Challenge for Change

Scrutiny Report Customer Complaints

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1. Introduction and Background

1.1 Following approval from the Board of Sheffield Homes, a customer scrutiny panel was established. Recruitment was open to tenants, leaseholders and customers of Sheffield Homes. The Community Engagement team, with independent support and advice from the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS), along with a steering group of tenants, and other customers, successfully recruited 15 scrutineers. The steering group decided that the scrutiny panel should be called 'Challenge for Change'. Throughout this report the scrutiny group will be called C4C.

1.2 The project has been completed with 6 scrutineers including Ian Alexander, Jenny Croft, Elspeth Lusby, Mick Daniels, Linda Moxon and Michelle Cook.

1.3 In this report, we have outlined our methods of investigation, detailed our findings from reality checks, document analysis and made recommendations for the board to consider as possible improvements to complaints handling and customer service delivery.

1.4 Kate Newbolt of TPAS presented at the inaugural meeting, an overview of scrutiny projects to C4C and to Chief Executive Peter Morton and Councillor Harry Harpham. The presentation outlined the basis for tenant led scrutiny and the tasks that would be required for a successful project. Kate also offered indicators in her presentation of what service areas of social housing landlords made for good and bad first scrutiny projects.

1.5 The purpose of the project was to examine the customer service delivery of Sheffield Homes in relation to the level of customer satisfaction of complaints handling and to review whether this meets their expectations.

2. Project Start-Up

2.1 Much thought and discussion was held before the group decided which area of the business should be scrutinised. Consideration was given to several operational areas of Sheffield Homes before deciding to select complaints as the first scrutiny exercise. C4C selected the topic for a number of reasons:

- Sheffield Homes were already carrying out an internal review of their complaints procedure
- complaints cover every aspect of the business
- every customer may have a complaint at some time
- satisfaction levels around complaints handling were fairly low
- the number of complaints received by Sheffield Homes is high compared to other similar social housing landlords

2.2 At the start of the project, C4C held an initial workshop day facilitated by Tom Strong and Louise Thompson from the Community Engagement team. The workshop helped identify the team's strengths and weaknesses and what each person could bring to the project. We also identified areas where training would be beneficial to help with the group's understanding of scrutiny projects

2.3 At this workshop, C4C made a decision to appoint a project manager to co-ordinate and monitor the progress of the tasks by use of a project plan *(Appendix 1)*. The group identified desktop review information and reality check-ing tasks they would like to analyse and investigate with staff and customers.

2.4 C4C set about getting an understanding of the current complaints process by requesting survey documents produced by Alison Wood as part of the internal complaints review. The group then conducted its own desktop review.

2.5 The documents provided helped C4C to identify which areas of Sheffield Homes service received the most complaints. The repairs service delivered by Kier was identified as the main area of dissatisfaction amongst customers.

2.6 Information from the review informed discussions at the regular C4C fortnightly meetings about the way forward for the project and objectives for the project.

2.7 C4C reviewed these documents and identified key areas for further investigation during the project. The key themes were as follows:

What is a complaint?

- What is the difference between a complaint and a grumble?
- Are service requests by customers confused with complaints?
- Who decides when it is a complaint?
- Are there different ways of recording/managing complaints?

Customer Expectations

- Do customers have different expectations of the service delivery to what Sheffield Homes can deliver?
- Do Sheffield Homes need an 'Expectations Charter'?
- Do customers have the confidence to make and follow through complaints?

Management of complaints

- Should there be a single team to manage complaints on service delivery issues?
- Who signs off letters and takes responsibility for quality assurance before these are sent to customers?
- Are too many people/teams involved in the complaints handling process?
- How timely is the response?
- Are complaint responses handled, using too formal a route?
- Who decides when a complaint is 'closed'?

Communication

- Is there good sign posting for customers to know where and how to make complaints and the procedure for complaints handling?
- Do Sheffield Homes respond using the correct communications channels?
- What is the level of consistency of response letters to customers and quality of responses?

Learning from complaints

- Are complaints used for lessons learned to identify key themes and improve customer service delivery?
- What internal learning is given as training support for staff?
- What lessons learned is published for customers?

3. Project Objectives

3.1 From our desktop research and analysis, we identified the following objectives for the project.

- To make recommendations which ensure that Sheffield Homes handle complaints in a more efficient way to improve customer satisfaction levels
- To understand the difference between 'a complaint and a grumble'
- To recommend a system to reduce the number of cases which are considered by the Housing Ombudsman
- To improve the consistency of grammar and clarity of detail in the response letters/emails sent to customers
- To recommend an improvement on how Sheffield Homes communicates with customers on how and when to make a complaint
- To publish activities in newsletters and the website to keep customers up to date on the work of Challenge for Change

4. Findings

4.1 Reality Checks

In order for the group to obtain the information needed to scrutinise and investigate the complaints service, various reality checks with staff and tenants groups were undertaken. C4C identified many areas of strengths and weaknesses of the complaints handling service. From the feedback at a staff forum and feedback results from a C4C staff and tenant survey, the group were able to identify areas which could be improved by implementing some changes to the complaints system and learning from the feedback from tenants and customers on their dissatisfaction.

4.2 Staff Survey

C4C designed a survey *(Appendix 2)* that was distributed electronically, to all Sheffield

Homes staff. C4C were pleased with the response returns number of 128. Responses were across all grades of staff, and the results show a high level of confidence in the complaints system. However, the majority of respondents indicated that they felt under pressure when dealing with complaints. A sizeable majority feel they get lots of support with complaints handling, and an even larger proportion are confident they can resolve complaints.

The survey asked how well they understand what customers think. The responses were much more widely spread, with just over 1/3 indicating they had an understanding or a good understanding.

There was also a wide range of opinions about identification of a complaint as differing from a request for service, or a general comment. Some staff com-mented that they take time to clarify the issue, even phoning or emailing a customer. Others commented that if a customer wants to complain they treat it as a complaint regardless.

(Appendix 3) - Staff complaints survey - comments.

4.3 Staff Forum

C4C members attended a staff forum to meet with those staff who handle complaints in the contact centre, housing offices and within New Bank House. The meeting enabled the group members to get an insight into the complaints process from a staff view point by talking to staff directly involved with dealing and responding to complaints.

The meeting gave an opportunity for the members to discuss with staff information gathered from the reality checks and desktop analysis.

4.4 Tenants Survey

Five hundred questionnaires *(Appendix 4)* were sent to customers who had made a complaint in the last 12 months. 91 completed questionnaires were received, giving a response rate of 18%. From the responses we received we established that just under half of customers who complain do so by phone, with around one in five visiting a housing office, and roughly the same number putting complaint in writing. Just over 10% use email or the website.

Less than half of respondents (41%) said they wanted to make a formal complaint even though they had been recorded as complainants. From the responses it is noticeable that most of the complaints received were about repairs issues. It is also evident that many of those who took the time to respond were frustrated by the experience, with a sizeable number commenting on poor communication.

4.5 Visit to Viewpoint

C4C visited Viewpoint to listen to a sample of recordings of complaints surveys made to customers who have made complaints which are now closed. The meeting gave the C4C members an opportunity to gauge the customer experience of firstly lodging a complaint with Sheffield Homes and then charting their journey through the complaints process.

From the recordings observed by C4C members, the surveys indicated that the customer experience is of a low satisfaction level. Comments from the customers also indicated that areas for improvement should be better com-munication and being kept informed on latest updates of their complaint.

The visit was in addition to the information we received from 46 surveys carried out in June 2011 by Viewpoint. 18 responses from tenants in that sample indicated dissatisfaction specifically with communication.

(Appendix 5) for comments and satisfaction scores.

4.6 Tenants Forum

C4C members attended a complaints workshop for tenants hosted by Sheffield Homes at Bard Street Community Centre. The workshop gave C4C the first opportunity to test the information gathered about complaints with tenants who had made complaints against Sheffield Homes and its partner organisations.

The feedback from the workshop suggested that Sheffield Homes needs to improve the way it communicates with its customers with regards to handling complaints. The tenants put forward a suggestion that a dedicated complaints team with a named contact would be a good idea to finding a solution to improving complaints handling. The tenants also suggested that a tenant's appeals panel which would consist of tenants and customers and Sheffield Homes managers should be in place to consider complaints appeals cases. They felt that this may help towards reducing the number of cases which go before the Housing Ombudsman.

(Appendix 6) for feedback comments

4.7 Correspondence response letters to customers

A sample of 10 individual letters (appendix 7) plus a standard acknowledgment letter were examined by the group. The quality of individual letters varied from good to unacceptable. Some had spelling errors, and others were not written in the recommended font. We would like to highlight one letter sent to a bereaved family member which demonstrated honesty and sensitivity. The standard acknowledgement which C4C also saw was considered to be of the right standard. However the standard of correspondence by individual staff members was inconsistent and showed a lack of attention to detail.

In some cases the response letter informed customers that the case was now closed. C4C considered that the customer should always be given the opportunity to contest the decision if they are not satisfied with it.

4.8 Benchmarking Review

4.9 C4C undertook benchmarking analysis and comparison markings with other social housing landlords. C4C used benchmarking information from Housemark to compare Sheffield Homes' results for complaints handling against similar organisations. The summary helped develop recommendations of areas to be reviewed in order to improve complaints satisfaction levels which should ultimately drive down complaints.

From the summary we saw that out of 12 organisations who responded, Sheffield had the 5th highest number of new complaints (15.2) per 1000 stock. Others ranged from 1.9 to 34.66 per 1000. To achieve the upper median the number would have to reduce to 10 in 1000.

Sheffield placed 6th out of 7 for speed of full stage 1 response, at 10.7 days, with the quickest being 6 days and the slowest 12.28. 59.5% of Sheffield customers expressed satisfaction with complaint handling, which put them 3rd out of 5 organisations.

C4C used statistical analysis information from the complaints benchmarking summary 2010/2011. See bibliography

5. Budget review for the project

C4C were allocated a budget of £5,000 for the duration of the scrutiny project. The money was used to cover the costs of:

- Workshop venues
- C4C member travel expenses
- Refreshments
- Costs for support from the TPAS mentor

C4C had a standing budget review agenda item at each meeting to discuss current spend and reviewed the cost implications for attending training events and conferences. The group aimed where possible to find ways of making value for money decisions when considering the need to spend money throughout the life of the project.

(Appendix 8 for final budget spend)

6. Learning and Development

For this first scrutiny project, C4C members have undertaken differing forms of learning and development. These include:

- Workshops – these enabled the group to learn to work together, review documents and findings gathered from reality checks, and, provided a forum for sharing of ideas for the way forward.
- Presentations from Sheffield Homes staff including:
  - » How Sheffield Homes and the Council is structured
  - » How the current Complaints Management System works and current complaints trends
  - » Performance Reporting Information
- Training visits to other organisations including:
  - » A Scrutiny Event held at Trafford Hall
  - » A Housemark Benchmarking event in Leeds
  - » Presentations from Kate Newbolt at TPAS about scrutiny

7. Conclusions

7.1 Sheffield Homes customers and partners do not agree about what a complaint should be.

7.2 Customers are not always clear who will deal with their complaint and how their complaint will be dealt with.

7.3 Sheffield Homes are missing opportunities to deal with low level ‘grumbles’ before they get bigger this incurs more time and resources in addition to lower customer satisfaction.

7.4 The complaints process becomes too formal, too quickly.

7.5 There are too many levels in the complaints process.

7.6 It does not always communicate effectively in-house.

7.7 It does not always communicate clearly with the customer.

7.8 Communication internally and externally is poor – particularly with and from Kier.

7.9 There is inconsistency in communications between 1) Sheffield Homes staff and customers, 2) Sheffield Homes staff and Kier and 3) Kier and customers.

7.10 Complaints are sometimes closed without involving the customer.

7.11 Sheffield Homes do not routinely produce a 'learning report' showing what they have learned from complaints.

7.12 Learning from complaints is not fed back to customers.

7.13 Sheffield Homes do not benefit from listening to the call back surveys made by Viewpoint.

7.14 Repairs are the biggest area of complaints for Sheffield Homes.

7.15 The letters sent to customers are inconsistent in their quality, tone, grammar and spelling.

7.16 With improvements to complaints handling and customer care, this should see a rise in morale as staff gain a better understanding of how complaints are handled and benefit from a streamlined process for dealing with them and checking on a single IT system.

7.17 All staff will need to have a 'can help attitude' to assist customers to resolve complaints at first chance, but if unable to then it should go to a second stage or a dedicated customer complaints officer.

7.18 All staff should be made aware of the new complaints handling system. The complaints new team handlers would need to be given adequate training in:

- Dealing with complaints – varying kinds
- Writing response letters to Councillors & MP's
- Producing in-house style templates for response letters to customers
- Understanding of housing policy

8.0 Recommendations

In line with the conclusions made in section 7.0 of this report, Appendix 9 sets out clearly the recommendations that C4C have agreed. This format has been agreed to ensure that there is alignment to our judgements, to show the evidence-base for each judgement made and the relevance and impact for Sheffield Homes' customers.

9.0 Acknowledgements

C4C have been pleased to have the opportunity to understand and develop their skills whilst carrying out this, their first project. We would like to thank the following people/ teams who have been instrumental in selection, training, supporting, and gathering information for the project.

Firstly, the Community Engagement team for enabling the project; setting up the steering group to do the recruitment; training the group; for their support and enthusiasm as we got the project off the ground.

Tenants, residents and customers who made up the initial steering group and carried out the recruitment. Peter Brown and Gary Westwood of the Planning and Performance team for their helpfulness in producing requested information; their role in organising meetings and activities for the group and their support and encouragement. We wish to also thank our mentor, Kate Newbolt of TPAS

10.0 Bibliography

List of documents used by C4C as part of the desktop review to enable the group to undertake investigative analysis of the complaints process within Sheffield Homes and benchmarked against other social housing landlords.

- Complaint case analysis
- Complaints benchmarking summary 2010/11
- What is important to a customer when making a complaint
- Complaints review questionnaire
- Most important factors when dealing with a complaint
- Complaints profile and performance analysis report
- Sheffield Homes customer feedback policy
- Customer feedback procedure
- Complaints results - June 11
- Complaints survey questions - March 11