

Report of Housing Leeds

Report to Housing Advisory Board

Date: 8 April 2014

Subject: Housing Leeds Tenant Scrutiny Panel (South) Recommendations from the Complaints Inquiry

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary of main issues

1. This purpose of this report is to present the South's Tenant Scrutiny Panel (TSP) report about complaints, following their enquiry. The resulting recommendations have both relevance to the housing service and other services council wide.
2. In their report the TSP have summarised that the quality of a complaints response and overall complaints service is determined by the consistency with which we are able to:
 - Accurately record data;
 - Empathise with the complainant and 'where the complainant is coming from';
 - Communicate with the customer and between ourselves in Leeds City Council and, where appropriate, Mears staff; and
 - Feedback to the customer at every stage of the process.
3. The TSP concluded that the housing service is meeting the National Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard in relation to complaints, and thus is meeting regulatory expectation, but could deliver an improved service if their recommendations are implemented. The housing specific complaints function can benefit from these recommendations, as can other complaints teams from within the wider council.

Recommendations

1. That the Housing Advisory Board acknowledge the work of the Scrutiny Panel and their positive contribution to service improvement and delivering better outcomes for tenants.
2. The Housing Advisory Board is asked to review and accept the officer action plan in response to the TSP's recommendations.

1 Purpose of this report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to present the Recommendations from the South's Tenant Scrutiny Panel's inquiry into the way housing related complaints are managed and the extent to which the service focusses on the quality of outcomes for customers.
- 1.2 The Board is also being invited to review and accept the officer action plan in response to the recommendations.

2 Background information

- 2.1 Tenant Scrutiny Panels (TSP) were established in response to the Homes and Communities Agency's Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard. This standard says that housing providers "*shall ensure that tenants are given a wide range of opportunities to influence and be involved in(...) the scrutiny of their landlord's performance and the making of recommendations to their landlord about how performance might be improved.*"
- 2.2 As with any tenant scrutiny exercise the panel examined a wide range of evidence for the whole service, including performance data, customer complaints and customer satisfaction data before deciding which area of the service to investigate. They chose complaints because:
 - Performance in this area could have been improved;
 - The evidence they examined suggested that some information did not always provide the true picture; and
 - The TSP felt that the complaints handling process was fundamental to tenants' experience of all services.
- 2.3 The inquiry involved a variety of methods of investigation, including a desk top review of relevant literature; a review of performance information; a review of the website; benchmarking with other landlords (including local authorities); mystery shopping exercises; staff and contractor interviews and focus groups; and telephone interviews with tenants who had been through the complaints procedure. This adds considerable validity to the report as the findings and resulting recommendations are based on evidence.
- 2.4 The TSP presented their findings and recommendations at a meeting of interested stakeholders which included, LCC's Executive Officer (Client and Customer

Relations); Customer Relations Managers; Chief Officers for Housing and for Strategy and Commissioning; Departmental Customer Relations Officers from across Environments and Housing and Housing Leeds.

- 2.5 The TSP also took this opportunity to invite Tenant Scrutiny Panel members from across the city; and representatives from Leeds Tenants Federation. It was at this meeting that the next step was supported to bring the report and recommendations to the Housing Advisory Board for formal consideration.
- 2.6 The level of commitment and scale of undertaking by volunteer tenants in this exercise (and indeed tenant scrutiny in general) is not to be under-estimated. In total, the complaints inquiry took 242 hours of tenants time.
- 2.7 The focus for Tenant Scrutiny is to now establish a single Tenant Scrutiny Board, independent to, but working alongside the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Board. At a meeting on the 10th March, initial membership of this new panel was agreed, a process for selecting a Chair and Vice-Chair was put in place and a future agenda items agreed to enable the creation of a work programme for future inquiries.

3 Main issues

- 3.1 In their report the TSP have summarised that the quality of a complaints response and overall complaints service is determined by the consistency with which we are able to:
- Accurately record data;
 - Empathise with the complainant and ‘where the complainant is coming from’;
 - Communicate with the customer and between ourselves in Leeds City Council and, where appropriate, Mears staff; and
 - Feedback to the customer at every stage of the process.
- 3.2 The TSP concluded that the housing service is meeting the National Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard in relation to complaints, and thus is meeting regulatory expectation, but could deliver an improved service if their recommendations are implemented. The housing specific complaints function can benefit from these recommendations, as can other complaints teams from within the wider council. The recommendations report can be found in Appendix 1.
- 3.3 Following the presentation of the report to key stakeholders, officers of Housing Leeds have attended the cross-service Departmental Customer Relations Officer meeting and worked with them to identify and implement key actions and next steps in response to the recommendations. In the same way officers have also worked with Mears to respond to the contractor areas of responsibility. Please refer to Appendix 2 for the proposed actions.

4 Corporate Considerations

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

- 4.1.1 The TSP is made up of only tenants and they have led on this inquiry; from deciding what the inquiry should be about, who to speak to and what information to request and review. Appendix 1 and the recommendations which we are asking HAB members to approve have been identified and written up by TSP members themselves.
- 4.1.2 We will report back to tenants on our progress against these recommendations via the website and the tenants' magazine due to be delivered in June 2014.

4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

4.2.1 The nature of a TSP inquiry is for tenants themselves to identify how services can be improved by taking time to investigate a particular service area and then make recommendations for improvement. The lead officer for each of the recommendation actions will need to consider due regard for equality and use an Equality, Diversity, Cohesion and Integration Screening to ensure due regard to equality has been shown.

4.2.2 The following recommendations are examples of where the service is likely to advance equality of opportunity:

- Senior Managers in Housing Leeds to request that their investigating officers adopt the approach of making informal contact early in the process and work with the DCRO to monitor its impact on preventing complaints from escalation. This would provide a good opportunity for investigating officers at a very early stage if the customer has any individual needs which need to be taken into account during that particular investigation.
- Develop a 'checklist' to guide Stage 1 and Stage 2 investigating officers and that this is included in the 'checklist'. This could include a reminder to check for any individual customer needs in order for the response to be tailored accordingly.
- Implement review of how complaints analysis feeds into service improvement, including how these improvements are communicated to tenants. This can include equality analysis which will help services to identify where they good be better promoting access to their services for people across different protected characteristics

4.3 Council policies and City Priorities

4.3.1 Tenant Scrutiny supports the Best Council objective to 'ensure high quality public services- improving quality, efficiency and involving people in shaping their city.'

4.4 Resources and value for money

4.4.1 Value for Money is one of the key drivers for the TSP. Each of the recommendations lends itself to more efficient and effective ways of working. Specifically, by improving the complaints process and encouraging early resolution at first point of contact, this will reduce the amount of avoidable contact and thus cost to Leeds City Council. Adopting a 'lessons learnt' approach will also

result in improved communication and relationship with our contractors and Customer Services, which should result in fewer complaints in future.

- 4.4.2 This report coincides with the requirement to offer a consistent and high quality complaints service across the whole city as part of the implementation of Housing Leeds. As far as possible, the recommendations will be implemented as part of the creation of a single complaints team, resource and pooling of appropriate skills and knowledge that this entails.

4.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

- 4.5.1 As a landlord we are required to promote and support tenant scrutiny in line with the Homes and Communities Agency's Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard. This is known as co-regulation and is how landlords are now regulated. Failure to comply with this standard could result in intervention from the regulator and put at risk the reputation of the service.

4.6 Risk Management

- 4.6.1 The more effectively we manage our customer complaints, the less likely it is that issues will escalate and customer satisfaction decrease. Escalation can often result in tenants' issues worsening, such as property damage or rent arrears, which can be much more costly to the Council.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 For the complaints inquiry, the proposed actions once addressed will offer an improved service to tenants. It will also allow the service the opportunity to feedback to tenants the difference their involvement has made. Where recommendations are not solely related to housing i.e. there could be implications or opportunities for improvement across other service areas within the council, we will be sharing and monitoring these recommendations at the Customer Strategy Board.
- 5.2 Going forward the Tenant Scrutiny Panel will now work with the other tenant scrutiny panel members from across the city to set up a single city-wide Tenant Scrutiny Board. As part of the development of this new process, future scrutiny inquiries are likely to link much more widely into other areas of the tenant engagement structures, for example drawing on estate walkabouts, tenant inspectors and customer sounding boards, to enable tenants themselves to monitor and test that recommendations have been implemented and improvements have been made.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 That the Housing Advisory Board acknowledge the work of the Scrutiny Panel and their positive contribution to service improvement and delivering better outcomes for tenants.
- 6.2 The Housing Advisory Board is asked to review and accept the officer action plan in response to the TSP's recommendations.

7 Background documents¹

7.1 Appendix 1: Tenant Scrutiny Panel Report- Complaints Inquiry

Appendix 2: Leeds City Council proposed actions in response to TSP's recommendations

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.