



Our Customer Charter

and

Complaints Policy

Chairman's Introduction

Our Vision

We will continue to enhance the end-to-end experience of Valuation Tribunal users by focussing on their needs.

This charter sets out the standards of service we aim to provide and explains how you can let us know when you are not happy with the service that you receive.

We know that most people who contact our offices or attend a tribunal hearing for the first time are unsure about what to expect. We aim to reduce any concerns you might have by giving you a helpful, polite and professional service.

You will find more advice in our guidance leaflets which you can:

- download from our website; or
- request from the office shown on the next page of this charter.

Your opinion matters to us, and we will take every opportunity to improve the quality of our service to you. If you are happy or unhappy with our standards of service, we would like to hear from you.

Anne Galbraith CBE
VTS Chairman

How to contact us

On our website, click on the tab 'Where to find us', for details of your local office.

Our Head Office is:

Valuation Tribunal Service
Chief Executive's Office
2nd Floor, Black Lion House,
45 Whitechapel Road,
London E1 1DU.

Phone: 020 7426 3900
Email: ceo.office@vto.gsx.gov.uk

Our aims, standards and targets

We aim to:

- be polite, friendly, approachable and professional;
- ask for your views and listen to you;
- provide straightforward information about our services;
- correct things promptly when they are wrong, and learn from complaints that are made about us;
- promote equality and fair treatment;
- seek continuously to improve our services;
- respond promptly to calls, letters, queries and emails;
- use plain English;
- deal with complaints promptly and guarantee a full investigation and a considered response in line with our complaints policy;
- list appeals for hearing as quickly as possible;
- contact everyone who is representing themselves in a council tax appeal to explain the process and answer any questions;
- arrange suitable, local hearing venues that are accessible to all;
- greet everyone who is involved in a case before the hearing starts and explain what will happen during the hearing;
- deal with as many cases as possible during each day, offering appointment times where we can do so helpfully;
- send written Tribunal decisions out promptly.

If we don't do what we say in this charter please tell us.

Service for all

We aim to provide services and premises that are accessible to every customer. We also aim to treat everyone fairly. No-one making an appeal should receive less favourable treatment because of their race, colour, nationality, age, religion, ethnic origin, sex, sexuality, marital status or disability.

We are able to provide the following when requested:

- information in large print, in Braille and on audio CD;
- translations of our leaflets into Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Gujarati, Polish, Punjabi, Urdu and Vietnamese;
- a hearing venue that meets your special needs;
- any equipment that is necessary to hear your appeal;
- an interpreter; or
- someone to help you communicate at the hearing, for example a signer.

Contacting us

You can phone or visit our offices between 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. Outside of these hours, and if staff are not available, there will be an answer phone service for you to leave a message.

We will answer phone calls within five rings, politely, giving our name and the name of our organisation.

We will respond to any phone message by the next working day.

We will reply to any email within three working days.

We will acknowledge or reply fully to any letter within three working days.

We can provide general information on tribunal procedures, but we cannot give you legal advice or tell you how to present your case. Also, we cannot say if your case is likely to succeed, or tell you what the tribunal will decide.

Our documents

We will aim to use plain English in all our correspondence and notices. All our guidance leaflets will be written in plain English and carry the Plain English Campaign 'Crystal Mark'.

Our expectations of you

To help us to improve the service we provide and to deal with your query or complaint efficiently please

- give us the information we need to help you; and
- treat our staff appropriately and with respect.

If you have already made an appeal, you can help by giving us the appeal number that appears on our letters and notices when you contact us in writing or by phone.

When you make an appeal

We will send you an acknowledgement within 10 days of receiving your appeal, so you know we have registered it. This will be by notice and will be sent with a guidance leaflet. For those appellants representing themselves in a council tax appeal, we will also contact you by phone, to explain the process and answer any questions you may have. (All other appellants may of course contact us for advice at any time).

We will list your appeal for hearing as soon as we can. We will group appeals together in a sensible way, which may cause some delay, but, for the main types of appeals, **these are our targets:**

- We will list council tax valuation (banding) appeals within five months of receiving them.
- We will list council tax invalidity notice appeals within five months of receiving them.
- We will list council tax liability appeals within six months of receiving them.
- Completion notice appeals will be listed within six months of receiving them.
- Non-domestic rating appeals will be listed within 10 weeks of the target date (set by the Valuation Office Agency).

We will aim to give you six weeks' notice of the date of your hearing and enclose a copy of a guidance leaflet.

For appellants who are representing themselves at a hearing, we will either phone you or send you a letter before the hearing, asking you:

- to let us know if you are still coming to the hearing;
- if you would like a map showing how to get to the place where we are holding the hearing. This will give you details about any links with public transport, any car parks near to the venue and any other facilities that we are aware of that the hearing venue offers; or if you need any general advice about what happens at a tribunal hearing.

We do not send guidance literature or this letter to main rating agents as they use our service frequently, and communication with them is through the active case management process leading up to a hearing.

Before the date of your hearing, you can come to any of our hearings. Lists of our hearings are on our website, (click on the Listings & Decisions tab) and can be seen at our offices. We cancel hearings if all of the cases have been settled, so you should contact us the day before the hearing to check that it is still going to take place.

When you come to the hearing, you will find:

- polite and helpful staff who will be wearing name badges so that you may identify them; and
- clear signs to help you find your way around.

You can help us by arriving in good time for your hearing and letting us know beforehand if you need any special arrangements for access or other facilities.

We display nameplates giving the names of the chairman and panel members at the hearing.

We will try at all times to deal with your case as quickly as possible, but delays can happen, for example, because the case before you takes longer than planned. We aim to deal with as many cases scheduled to be heard during each day and we will tell you as soon as possible if a panel cannot hear your case that day.

We will send a written copy of the panel's decision (and reasons for the decision) within one month of the hearing or contact you to let you why we have been unable to do this and tell you when the decision will be issued. When we send you the written decision, we will enclose a leaflet called 'a guide to our notice of decision'. This leaflet explains how to apply for a review or appeal against the tribunal's decision, and the relevant time limits.

Listening to you

We welcome your comments, compliments and complaints. We pay attention to any feedback and carry out national surveys to improve our service. You can help us and other tribunal users by telling us what you liked about our service and how we can improve.

Complaints

We are committed to providing a quality service and want to get things right, but recognise that sometimes they do go wrong. Wherever possible we will aim to settle complaints quickly and informally at your first point of contact, but we have introduced a formal process if this is not possible.

One of the ways in which we can continue to improve the service we provide is by listening to and responding to the views of our users. If you are not happy with our service, please let us know straight away.

We will:

- make the process of making a complaint as easy as possible;
- treat your complaint seriously, whether it is made in person, by telephone or in writing;
- deal with your complaint promptly and politely;
- respond in a positive manner (for example, with an explanation, or an apology where we have got things wrong, or information on any action taken);
- learn from complaints by using them to improve our service, and publish information on complaints in our annual report.

Please be aware that the Valuation Tribunal Service can only consider complaints about the administration carried out by our offices and our staff. Administrative complaints cover processes before and after a tribunal hearing.

If you want to complain about the administrative process associated with the handling of your appeal, or enquiry, such as delay, lack of response, discourtesy, or the standard of the service we have provided to you, any of our staff will try to sort out your problem immediately.

What can you expect from us?

- We will acknowledge any written complaint within one week of receipt;
- we will investigate and reply fully to your complaint as soon as possible. If we are unable to do this within one month, we will let you know about the delay and the reason for it;
- you will receive a written response in which we will try to deal with all your points of concern and provide a suitable resolution wherever possible;
- if we have made a mistake we will apologise, tell you what went wrong and how the service is being put right;
- we monitor the complaints that we receive. Every complaint is logged and analysed to allow us to improve our service.

How to complain

If you are not happy with our service at the hearing, please tell the clerk, who will try to sort out your complaint there and then.

Or, you can make a complaint about our administration by writing to the office about whose administration you are complaining. They will pass any unresolved complaint to the Operations Manager.

Please mark your envelope or email 'COMPLAINT'.

If you feel that your complaint has not been properly considered or remedied by either the office or the Operations Manager, you can write to:

Mr Antonio Masella MRICS MCIOB IRRV (Hons) AFA, Chief Executive of the Valuation Tribunal Service at:

2nd Floor, Black Lion House,
45 Whitechapel Road,
London E1 1DU.

Or you can email him at tony.masella@vto.gsx.gov.uk.

You will receive an acknowledgement within one week. He will investigate how your complaint has been previously dealt with and will send a full reply within one month. If for some reason this is not possible, he will let you know of any delay.

What if I am still not satisfied?

At any time you can ask your Member of Parliament to refer the matter to the Parliamentary Ombudsman for investigation.

Judicial Complaints

The Valuation Tribunal Service has no role in relation to the conduct of the members of the Tribunal, who hear and decide appeals. Their personal conduct is initially a matter for the President of the Tribunal and ultimately for the Lord Chancellor.

You cannot use the judicial complaints procedure if your complaint is solely about the decision made by the member or reasoning underlying the decision as these are judicial matters and may be the subject of an appeal or an application for judicial review. There is limited scope for a review of a decision by the President on prescribed grounds. (Please contact the office that has been dealing with your case to ask for more information about these procedures.)

However, there is a complaints procedure for use where a member or members of the Tribunal have behaved improperly, for example they have been discourteous, used offensive or inappropriate language or acted despite having a conflict of interest. The following categories are covered:

- the member's personal conduct in and outside the hearing room;
- excessive delay, for example in the delivery of a judgment;
- comments made by a member in the course of proceedings which are not directly integral to the judicial decision or underlying reasoning and which might lower public confidence in the judiciary.

In such cases, you should write to the President at the address below, who will investigate the complaint and, if substantiated, will deal with the matter himself or refer it to the Office for Judicial Complaints for consideration by the Lord Chancellor.

Professor G Zellick QC
President of the Valuation Tribunal for England
President's Office
Black Lion House,
45 Whitechapel Road,
London E1 1DU

Or you can email him at graham.zellick@vto.gsx.gov.uk.

Data Protection and Freedom of Information

The VTS is a data controller under the Data Protection Act. (Our registration number is Z8547449).

We will hold and use information about you and your appeal to carry out our duties and we will only share it as the law allows or requires us to do. Sometimes we may use your information for the purposes of statistical research, but only in a way that will not allow you to be identified. We will not share any information about you or your appeal with any other organisations, unless the law allows us to or we have asked your permission.

We will apply high levels of care and security when using the data you have shared with us.

You have a right to:

- see what information we hold about you; and
- make requests for information that does not come within our Publication Scheme.

You can find out more about this on our website, and from the Information Commissioner's website, www.ico.gov.uk.

If you have a complaint about the way we have used information we hold about you or the way we have dealt with an information request, in the first instance please use the Complaints Procedure described on page 8.

If you remain unhappy with our response, you have the right to complain to the Information Commissioner in writing:

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 4AF