



Our Code of Practice on Complaints





This voluntary code applies to all customers of the Valuation Office Agency (VOA). It is supported by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs' Code of Practice on complaints.

It does not apply:

- ✓ to organisations where there is a separate service partnership agreement or contract in place
- ✓ where the valuation service has been provided under contract from another organisation, such as a local authority or housing association. In such circumstances, we will direct you to their complaints procedure.

If an agent or representative is making a complaint on your behalf, we may need a letter of authority from you before we will investigate that complaint.

Our commitment to you and your responsibilities

We aim in the VOA to provide a high standard of service and to deliver it in a way that helps build your confidence in us and the way we carry out our business. Our code is supported by the HMRC Charter and our own Service Standards Document which can be found on our website www.voa.gov.uk.

If you have a complaint it is best that you set it out in writing, to avoid any misunderstanding, and send it by letter or email. If this is not possible then you can contact us by telephone.

We will investigate complaints about unreasonable delay, poor handling of your case, inappropriate conduct and other aspects of our service.

We do not normally look into valuation matters, such as council tax banding decisions, rating assessments or a Rent Officer's determination. Our complaints procedure is for complaints about the standard of our service and is not an opportunity to appeal against the outcome.

We will not consider complaints where the valuation has been provided under contract with another organisation.

In dealing with a complaint, we do not expect our staff to tolerate behaviour by customers which is clearly unacceptable (e.g. abusive, offensive or threatening) and may take action to protect our staff from that behaviour.

We expect you to take all reasonable steps to minimise or mitigate the effect of any errors:

- ✓ by checking carefully any factual information that we provide you about your property;
- ✓ by contacting us promptly where you believe the information we have is inaccurate; and
- ✓ by acting promptly if you believe our decision is wrong so that you can formally challenge it where the law allows.

However, we need your help to maintain our high standards and we welcome your comments, whether they are suggestions, compliments or complaints, so we can continue to improve.

We want to work with you

If you have any concerns regarding the way we have dealt with your affairs, please contact the person you have been dealing with. We know most of these initial concerns can be resolved this way without the need to make a complaint.

If you do wish to complain, the next section sets out what you can expect from us and gives guidance on how to make a complaint.

Our standards for handling your complaint

We will:

- ✓ acknowledge receipt of your complaint within 3 working days
- ✓ provide you with a point of contact throughout the course of the complaint
- ✓ deal with most complaints within 20 working days (However, in complex cases we may take longer if we need to carry out further research or if we are experiencing high volumes of work)
- ✓ let you know if we will be unable to provide a full reply within 20 working days and keep you informed of progress
- ✓ treat your complaint seriously and keep it confidential
- ✓ deal with your concerns in an impartial, professional and courteous way
- ✓ avoid jargon
- ✓ get our facts right
- ✓ not discriminate against you on the grounds of colour, race, religion, nationality, age, gender, sexuality, disability or any other unlawful reason.

We will also tell you if we cannot resolve your complaint because we no longer hold records on the matter.

How to complain – our complaints procedure

There are two tiers to the VOA's internal complaints procedure:

Tier One: A Customer Service Manager will deal with your complaint at the first tier. You can find out how to contact the relevant Customer Service Manager on our website or from details on the back of the hard copy leaflet. The Customer Service Manager will either investigate the issue you have raised and send you a reply, or arrange for someone else to do this.

Tier Two: If you are unhappy with the final reply you receive from tier one, you can contact the Customer Service Team at our Head Office. The Customer Service Team's address is:

**Customer Service Team
Valuation Office Agency
3rd Floor, Wingate House
93 – 107 Shaftesbury Avenue
London W1D 5BU**

Telephone: 0300 050 0471

Fax: 0300 050 0690

Email: customerservices@voa.gsi.gov.uk

The next step

If you are dissatisfied with the final response from the Customer Service Team, you can write to the Adjudicator's Office to ask for the matter to be investigated. The Adjudicator is a fair and unbiased referee whose recommendations are independent and free of charge. You can contact the Adjudicator at:

**Adjudicator's Office
Eighth Floor, Euston Tower
286 Euston Road
London NW1 3US**

Telephone: 0300 057 1111

Fax: 0300 057 1212

For more information ask for booklet AO1 or visit the website at www.adjudicatorsoffice.gov.uk

You can, at any time, ask your Member of Parliament (MP) to take up your case with us. You may also ask an MP to refer your case to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman for investigation. The Ombudsman will normally expect you to have had your complaint considered by the Customer Service Team and the Adjudicator. The Ombudsman is independent of Government. Their service is free of charge.

For more information about the Ombudsman's services please contact:

**Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman
Millbank Tower
Millbank
London SW1P 4QP**

Telephone: 0345 015 4033

Fax: 0300 061 4000

Email: phso.enquiries@ombudsman.org.uk

You can visit the Ombudsman's website at www.ombudsman.org.uk

Putting things right

After we have investigated your complaint we will:

- ✓ contact you, usually by letter or email, but by telephone if you prefer
- ✓ say sorry where appropriate
- ✓ explain what went wrong and why
- ✓ correct the mistake as far as the law allows
- ✓ tell you what steps we will take towards preventing the mistake from happening again
- ✓ identify areas where we can improve our service.

Your costs

We will not reimburse your normal costs of dealing with the VOA (which includes making a formal challenge, or 'proposal', against a rating or council tax assessment, making a request for a Housing Benefit redetermination or challenging a registration of Fair Rent). So, for example, costs of your travel to a tribunal hearing and/or your representative's fees would not be reimbursed.

We will not consider claims for losses that have not been incurred as a direct result of our shortcomings, for instance, compensation for interest on council tax refunds or unsubstantiated or notional loss of earnings.

Before we consider any claims for costs we expect you to have taken reasonable steps to minimise any losses, including having formally challenged any valuation or banding within any relevant legal time limits. If you do not do so and incur avoidable or excessive costs, we will only reimburse what we would consider to be reasonable.

Costs we might consider paying could include postage, telephone calls, travelling costs and other reasonable actual out of pocket expenses directly and unavoidably incurred as a result of our mistake or unreasonable delay.

We may need to see evidence of your costs, or ask you for more information, which may include receipts and receipted invoices

Worry and distress

On occasions we may accept that our mistakes or delays might have caused you a great deal of inconvenience or irritation. In exceptional circumstances we may be able to make an additional token payment to acknowledge and apologise for this.

Poor complaint handling

If we handle your complaint poorly, or take an unreasonable time to deal with it, we may make a token payment.

Some questions you often ask

- Q I've had my council tax band changed. Does this mean you made a mistake?
- A *Generally, no. We will need to investigate the reasons behind the change.*
- Q Do I still have to pay any outstanding council tax or rates while you are looking at my complaint?
- A *Yes, any outstanding sums should be paid to the relevant council.*
- Q Will you pay me compensation because my neighbour's home is, or was, in a different council tax band from mine?
- A *No, because we will only consider your own council tax affairs.*
- Q Will you pay me compensation because the rateable value placed on an identical shop to mine in my parade is, or was, lower than the rateable value on my shop?
- A *No, because we will only consider your own rating affairs.*
- Q My Fair Rent has been increased as a result of my objection to the Rent Assessment Committee (RAC). Is their decision backdated and can I claim the shortfall due to the Rent Officer's mistake?
- A *The RAC decision takes effect from the date of their decision notice to you. It is not backdated. We do not generally believe that this is evidence of a Rent Officer error, it is a difference of opinion and the amount registered by the Rent Officer is payable from the original effective date until the date notified to you by the RAC.*
- Q The Housing Benefit I have been awarded is less than I was expecting and I believe the Rent Officer's determination is too low. Can the valuation be looked at again?

A *Yes, but there are time limits on how long you have to appeal. You should refer to your decision notice for details and contact your Local Authority Housing Benefit department without delay and request a redetermination. The Housing Benefit department can then ask for a redetermination of the Rent Officer's determination on your behalf.*

Q How can I find out the Local Housing Allowance for my area?

A *Your Local Authority Housing Benefit Office will have lists of the rates. This list is also available on the LHADirect site at www.directgov.uk*

Q I made an application to the Rent Officer to review my Fair Rent over a month ago but have heard nothing, how long does it take to register a fair rent?

A *You should contact our helpdesk without delay to check we have received your application. We always acknowledge applications within 14 days of receipt. We aim to register rents within 40 working days from the date of receipt.*

Q I am unhappy with the valuation that DVS has provided in connection with my property. What can I do?

A *DVS is the arm of the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) which provides professional property advice to other public sector bodies on a range of non-taxation issues, such as compulsory acquisition, disposals, rent reviews and shared ownership. The public sector bodies for which DVS acts are our clients. If you are unhappy with the way in which we have handled your case, we will liaise with our client, and in some circumstances may ask that you contact our client directly with your concerns. In the absence of agreement on the valuation of your property you may, in certain types of case, have the right to refer the matter to the independent Upper Tribunal (Lands Chamber) for a decision.*

Q Are compensation payments taxable?

A *No, and you do not have to include them in any return to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.*





INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

VO 9710 (08/11)

This booklet is published by the Valuation Office Agency

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