

Scottish Parliament Region: North East Scotland

Case 200503292: Hillcrest Housing Association Ltd

Summary of Investigation

Category

Housing: Repairs and maintenance

Overview

The complainant raised concerns that she repeatedly had to report problems with her property to Hillcrest Housing Association (the Association) before they were dealt with. She complained that she experienced long delays before necessary repairs were carried out.

Specific complaint and conclusion

Ms C repeatedly had to report the same problems before they were addressed by the Association and she experienced long delays before repairs were carried out (*partially upheld*).

Redress and recommendations

The Ombudsman recommends that the Association:

- (i) train relevant employees to raise awareness of target times and of the importance of acting within the specified times;
- (ii) take steps to identify why time targets are not being met; and
- (iii) make a payment of £150 to Ms C in recognition of her time and trouble in making this complaint.

The Association have accepted the recommendations and will act on them accordingly.

Main Investigation Report

Introduction

1. On 1 March 2006 the Ombudsman received a complaint from a woman (referred to in this report as Ms C) that she repeatedly had to report problems with her property to Hillcrest Housing Association (the Association) before they were dealt with. Following problems in the Association's previous accommodation, Ms C was transferred into her current property. The Association were to send a contractor (Contractor 1) to disconnect Ms C's white goods but they failed to attend on the pre-arranged day. The Association also assured Ms C that specific work would be carried out on the flat before she moved in, including laying laminate flooring and installing blinds. There were delays in installing the blinds and flooring. Furthermore, the flooring was poorly fitted and the beading did not match the floor. Ms C also had problems with her central heating and there were delays in fixing it.

2. Ms C complained to the Association on 23 October 2005, and a reply was sent on 4 November 2005. They accepted that further work was required on the floor and that correct instructions about moving the white goods had not been given to the contractor. They also offered Ms C compensation for the wait she suffered in relation to the blinds and the central heating. Ms C answered this letter to tell the Association that her central heating was still not fixed and that she expected compensation for her flooring. An acceptable amount was agreed on 25 January 2006. Frustrated by the delays and poor workmanship she had experienced, Ms C agreed to accept the condition of the flooring as it was.

3. On 1 February 2006 Ms C asked that her complaint be progressed to the next stage of the procedure. Rather than pursuing complaints about specific incidents of delay, Ms C was thoroughly frustrated by the delays which she had generally experienced throughout her tenancy with the Association in both properties. The Chief Executive replied to inform her that he deemed it inappropriate to progress the complaint to the next stage as she had been compensated for the delays and had accepted this compensation. He referred Ms C to the Ombudsman and she wrote to this Office on 1 March 2006.

4. The complaint from Ms C which I have investigated is that Ms C repeatedly had to report the same problems before they were addressed by the Association and that Ms C experienced long delays before repairs were carried out.

Investigation

5. The investigation was based on information provided by Ms C and by the Association, on the correspondence between Ms C and the Association regarding the complaint and on the Association's complaint file on this matter. Ms C additionally provided comments in response to the draft of this report. I have not included in this report every detail investigated but I am satisfied that no matter of significance has been overlooked. Both Ms C and the Association have been given the opportunity to comment on a draft of this report.

Complaint: Ms C had to repeatedly report problems before they were addressed by the Association and experienced delays before the necessary repairs were carried out

6. This investigation is about the problems and repairs which arose in Ms C's current accommodation. I have, however, noted that the problems suffered by Ms C in her previous accommodation were similar to the current ones. They involved delays in responding to Ms C and in resolving the problems which she raised. These matters were resolved by paying compensation to Ms C during the course of her previous tenancy. In a letter to Ms C, the Housing Manager (Officer 1) acknowledged the Association's poor communication and wrote on 22 October 2004:

'I would apologise for this and advise you that in future we will strive to meet the promises made in our Services Standards leaflet.'

7. In another letter to Ms C about these matters, the Director of Housing Services (Officer 2) formally advised her that the Association accepted that there had been shortcomings in their response to matters raised throughout her tenancy.

8. Ms C moved into her new flat on 22 August 2005. Contractor 1 did not attend to disconnect Ms C's white goods. Ms C stated that she spoke to Contractor 1 and they told her that they had never been instructed by the Association to carry out this work. She told me that she had to negotiate with her removal firm in order to convince them to carry out this work. In a letter to Ms C, the Association

acknowledged that they failed to give the necessary detailed instructions to Contractor 1 to attend and took responsibility for them not turning up. They also apologised for the inconvenience and stress caused to Ms C.

9. The contractor who was to lay the flooring (Contractor 2) and was due to start on 15 August 2005 delayed starting work. He then left due to a disagreement with Ms C about the fact that he did not turn up at the agreed times to carry out the work and also that he had purchased the wrong type of beading. The Association accepts that Contractor 2 failed to attend on the agreed dates and that the beading did not match the flooring. Fortunately, an alternative contractor was found; however, he did not complete the work.

10. The blinds were fitted late due to low quality blinds originally being purchased – these were subsequently replaced. Ms C also reported problems with television reception but there were delays in rectifying this as the Association had provided the wrong telephone number to the contractor.

11. Ms C reported problems with her central heating on 15 October 2005 and the Association arranged for a contractor to carry out the necessary work. The problems were resolved on 3 November 2005.

12. The Association was prepared to carry out the necessary repairs to the flooring in early January 2006, however, Ms C was unwilling to allow the parts of the floor, which were due to be replaced, to be uplifted in order to be matched. She also refused to allow the original contractor to access her flat. Ms C suggested to the Association that she would rather receive compensation than have the work finished. The Association offered Ms C compensation for the delay and trouble this problem had caused her.

13. In response to the draft of this report, Ms C gave me further examples of the problems which she experienced in her dealings with Hillcrest. She stated that she had to repeatedly contact the Association about the work which was carried out on the laminate flooring. A number of letters which she sent on this subject were included in the documentation provided to me by the Association. Ms C explained that the contractor and the Association were inefficient in obtaining the correct laminate flooring and that inaccurate information relating to this and to the dates for

completion of this work were given to her by officers of the Association. While I have not investigated this, I believe that the issue would be addressed by the recommendations below.

Conclusion

14. There is no evidence to suggest that, in her current property, Ms C had to repeatedly report problems to the Association before they were acknowledged. It appears, however, that the delays occurred whilst she was waiting for the repairs to be carried out or finished. At this stage, and especially with regard to the laminate flooring, Ms C wrote to, visited and telephoned the Association on a number of occasions to find out when work would be completed. She should not have had to do this.

15. Ms C was compensated £57 for the two week delay in installing the blinds. It took 19 days to repair the central heating; Ms C was awarded £69 compensation for this delay. There was a lengthy delay in installing the laminate flooring in the flat. It was due to be laid by 19 August 2005, in time for Ms C moving into the property. Five months later, in January 2006, the floor had still not been finished. Ms C was paid £200 compensation and agreed to accept the condition of the floor as it was.

16. The Association have accepted that the delays experienced by Ms C exceeded the timescales specified in their services standards. They have apologised to Ms C for these delays and have paid compensation to her based on their policy. Whilst I commend the Association for this action, it would appear, based on Ms C's experience, that there have been systemic delays in carrying out repairs during her tenancy. The shortcomings in the Association's responses were acknowledged by the Chief Executive with reference to Ms C's experience in her previous property. It would not, however, appear that anything has been done to improve this situation. I, therefore, partially uphold this complaint.

Recommendation

17. The Association have targets in place for carrying out repairs and these are publicised in their services standards; the Association should be able to deliver these standards. The Ombudsman recommends that relevant employees are given training to raise awareness of the time targets and to remind them of the

importance of meeting them from a service quality point of view. The Association should also take steps internally to identify why targets are not being met and whether this is due to resources, staffing or contractors.

18. While the compensation already received by Ms C is welcomed, this was based on the delay experienced and does not involve an element for time and trouble. In recognition of her time and trouble in bringing this complaint to the Association and to this office, the Ombudsman recommends an additional payment of £150.

19. The Board have accepted the recommendations and will act on them accordingly. The Ombudsman asks that the Board to notify her when the recommendations have been implemented.

31 October 2006

Explanation of abbreviations used

Ms C	The complainant
The Association	Hillcrest Housing Association
Officer 1	The Housing Manager
Officer 2	The Director of Housing Services
Contractor 1	The contractor who was supposed to disconnect Ms C's white goods.
Contractor 2	A contractor who was instructed to fit Ms C's laminate floor.