

Caretaking Estates Services Management

Clarification on paper submitted by GMB

Introduction

This paper provides some further clarification on the issues raised and proposals made regarding caretaking and estates services management in the paper presented by GMB at the Housing Scrutiny Committee meeting on 26 January 2015.

This report will show how management is working with the GMB and others on moving the service forward to improve service delivery and resident satisfaction and make it ready to consider how we can offer caretaking services to others to increase income.

Service description

As was pointed out in the presentation made on 2 December 2014, there are layers of management in the Area Housing Offices, see attached appendix one.

This structure was recommended from a best value review completed in 2006 which provided a holistic approach to estate management combining the management of caretaking, communal repairs and estates services. The new structure has been successful in improving tenant's satisfaction with the caretaking service from 42% to 81% in 2013.

Caretakers are currently line managed by Estate Services Co-ordinators (ESCs) and are assisted by Quality Assurance Officers (QAOs) who provide day to day supervision. The QAOs undertake proactive monitoring of cleaning, communal repairs, grounds maintenance and health and safety checks through their inspections.

Previously as part of the Quality and Performance team in Homes for Islington, independent estate inspections were completed by that team along with a range of other inspections of the organisation's services. When these posts were deleted housing operations assumed these roles within their existing resources, including independent estate inspections.

The estate services support manager's primary function is to assist the ESCs by ensuring stores and equipment and training is provided for the caretakers and their leave is managed and covered.

The responsibility for repairs ordering varies across the offices however they are responsible for investigating reported communal repairs and ordering those repairs mainly with our Estates Maintenance Team based at Downham Road. This responsibility however only amounts to ordering approximately one order per officer per day. They may of course also chase orders reported to them by residents or indeed ones they find on their estate inspections.

The Resident Engagement team in the Housings Needs and Strategy division recruited resident inspectors to check a variety of services in housing including customer services and estates services. These provide us with an essential view of residents to ensure we maintain and improve all services.

Proposals

It is not accurate to say that the caretaking service has been cut back to the bone.

In fact since 2002 the establishment has increased by two, following requests for extra staff to complete the tasks set out within the measurement scheme. This scheme was agreed with the GMB union to establish the caretaking resources required to clean and maintain our estates. The caretaking establishment is calculated using this scheme.

During the same period whilst we have maintained the caretaking establishment, the housing management structure in operations has been reviewed twice and reduced management posts by 33%, through the reduction of Area Housing Offices, saving approximately £500,000.

Services to support the caretaking services have also been increased with, for example, the introduction of mechanised estate road sweeping and bulk refuse disposal provided by the Environment and Regeneration department.

The GMB's proposal to return to a separation of caretaking management and estates repairs would divide responsibility for our residents who often complain that they have too many different officers to contact. This would be a regressive step for our residents. The service provided before the changes recommended by the best value review was not noted for its efficiency or effectiveness and the GMB's proposals do not show how these could be improved.

The reporting of repairs by quality assurance officers is not significant part of their role and does not warrant any radical change. We want to maintain the holistic service developed since the best value review and look at other ways of making it more effective.

Fit for the Future

One Housing Group was only linked to Homes for Islington because it developed new housing on the existing Six Acres estate.

We believe the GMB is referring to our benchmarking that is carried out across many social housing providers as a good way of comparing our services with similar organisations.

It is accepted that the current service is expensive although we do not have current accurate comparable costs. Savings have been made to the support given to the caretaking services through reductions in costs for mechanised services, window cleaning and bin cleaning.

With these savings the caretaking services now cost approximately £7.7 million compared to the estates services management from the local offices which costs £1.2 million.

Way Forward

We agree with the GMB that changes need to be made to the service and we have been working with the GMB shop stewards at monthly meetings to find ways to go forward.

There are three main areas of work we want to progress, Improving Cover for Caretakers Absence, Weekend Cover and Introduction of New Tasks, as well as finding ways to create new income.

Improving Cover for Caretakers Absence – we do not have sufficient resources to pay for full cover when any caretaker is on leave or ill and we have put forward to the shop stewards suggested cover arrangements including paired working and use mobile relief cover.

Weekend Cover - The current arrangements are expensive and not seen as an effective use of resources. We want to look at full week day cover and an alternative week end cover service to improve satisfaction.

Introduction of New Tasks – Because the caretaker’s tasks have all been measured each caretaker knows what they have to do. However if new task is required we need to agree a procedure for its introduction with the shop stewards. This will be extremely important if we are to offer services to other clients to raise income.

Papers on these changes have been or will be discussed with the GMB at our monthly meetings.

Increasing income is a high priority for the Council and following a presentation at the Policy and Performance Committee in January we have been asked to provide costs of the services we could offer, such as voids clearance or minor decorations for other social landlords.

David Salenius
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Appendix 1

