the letters sent by TVH once a complaint has been opened clear and descriptive of				<p>Contact letters sent after receiving a complaint currently state after how many working days you will receive a response. We feel that this may be slightly confusing and lead</p>	<p>11.1 Agreed - Letters will have to be amended on the system ensuring staff give a date</p> <p><b>PA April 2011</b></p>

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	the process?				to residents feeling you haven't responded in the said time. (What is a working day?) We would like to see a date inserted rather than working days.	
12	How are complaints submitted by E-mail dealt with?	Speaking to staff.  Customer experiences.  Residents' surveys.			When complaints are submitted by E-mail they often take longer and we have heard that they are not being responded to and even deny that it has been received in some instances.  As complaints go to the info e-mail address the post room confirm that they do not take any form of priority.  Some organisations utilise a numeric logging system so that every e-mail that	Agreed.  12.1 Action - TVHA will test our website and info e-mail address to see if complaints reported in this way can be sent a receipt copy and we will also consider if there should be a dedicated complaints address.  <b>Action - PA, End June 2011.</b>

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					comes in via the given address is given a unique reference number, perhaps the complaint number. Is this something that could be implemented by TVH?	
13	What is the current level of service failures	<p>Speaking to residents</p> <p>Speaking to estate inspectors</p> <p>Speaking to staff</p> <p>Looking at complaints</p> <p>Audit on known service failures to see if they appear</p>			<p>We looked at the amount of complaints and service failures last year but the figure to us seemed very low</p> <p>The amount of service failures especially seemed very low. We feel that there is confusion as to what a service failure is amongst staff and that often although there has been a clear service failure it is not logged that way if there is a corrective action.</p>	Agreed – we recognise that when residents and TVH talk about complaints the understanding of what constitutes a complaint is different. Actions to address this and increase the number of service failures have been addressed under items 3 and 4.
14	Are Literal comments on	Looking at literal			Overwhelmingly residents believe that by making	Agreed – We have responded to some survey and inspection

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	TVH surveys responded to	comments on various surveys covering complaints Speaking to residents			<p>literal comments they are registering their Satisfaction/ Dissatisfaction. We checked a random sample of some of the comments on estate inspector forms, repairs satisfaction forms, and cyclical decoration forms There was evidence to show that many literal comments had not been acted upon.</p> <p>There is confusion as to what a complaint is; we are not insinuating that all literal comments are complaints. Often it features in responses that residents say we are always telling TVH but they do nothing, what is the point in asking us as nothing is ever done about it etc, this leads to frustrated customers which eats</p>	<p>reports, but this has not been consistent. Some of these have not been responded to as they are not the view of all residents and can contradict other feedback on the same scheme. We agree however that all literal comments deserve a response.</p> <p>6.1 We will put mechanisms in place to ensure we respond to all service failure related comments. As part of this we may reduce the opportunity to make literal comments in some surveys where, in the past, this information hasn't been useful to improve services.</p> <p><b>Action – MB, end of June.</b></p>

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					<p>away at them and eventually culminates in a more serious complaint.</p> <p>We would like to see a review of the process for responding to literal comments and a uniform procedure and monitoring put into place.</p>	
15	<p>What checks are in place to ensure that literal comments are responded to?</p>	<p>Looking at completed.</p> <p>Monthly surveys.</p> <p>Repairs surveys.</p> <p>Estate inspector feedback.</p> <p>Speaking to officers.</p>			<p>Some departments <u>are</u> responding to literal comments. However not all and some not until several months after the survey was initially returned.</p> <p>If you are asking for comments on a survey you should be prepared to act upon/respond to them where necessary.</p> <p>Alternatively indicate on the survey that you will not</p>	<p>See item 14 above</p>

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					<p>be responding to them.</p> <p>We checked a sample of 30 various surveys and so far as we could see 9 had literal comments that required an action or response, only 1 had been actioned.</p>	
16	What is the current level of formal complaints?				<p>This is at a good level, however it may be a bit misleading, we spoke to 112 totally random residents in our residents sample and over 50% <b>believed</b> they had made a complaint in the last 12 months.</p> <p>If this was scaled up across the areas TVH cover over 5000 complaints or service failures would have been logged in the past year. (on the assumption that</p>	<p>Agreed – we recognise that when residents and TVH talk about complaints the understanding of what constitutes a complaint is different. Actions to address this and increase the number of service failures have been addressed under items 3 and 4.</p> <p>16.2 TVHA will review its current leaflet and other information to ascertain if we are communicating well enough to Residents so that we may be clearer on what we class as a complaint and how we deal with informal complaints.</p>

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					<p>random sample surveys could be scaled up)</p> <p>We have been advised by TVH that our snapshot data is not statistically valid as we would have had to of had a response rate of 10% of the entire stock and not 10% of the 600 we surveyed for it to be valid?</p> <p>However what we are trying to indicate is that far more residents believe they have made a complaint than TVH have actually captured.</p> <p>With this in mind we would like TVH to investigate a way of explaining the complaints process to all residents, which would help improve the perception of TVH to their residents</p>	<p><b>Action – PA, end April.</b></p>

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17	What is the current level of complaints at review stage?				This seems very positive	
18	What is the current level of complaints at ombudsman stage?	Looking at TVH statistical data  Looking at complaints at the Ombudsman level.			It is very encouraging that although TVH have had a small number of Complaints go to the Ombudsman so far, in the financial year 10/11, they have had no findings against them or been asked to award compensation	
<b>Documents Checked</b>						
19	Vexatious policy	Looking at the vexatious policy document			This is a comprehensive document and has already been through resident consultation.	
20	Complaints policy	Looking at the current policy  Looking at the Moat peer review			The policy seems to be fairly comprehensive.  The peer review with Moat seemed to highlight some differences; With MOATS	Agreed - the review with Moat was very useful and done at a time when we had lots of improvements to make to our process. We did review our policy following the peer review and incorporated the things which we felt

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					policy being far more detailed is anything being done to bridge these differences?	were good practice.
21	Compensation policy				This is far too vague and non committal and we would like to see more detailed times when this is payable and the criteria for such.	Agreed - There is a new policy and procedure about to be put in place that should deal with these queries. It includes guidance notes for staff, limits and amounts of compensation for specific issues and a new form for use by Finance so that there will be clearer reporting. It also makes the point that Refunds are not paid from the Compensation. (See items 7-8)  <b>Action - PA March 2011</b>
22	What is the average time to resolve a stage 1 complaint?	BIS check on 18/1 only completed cases YTD  Calculation 127 complaints over 6330 days			The average time for a formal complaint to be resolved was 49.8 days from initial complaint. This is over 7 working weeks. The complaints policy states in any event a written response will be	22.1 We will introduce and report on a new management PI for the Average Time for the resolution of complaints.  <b>Action - PA March 2011</b>

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		=49.8 days average			<p>sent <b>within 10 working days of receiving the formal complaint.</b> This implies to residents that this is how long it will take to resolve or move to the next stage.</p> <p>This obviously takes into account some very long running complaints.</p> <p>We did seek advice as to how to calculate this and this was the chosen method- How would TVH work out the average time as this is very different from ours?</p>	
23	Has the introduction of the complaints co-ordinator improved the service residents	<p>Speaking to the complaints co-ordinator</p> <p>Speaking to residents</p>			The auditors feel that the permanent appointment of both the Complaints Coordinator and the Quality Assurance Assistant provides greater continuity in dealing with complaints	

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	receive?	Looking at satisfaction levels  Looking at the time taken to resolve complaints			and the reporting on them. It also demonstrates the organisations commitment to improving their complaints satisfaction.	
24	Looking at The level of complaints recorded. BME seems low is this proportionate to the profiling make up?	Looking at information from the business intelligence system			We combined all levels of complaints for our analysis –  White ethnicity 59% of the complaints vs. 46% of the make up  BME – 21 % of the complaints Vs 21 % of the make up  Unknown – 20% of the complaints Vs 33 % of the make up. We felt that this is really positive and the split shows	

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					that TVH is as accommodating and accessible to making complaints regardless of Ethnicity.	
25	How do TVH learn from complaints?	<p>Speaking to staff</p> <p>Attending complaints group Meetings</p> <p>Speaking with residents</p>			<p>The current IT system has the facility to capture learning points. It seems that these are not distributed to all staff however.</p> <p>There seems to be no facility to analyse service failures, to pick up common trends.</p> <p>A lot of complaints that were looked at had similar themes and trends however there seemed to lack an action plan of how to prevent this in the future, only on resolving the complaint of the</p>	<p>Agreed – learning from complaints is a key part of the process and something we can always improve on. We have recently changed the system so that a complaint can no longer be closed without this field being completed. We produce a very comprehensive Learning point action which forms part of the regular complaints report to the Customer Services Group. We have also used this and the internal audit of complaints to shape staff complaints training.</p> <p>25.5 We will continue to analyse complaint learning, but build into the process a review of the key themes so that we can</p>

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					<p>individuals. The main thrust of this comment is that in the service failures and complaints that we looked at the themes were often the same.</p> <p>Looking at some of the learning points and complaints they often seemed to be similar even over time.</p> <p>If individuals are fully aware of them and changes come as a result of the learning points we felt the same issues should not keep appearing.</p> <p>We think this is a valuable process and are not saying at all that nothing has come from them, just that it perhaps could be</p>	<p>produce some golden rules for staff when dealing with complaints.</p> <p><b>Action - PA, end June 2011.</b></p>

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					improved still further	

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### Auditors Independent Survey

The following questions were asked to a random selection of Residents and Leaseholders across TVH's area via a door knock survey. Permission to include NHS accommodation via a postal survey was requested, we were informed that NHS had been over-surveyed.

Only residents who answered 'yes' to the question, have you made a complaint to TVH for any reason in the past 12 months, are included in this data.

No	Questions	Evidence	Traffic Light	TL Progress	Auditors Comments & Recommendations	TVH Responses
1	Was the complaints process explained to you?	Survey response			52% said NO	Action – this will be picked up and fed back to staff alongside the updating of complaints materials. <b>PA – End of April to update staff.</b>
2	Would you say that your complaint was dealt with professionally or as you would expect?	Survey Response			49% said NO	We hope that the recommendations in this audit will ensure that this improves in the future.
3	Did TVH confirm with you that they had dealt with your complaint satisfactorily?	Survey Response			64% said NO	This has been picked up in the audit and the complaints co-ordinator will ensure complaints have been closed properly.

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5	Did you feel that your complaint was taken seriously?	Survey Response		57% said NO	This related to customers having to chase which will be picked up through the proper logging and tracking of service failures.
6	On a scale of 1-5 how satisfied are you with the current complaints process	Survey Response		40% dissatisfied 31% Satisfied 29% No opinion	This level of response is median when benchmarked in the sector, but we have a target of 50% and are moving towards this.
<p>Surprisingly our independent data differed substantially to that TVH collects - TVH data is statistically valid – this data is based on 62 responses (those who said they had made a complaint) and is unlikely to be valid. We accept that this is just a sample representation; however this is the actual data we collected and just felt that as such it should be included within the report. For this reason we have not put actual recommendations.</p>					

TVHA notes the above information. Monitoring of resident satisfaction, particularly that of Complaints will continue. The Complaints Review Group will look at this disparity during the coming year.