

Guiding Principles for an Effective Complaint Resolution Framework



Complaints can provide valuable feedback to non-profit housing providers about the experience tenants have in their housing and with housing services, areas for improvement, as well as opportunities to strengthen relationships with tenants and better address their needs.

Applicability: All BC Housing funded non-profit housing providers must have a complaint resolution process. These principles align with existing contractual language in agreements between BC Housing and housing providers.

Purpose: These guiding principles have been created to support non-profit housing providers in developing, reviewing, and maintaining your complaint resolution processes. The principles in this guide are intended to support fair, equitable, and responsive processes to assist staff in addressing complaints in a timely and respectful manner.

We understand your organization's approach to complaints processes are informed by building design, operations, and dynamics of the communities you work with and that this may result in a variety of complaints policy language. BC Housing expects housing providers to review your complaint resolution policies to ensure they are aligned with the overarching principles in this guide. This document includes a checklist to help you improve the effectiveness and accessibility of your complaint resolution process.

Six Guiding Principles For Complaint Resolution

To balance supporting consistent and fair administrative processes for complainants, while allowing providers to be responsive to individual needs, providers should use these guiding principles for their complaint resolution processes.

Embracing these principles aligns with existing contractual language in agreements between BC Housing and housing providers. This language requires housing providers to be transparent and accountable.

It is important that providers consider how processes will impact tenants and staff. Below are some fundamental principles.

1 Implement accessible and transparent processes

Complaint resolution processes should be sufficiently accessible and transparent to anyone who is impacted. Not all complaints may reach your organization due to the following complaint submission barriers: tenants may not be aware of their right to complain, lack of information about how to complain, lack of access to a complaint channel (e.g., internet, website, phone number). Transparency in complaint resolution processes can ensure that tenants and staff are fully aware and understand their rights and responsibilities. Accessibility ensures that individuals can be heard. Your complaint resolution process should:

- ▶ Make it easy for people to share concerns.
- ▶ Be simple to use.
- ▶ Use plain language.
- ▶ Be clearly communicated to tenants and staff.
- ▶ Be readily available and easy to access by tenants and staff.
- ▶ Include a range of contact options, such as phone, email, or in person (the process should not require complaints to be put in writing, unless there is a legal requirement).
- ▶ Be explained verbally by staff if a person has difficulty understanding written information.

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Have you defined what complaints you can review as part of this process?
- Are there complaints which would fall outside of the scope of this process?
- Do you refer certain complaints to an external process?
- Will you accept anonymous complaints? If not, is this stated with a rationale for why they are not accepted?
- How will you ensure that your staff understand and are confident about their role in resolving complaints?

2 Support fair and consistent treatment

A complaint resolution process provides a mechanism for staff and tenants with concerns to have a way of addressing them in a fair, equitable and respectful manner. Consistency is one way to apply administrative fairness in complaints processes, including:

- ▶ Ensuring complaints are reviewed by an independent and unbiased person, who was not involved in the original complaint. Bias is a predisposition toward one side or a specific result and includes the perception of bias. If a person identifies they have a bias, or could be perceived to be biased, they should recuse themselves from the process.

WHAT IS ADMINISTRATIVE FAIRNESS?

Administrative fairness includes allowing people to be heard in processes that affect them, ensuring decisions are made without bias and acting consistently with the rules that apply. It is also about making decisions that are considerate of the individual's needs and circumstances and based on relevant information.

Source Office of the BC Ombudsperson

- ▶ Approaching complaints with an open mind and responding to each complaint on its merits. A complaint should not be dismissed because it came from someone who submits many complaints.
- ▶ Informing complainants of their rights and sources of information to support their rights, including the Residential Tenancy Branch or the Human Rights Tribunal.
- ▶ Giving complainants the right to be heard by providing:
 - Advance notice of an action or decision.
 - Proper disclosure.
 - A reasonable opportunity for complainants to respond to the information found by the reviewer.
 - An opportunity to submit new information and comment before closing a complaint.
 - Consideration of their response.

WHAT DOES A MEANINGFUL CHANCE TO BE HEARD LOOK LIKE?

The ability for those participating in the complaint process to be heard supports administrative fairness. It also allows for meaningful self-advocacy. This can look like ensuring that those participating understand their role, are invited to share concerns and evidence, and are clear on what they can expect at the conclusion of the process.

3 Ensure person-focused processes that are informed by equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging

With the Province's commitment to reconciliation and anti-discrimination, it is critical that your complaint resolution processes are informed by a commitment to intersectional approaches to anti-oppression and non-discrimination. You must ensure your processes uphold the human rights of all tenants as prescribed under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the BC Human Rights Code, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Cultural safety and trauma/strengths-informed approaches should be woven into all processes, to include:

- ▶ Informing people of their rights.
- ▶ Respecting, hearing, and considering the voices and perspectives of tenants in resolutions.
- ▶ Actively listening.
- ▶ Integrating cultural safety and trauma/strengths-informed approaches.
- ▶ Being flexible and responsive to individual needs.
- ▶ Acknowledging that all participants arrive with their own bias.

4 Ensure an approach that reflects the principles of reconciliation

With the Province's commitment to reconciliation as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action, and the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, providers should consider the following:

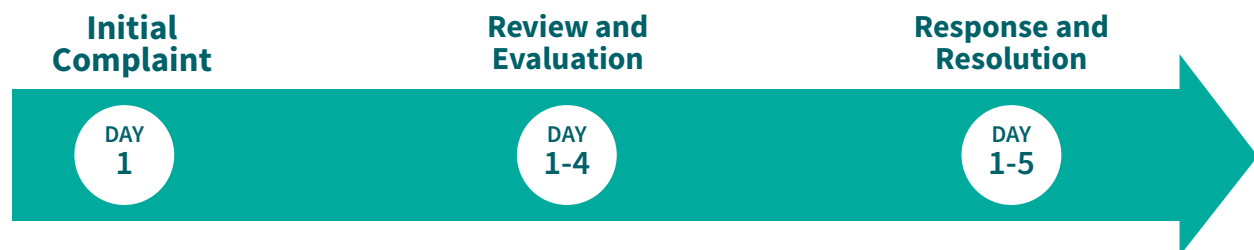
- ▶ Ensure culturally appropriate supports and protocols for Indigenous (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) Peoples.
- ▶ Access to community supports (e.g., ones' First Nation/community, Aboriginal Friendship Centers, etc).
- ▶ Access to culturally appropriate resolution practices (e.g., healing circle, reclamation etc.).
- ▶ Access to support lines and Indigenous advocacy supports.
- ▶ Knowledge and/or responsive/aware of Indigenous protocols.

5 Create a responsive complaint process

Responsiveness demonstrates your commitment to maintaining or improving relationships with tenants. Your complaint resolution process and employee training should:

- ▶ Empower staff to respond to complaints quickly, non-judgmentally, and respectfully.
- ▶ Promptly acknowledge each complaint.
- ▶ Set a timeframe for responding to complaints, if possible.
- ▶ Keep people informed of the progress of their complaint, within privacy constraints.

EXAMPLE TIMELINE



6 Maintain confidentiality and privacy

Complaint processes must ensure confidentiality and comply with privacy legislation. Providers should:

- ▶ Implement practices to protect privacy and maintain confidentiality.
- ▶ Provide training for staff on handling complaints in compliance with privacy legislation.

TRAINING

How will you ensure that your staff understand and are confident about their role in resolving complaints? Do staff understand their role in applying the policy with administrative fairness? Does your training include trauma-informed and culturally safe approaches to complaint resolution?

DEVELOP YOUR COMPLAINT RESOLUTION POLICY

Complaint resolution processes are intended to support your organization in responding to complaints and improving consistency and fairness in practice. If changes to an existing complaint resolution process are being considered, the best practice is to involve staff and tenants in the review.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of items to consider when developing your complaint resolution processes.

Including tenants and people with lived experience in policy development can help shift understanding of the problems and possible solutions.

▶ **Define complaints**

Be clear and transparent about what complaints will be considered, so that tenants are treated consistently. The definition of a complaint can be broad, to ensure you continue to hear the range of concerns. As a best practice, it is recommended that you include what complaints can be addressed within your complaint resolution process and what complaints cannot be addressed in this process.

▶ **Set a timeframe for the complaint resolution process**

Complaint resolution processes should identify realistic timeframes to set expectations and inform complainants of how long they can expect the process to take. This ensures the process is responsive.

▶ **Identify complaint resolutions**

Complaint resolution processes can provide examples of possible resolutions you may consider in resolving a complaint. Appropriate remedies could include issuing an apology or an explanation, repairing service-delivery weaknesses, amending policies or processes, providing staff training, or any other remedies appropriate for your organization.

▶ **Establish an escalation process**

Have a clear escalation process for tenants who are not satisfied with the outcome or resolution of their complaint. Front-line staff are an integral part of this process. They should be empowered to know their role and understand when to escalate a complaint and what the next step of the escalation process looks like. This includes referring the complaint to a manager or senior leader, and to your board of directors if the complainant is still not satisfied. Additionally, this may include referring the complainant to external organizations where appropriate, such as the Residential Tenancy Branch or the BC Human Rights Tribunal, for an independent review of the complaint.

▶ **Document complaints and reporting**

Have a system for documenting, tracking, analyzing, and reporting on complaint outcomes. This information can be used to ensure consistency in complaint handling, identify areas for improvement, and support decision-making about future organizational or program changes.

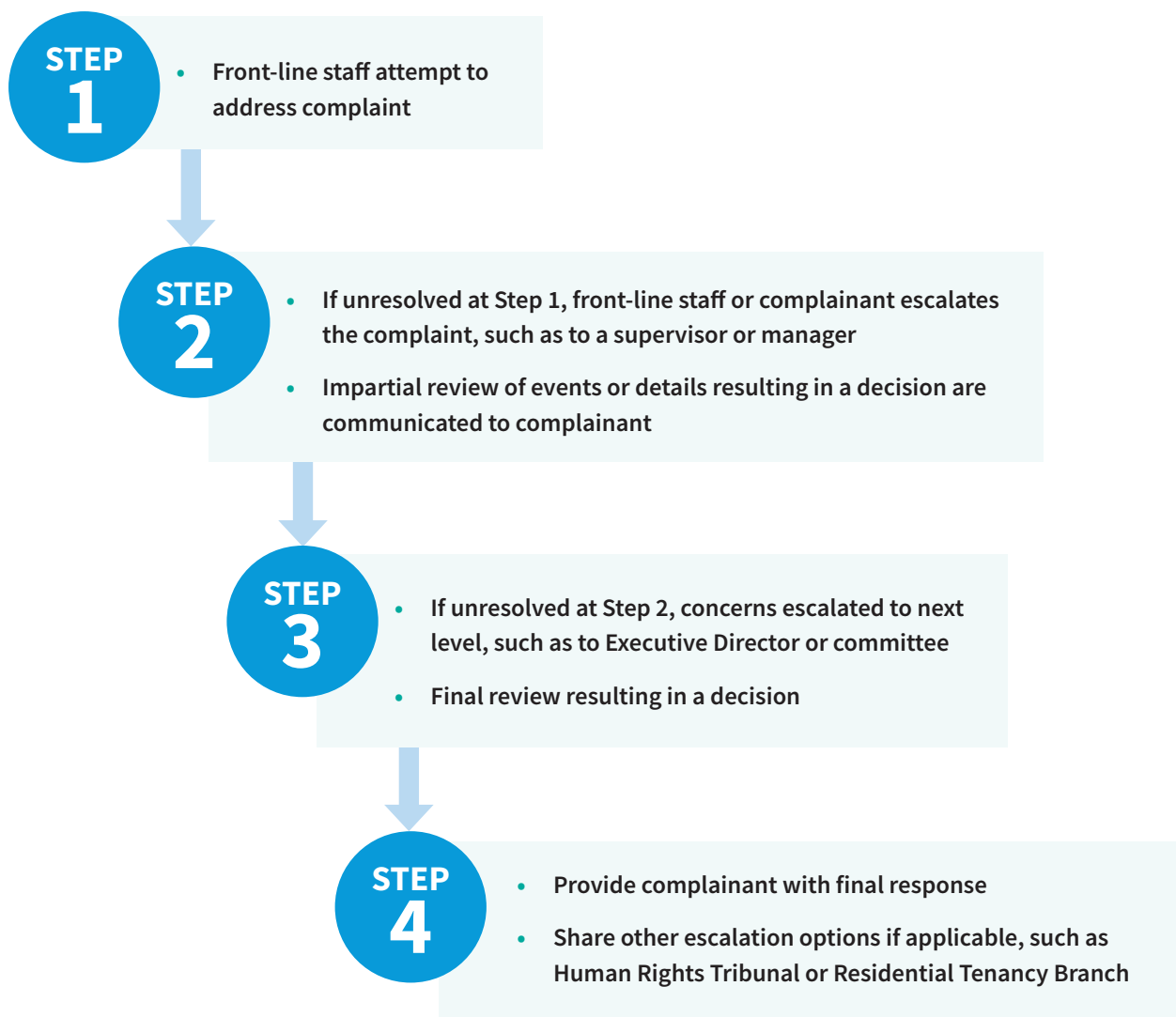
When reviewing complaint policies, providers must appreciate the multifaceted impact you can have on all tenants and staff. It is crucial that complaint policies are informed by a deep understanding of antidiscrimination, and that policies are grounded in cultural awareness. Involving tenants and staff in the creation of complaint policies will help ensure they are effective and sustainable.

WHY DO I NEED A COMPLAINT RESOLUTION PROCESS?

Effective complaint resolution processes are crucial for supporting tenants and staff. By using these guidelines and incorporating the principles of accessibility, fairness, equity, responsiveness, confidentiality, you can enhance your complaint resolution processes and contribute to better outcomes for tenants and staff.

Create A Complaint Process Flow Chart

Complaint resolution processes should be sufficiently accessible and transparent to all impacted people. You should make sure that complainants know what to expect when they make a complaint.



Review The Complaints Process Self-Assessment Checklist

This checklist provides a quick reference to conduct a self-assessment of your current complaint resolution process and identify areas for improvement.

1. Do we foster an organizational culture that welcomes complaints?

- Do leaders view complaints as a valuable source of feedback/opportunity to improve?
- Do we make it easy for people to raise concerns?
- Do we act on issues identified through complaints?
- Do we support staff who are the subject of a complaint?

2. Do we have an adequate complaints resolution policy and procedure?

- Does our policy include a definition of a complaint?
- Does our process encourage early resolution of complaints?
- Do we guide staff on acknowledging and responding to complaints, including standard timelines?
- Do staff have procedures on complaints that can be resolved informally vs those requiring escalation/investigation?
- Do our procedures describe our standards for investigating complaints?

3. Is our complaints resolution process accessible and responsive?

- Is our complaints resolution process available to the public, including contact information?
- Do we accept complaints in several formats (e.g., phone, email, in person)?
- Do we have systems to help more vulnerable people make a complaint?
- Have we addressed and removed any barriers to making a complaint?
- Are staff aware of their authority to resolve complaints informally?
- Do we ensure timeliness and keep people informed on progress of the complaint?

4. Is our complaints resolution process fair and person-focused?

- Are complaints reviewed by unbiased staff (not involved in the original complaint)?
- Can complainants submit more information and comment before the review is closed?
- Do we provide clear reasons for decisions after reviewing a complaint, including the issues and information considered, the conclusions drawn, and any resolutions?
- Do we tell complainants of their escalation options?
- Do we ensure complainant privacy and confidentiality?
- Are we trauma-informed in how we respond to complaints?

5. Do we adequately support our staff who respond to complaints?

- Does our recruitment process attract staff skilled in complaint resolution?
- Do we provide training in effective communication and conflict resolution?
- Does our complaint policy guide staff on dealing with unreasonable conduct?
- Do we debrief with staff who are dealing with challenging complaints?

6. Do we adequately document and learn from complaints?

- Do we have a system for documenting, analyzing and reporting on complaint outcomes?
- Do we report to our board the number of complaints and resolutions?
- Do we identify trends and address systemic issues?
- Do we acknowledge improvements identified through complaints?

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- **Complaint Handling Guide:**
bcombudsperson.ca/guide/complaint-handling-guide/
- **Model Complaints Policy:**
bcombudsperson.ca/assets/media/Quick-Tips-Model-ComplaintsPolicy.pdf
- **Effective Communication:**
bcombudsperson.ca/assets/media/Quick-Tips-Effective-Communication-1.pdf
- **Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act:**
www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/indigenous-people/new-relationship/united-nationsdeclaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples
- **UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:**
www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf