



Board Management Response

Housing Ombudsman Code. 30th June 2024.

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BOARD RESPONSE

Pam Bhamra, Board Chair at Populo Homes has said

The Populo Living Group has nearly doubled in size over the last year which has been great in terms of delivering much needed new homes for Newham residents. Serving the needs of twice as many residents has been challenging for the customer services team. **Sometimes things haven't reached the standards we'd like especially on speed and efficiency of our responses. We have put them right, reviewed and improved the approach learning from other best practice in the sector in parallel.** This year's Housing Ombudsman's self-assessment has acted as a good opportunity not only to assess the effectiveness of our own complaints management systems, but also identify new ways of improving our broader services to meet the high standards expected by our residents.

This year, I have taken on the role as **Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC)** on our Populo Homes Board. I will lead the board on ensuring that Populo maintains a positive culture of complaints handling, regularly reviewing and monitoring our complaints handling processes, and enabling the necessary cross-organisational and cross-departmental collaboration to ensure improved service provision.

With the implementation of the revised Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code in April 2024, we have made great efforts to review and update our complaints handling policies, processes and procedures, and responding to the invaluable feedback that we have received from our residents following the reception of our Tenant Satisfaction Measurers.

As a result, we have undertaken the following actions, and cross-referenced our self-assessment against Populo's complaints handling in practice, to ensure that Populo maintains a robust and highly satisfactory complaints management service

- The Populo Homes Board can confirm that they have received and reviewed the annual complaint performance and service improvement report, and self-assessment. Following their review and challenge, they can confirm that they are satisfied with the contents of the reports.
- Populo introduced a new Complaints Monitoring and Learning Group, which provides critical oversight over the management and handling of complaints raised by the Populo Homes residents about our services and/or staff and contract. The group, comprising of lead officers, senior managers and the Member Responsible for Complaints use this opportunity to monitor and scrutinise complaints to identify areas of improvement in specific complaint scenarios, or identify any service gaps, and share, where necessary lessons learned on how to address similar complaints. Lessons learned and steps for improvement are then reported to the Populo Homes Board on a bi-monthly basis.
- The Board have continued to receive bi-monthly customer service reports detailing complaints handling, the volume, nature and handling of complaints, and in turn the actions that we have taken to improve the service area where relevant.

- In March 2023, our complaints handling processes underwent additional scrutiny from our internal auditors, which provided assurance on the performance and handling of complaints in alignment with best practice and issued recommendations for improvement on our complaints handling. We are happy to announce that these recommendations have been implemented and will be subject to review in quarter 3 2024/2025

As a result of the review of our practice and policies against the new updated 'Code', we have identified a number of issues as part of our review and have already begun to take steps to address these issues as we head into the new reporting period for complaints handling.

The issues identified include:

Better Communication with Residents:

From previous Tenant Satisfaction Measures, and feedback we sought on via our complaint closure letters and surveys, residents would like better and more responsive communications. The evidence is that some of these issues are temporary with many residents moving in at once, and other complaints about expanding capacity and improving processes. Since our previous TSMs, Populo have reviewed and implemented new templates enabling standardisation and thus speedier more consistent responses, with automated prompts lowering risks of issues being missed for a time.

Growing Demand for Customer Services:

Whilst we remain incredibly proud of the work of our customer services team, the evolving landscape of which our customer services team work within and its demands, have led to increased challenges around capacity and completing work/time at the high standard that we strive for. As we now reach a period of greater stabilisation, and with an increase of staff within our customer service team, we have begun to act on creating clearer expectations of lines

of responsibility on our staff to ensure greater accountability over delivering against complaints KPIs. Additionally, our Health and Safety Working Groups are now in full swing, creating clearer cross-departmental relationships to ensure that typical complaints around repairs and maintenance can be mitigated before they arise, and ensuring that resident's complaints do not fall through the gaps of not being addressed.

Better Expectation Setting:

We identified that it was imperative that appropriate expectations were set from the offset and maintained through the resident/landlord relationship to maintain trust in the services that Populo provides, mitigate complaints being raised, and when arising, trust that complaints will be suitably handled. As such, the customer service team have undergone a significant review and improvement process on its internal templates, policies, procedures and training (i.e. complaint case reviews) to ensure that all Populo staff are clearer on their expectations to residents. This has also included ensuring that Populo staff are clearer of the need to set reasonable expectations and keep them going forward. We have also updated our policies and customer standards which will be shared with our residents to provide greater clarity around the processes surrounding what they should expect from Populo as a landlord, making a complaint where we miss the mark, and their rights.

We have found the self-assessment a useful tool and have begun rolling out new initiatives to improve complaints handling services as above.

Forming the Residents Engagement Forum:

The creation of these groups provides an opportunity for residents to present feedback on the provision of Populo's broader housing management services, and suggestions on how we can improve said systems. Where relevant, this feedback will also feed into the design of the next set of homes in our pipeline, e.g. where improved design can aid better security. Responses will be shared with our Populo Homes Board, allowing our residents to have the critical opportunity to directly impact feedback into the strategic decision making on the delivery of our complaints management services.

Introducing Co-Design Workshops:

For any changes to Populo's service provision, including complaints management, Populo will introduce new consultation processes allowing Populo residents to have their say on what changes need to be made to new policies and procedures, submit new proposals for improvement on our complaints management services, and in turn co-design complaint management services that address and suit the needs of the residents that Populo seek to serve.

Piloting our first Resident Strategy Groups:

The best way to prevent complaints, is to address issues before the complaint needs to be raised. This year we will be introducing a new pilot for the creation of scheme sized Resident Strategy Groups (RSGs). Here RSGs will act as scheme sized forums for residents to feedback on the scheme level issues that arise and suggest improvements on scheme maintenance and management. These forums will allow the groups to form their own terms of reference, and will be guided by Populo Head of Housing & Customer Services, housing officers, or property managers who will facilitate the discussion around identifying the improvement of services to the management of the block, thus aiming to close the gap of communication between residents and the Populo customer services team, and addressing issues within properties before needing to be raised as complaints.

Populo are looking forward to taking forward the lessons learned from the self-assessment and reporting on our aspiring successes for our new initiatives in the future.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Pam Bhamra', written on a white background.

Pam Bhamra
Populo Homes Board (Member Responsible for Complaints)



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