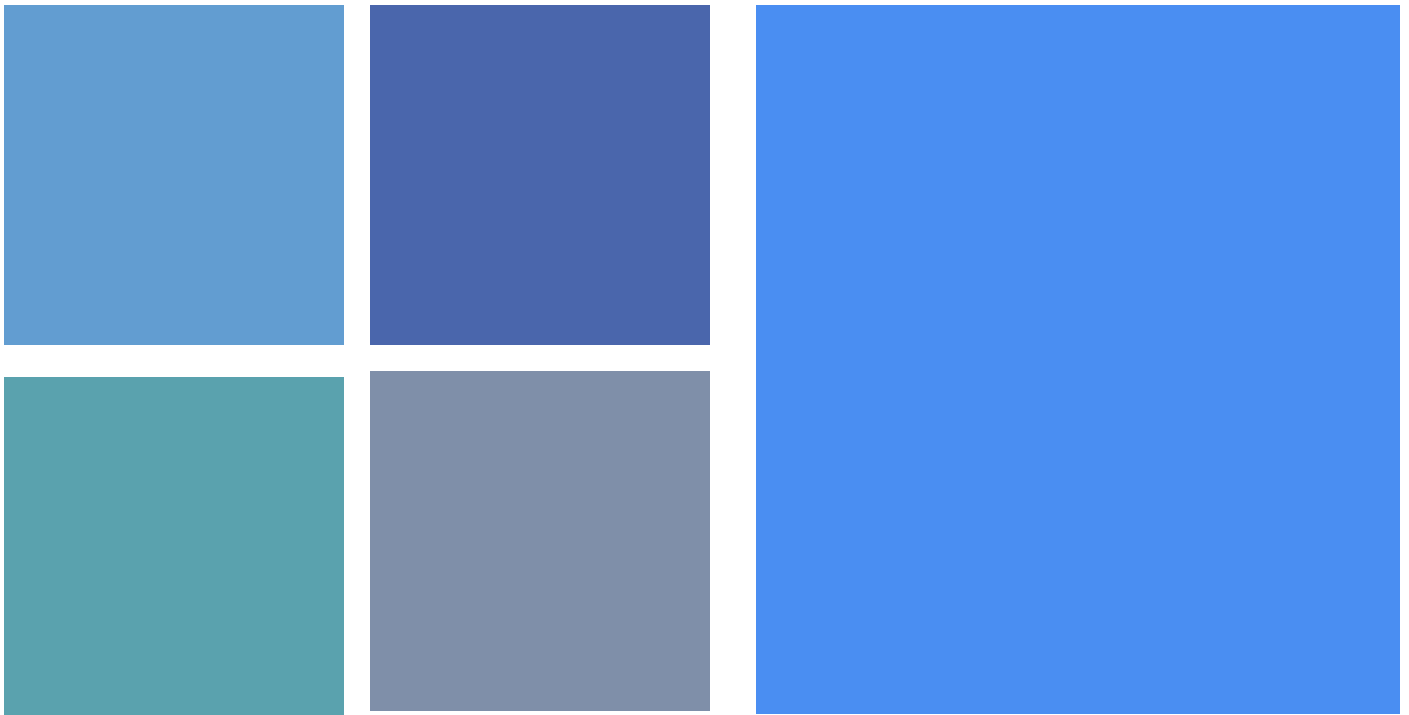


November 2013

Report Of The Tenant Scrutiny Panel - Complaints Process





Introduction

The Tenant Scrutiny Panel

The Tenant Scrutiny Panel (TSP) is an independent tenant-led body that scrutinises individual areas of the business using appropriate evidence, challenges Aire Valley Homes (AVH)/Housing Leeds on performance, advises and influences performance management and helps drive positive change.

It undertook its first pilot scrutiny inquiry between May and September 2012, having chosen to look at the sign up process. It made a series of recommendations that have contributed to significant change in the way this vital service is handled within the old AVH area. Since the Scrutiny Panel delivered its report, no complaints have been received from tenants about the sign up process.

The TSP met regularly during the inquiry to plan, allot tasks and table and consider evidence. They chose to appoint one of their number as Project Manager who chaired Panel

meetings, liaised with AVH staff and contacted members between meetings to keep the project on track.

This Project

The TSP chose complaints handling as a topic for scrutiny having examined performance information that indicated performance could be better in this area and suggested some information did not always reflect the true picture. The Panel felt Complaints was fundamental to tenants' experience of other services so should be the first full topic for the Panel.

The aim of the TSP was not to go on a fault-finding mission or look to apportion blame, but to compliment good practice and help improve complaints handling for both tenants and the organisation.

This report has been developed by the TSP with assistance from Rachel Vernelle, Independent Advisor.

Thanks

The TSP would like to thank the following for their support in developing this enquiry report:

- Everyone who contributed to this inquiry from Mears/Morrison, AVH/Housing Leeds
- Leeds City Council Customer Services Centre
- Sarah Lockwood
- Ian Montgomery

What we did

The TSP undertook the following activities to gather evidence for the inquiry:

1. Carried out a desk-top review of relevant literature-
 - 1.1. Performance information on complaints- number, categories, targets met, etc.
 - 1.2. Policy and procedure
 - 1.3. Information leaflets advising customers on how to complain.
 - 1.4. Letters sent to complainants at all stages in the process
2. Reviewed the website and benchmarked it against other council's websites
3. Benchmarked procedures with other local authorities
4. Conducted mystery shopping of Leeds and other council's telephone response to complaints
5. Had an information session on how the complaints database and process operates.
6. Undertook staff interviews/focus groups with Customer Services Officer, Complaints stage 1 and 2 investigating officers, Customer Involvement Manager, Customer Relations Manager
7. Undertook interviews with staff of Mears/Morrison- Customer Services Manager and Resident Liaison Officer
8. Undertook a briefing session on the new arrangements for handling complaints under the Localism Act 2011
9. Emailed follow-up questionnaires with Mears/Morrison and Housing Leeds Staff in relation to the introduction of a new IT system which occurred during the inquiry

10. Undertook telephone interviews with tenants who had taken out complaints
11. Spoke to tenants leaving a One Stop Centre
12. Listened in to calls received at the Leeds City Council Customer Service Centre
13. Visited Mears/Morrison and observed how they handle in-coming complaints.

Overall judgment

In the panel's view, issues around complaints come down to:

- 1.1. Accurate recording of data
- 1.2. Empathy with where the complainant is coming from
- 1.3. Communication between customer, Leeds City Council staff and, where appropriate, Mears/Morrison
- 1.4. Feedback to the customer at every stage of the process

Observations and Conclusions

The National Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard states that "Registered providers shall have an approach to complaints that is clear, simple and accessible that ensures complaints are resolved promptly, politely and fairly."

1. A new IT system, MCM, at Mears/Morrison has resulted in fewer Stage 1 complaints since it was introduced. This emphasises that where communication improves, complaints reduce but should not be a cause for complacency. They have tightened up how they handle complaints but LCC still needs to be clear about what information it wants from Mears/Morrison so that it can monitor incidents and respond to customers. The MCM system is not being used to its full capacity in relation to the handling of complaints. The Panel recognises that the MCM system has only been fully operational since June, which the Panel has taken into consideration in the development of this report.

2. A general observation of the Panel is that if repairs processes were more consistently adhered to there would be fewer complaints for Mears/Morrison and AVH/Housing Leeds staff to be diverted into.
3. Some good and swift responses to complaints were identified and there was no complacency amongst staff that improvements could not be found.
4. The Panel recognises that some complaints – such as grounds maintenance- are easier to deal with swiftly than others.
5. LCC's website clearly sign-posts people to Complaints and the system is accessible and clear, in comparison with other councils' websites.
6. The Panel's experience of the service from Morley One Stop Centre was exceptional – data recorded was thorough and customer experience good.
7. The Panel identified good practice around both AVH/LCC and Mears/Morrison identifying support needs and the meeting of these through referrals to LCC teams or outside agencies.
8. In general, the TSP is of the opinion that AVH/Housing Leeds is meeting the National Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard in relation to complaints but can deliver a massively improved service if the recommendations made in this report are implemented.

Scrutiny Panel Judgement	Evidence	Recommendations	Expected benefit for customers
<p>Understand how AVH/Housing Leeds manage it's complaints process, taking into account the quality of the process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When is a complaint a complaint? Not always clear about what is a service request and what is a complaint. • Things are not routinely 'nipped in the bud' at an early stage, before they becomes a complaint in the first place or at Stage 1. • Stage 2 complaints in other councils may be handled by teams other than those that have dealt with Stage 1. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interview with Customer Services Officer 2. Desk-top review of complaint letters 3. Focus Group with Stage 1 and 2 officers 4. Telephone survey of tenants 5. Visit to Contact Centre 6. Interview LCC Customer Relations Manager 7. Review of Performance Information 8. Interview/s with Customer Involvement Manager 9. Benchmarking with other councils. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Make 'informal' contact to appease complainants early in the process 2. Deliver promises made at Stage 1 3. Apologise for a service failure/failure to remedy at Stage 1 4. Consider having a different team dealing with Stage 1 and 2 complaints to introduce a level of independence. 	<p>Less need to escalate complaints through the formal stages.</p> <p>More satisfactory outcomes from complaints.</p> <p>Complaints less likely to escalate to Designated Persons and/or Ombudsman Service where complainants can see an element of independence introduced at Stage 2.</p>

Scrutiny Panel Judgement	Evidence	Recommendations	Expected benefit for customers
<p>Interface with Mears/Morrison complaints handling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harder for AVH/LCC to deliver on promises as it has less control of the response when it is delivered by Mears/Morrison • AVH/LCC doesn't have access to information from Morrison on the number of complaints outstanding complaints made direct to Mears/Morrison 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Study visit to Mears/Morrison 2. Interview with Mears/Morrison Customer Services Manager 3. Interviews with AVH/LCC officers who are lead officers for responsive repairs and gas services 4. Email questions raised with LCC officers and Mears/Morrison 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Share incidents between Mears/Morrison and LCC where complaints are made direct to contractor 6. LCC and Mears/Morrison need a clearer reporting structure. The onus is on LCC to ensure they get this as the customer and they need to be clearer in their expectations. We have seen this is possible – it just needs to happen! 7. Operatives need to be on making fuller notes on MCM to enable effective and speedy responses to complaints. This may be a training issue for Mears/Morrison. 8. Each party should be fully aware of the impact of actions taken on the customer. 9. Methods of measuring customer satisfaction with repairs requires significant improvement. 	<p>Fewer complaints from tenants.</p> <p>Early resolution of complaints.</p> <p>Accurate tenant satisfaction rates established to guide service improvement.</p>

Scrutiny Panel Judgement	Evidence	Recommendations	Expected benefit for customers
<p>Feedback to tenants-quality of communication through the investigation and in delivering conclusions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How tenants are told how to make complaints in the first place. • Complaint response letters can be a mixture of template and personal comments. Sometimes they appear impersonal and disjointed. • Not all complaints are routinely telephoned, as required by the policy. • Posters do not refer to 'complaints', rather they invite 'views on the service'. • Confusion exists over how a visitor to a One Stop Centre makes a written rather than verbal, complaint, perhaps for a relative or neighbour, should they wish to. • Leeds Housing has a 10 working day response, the rest of the council, 15 working days. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Looked at a website and leaflets available in One Stop Shops and Housing Offices 2. Looked at complaint letters 3. Telephone survey of tenants 4. Interview with One Stop Centre Staff. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Ensure policy of telephoning complainants is adhered to. 11. Wording of feedback needs to be Plain English and have the 'personal touch'- consider introducing a checklist of points that must be covered by officers dealing with complaint responses with associated training rather than cutting and pasting from model letters. 12. Provide One Stop Centre Staff with an overview of the new complaints arrangements arising from the Localism Act. 13. Clarify procedure for written complaints accessed through One Stop Centres and other outlets and provide a form for complainants to fill in based on the on-line form. 14. The 10 working day response time should not be lost. 15. Consider extending this deadline to all Council services. 	<p>Higher tenant satisfaction .</p> <p>Less escalation of complaints.</p>

Scrutiny Panel Judgement	Evidence	Recommendations	Expected benefit for customers
<p>How do service teams learn from complaints?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How complaints contribute to service improvement • Issues around who takes ownership of complaints and how they respond • Issues around where more than one issue is contained in a complaint, who takes ownership? • Issues around inputting of information into the MCM system so all parties can learn from matters that arise. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interviews with Stage 1 and 2 officers. 2. Email questions following the implementation of MCM. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 16. Evidence of how complaints contribute to service improvement requires review. 17. Existing systems for recording how complaints have contributed to service improvement need to be shared generally with tenants (e.g. through the newsletter) . 18. Internal communication around how AVH/Housing Leeds learn from complaints needs improvement. 	<p>Greater confidence from tenants in LCC's willingness to learn from complaints.</p> <p>Tenants benefit from service improvements.</p>
<p>How is LCC responding to the new complaints regime that commenced in April 2013?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes to the Ombudsman Service and access to it enshrined in the Localism Act 2011 • Leeds Tennant Federation is establishing a Designated Tenant Panel for Complaints 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presentation by Independent Mentor. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 19. While response letters contain information about the new system, written advice on how to complain is out of date in this aspect. 20. Leeds Tenants Federation's Designated Panel for Complaints should focus on advocacy for tenants, aimed at helping tenants understand the process and acting as an 'honest broker' between tenants and the Council. 	<p>Clarify for tenants about the new system.</p> <p>An effective Designated Tenant Panel helping to reduce escalation of complaints to the Ombudsman Service.</p>

Scrutiny Panel Judgement	Evidence	Recommendations	Expected benefit for customers
<p>Capacity of staff to deal with the specialist nature of complaints' response, including training.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A large number of staff are involved in complaints- are they all equipped to deal with them? • When complaints are complex and/or cover more than one area of service, problems can arise especially around who takes ownership • On occasions, staff at One Stop Centres are known to escalate complaints at busy times which may not be warranted. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus group of Stage 2 Officers. 2. Observation at LCC Customer Services Centre. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 21. Protocols need to be clear and consistent especially where a number of service areas are involved, with a view to having the fewest number of officers involved as possible. 22. Focus needs to consistently be on solving matters at as early a stage as possible, which may require a review of how they are handled at One Stop Centres. 	<p>Early resolution of complaints so increased tenant satisfaction.</p>