



Report of: **The Service Review Group**

Meeting of	Date	Agenda Item	Ward(s)
Housing Scrutiny	16 November 2015	B1	All

SUBJECT: Service Review Group – Learning from and responding to complaints

1. Synopsis

- 1.1 Learning from and responding to complaints was identified by residents as a key area for review at the first Service Review Group (SRG) meeting 18 March 2015. This report sets out the background to the review and the recommendations of the first review undertaken by this group.
- 1.2 The review was resident-led and facilitated by the Resident Engagement Team.
- 1.3 This review looked at the way that Housing Services learn from and respond to complaints. The review aimed to improve the way that services deal with complaints and identify areas of good practice.
- 1.4 Recommending changes to the response timescales set out in the existing corporate and housing complaints procedures was not included in the scope of the review.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the recommendations of the Service Review Group be received.

3. Recommendations of the Service Review Group – set out in detail at Appendix 1.

- 3.1 Ensure the experience of residents who use the complaints process is positive by adopting a more personal and empathetic approach to complaints handling.
- 3.2 Produce a specific Complaints Customer Care Standard.
- 3.3 Implement the Complaints Customer Care standard by:
 - Publicising the complaints process and performance and learning more widely
 - Making the complaints pages on the council's website more accessible
 - Getting Housing Needs, Housing Operations and Housing Repairs Divisions to adopt similar learning from complaints processes.

- 3.4 Monitor staff performance against a set Complaints Customer Care standard.
- 3.5 Continuously improve and develop complaints procedures through benchmarking and an annual check of a sample of responses by the SRG.

4. Background

- 4.1 The members of the Service Review Group who participated in this review were:
- Annabel Goulding, Nicola Eyidah, Dean Donaghey, Luigi Indri, Violet Oruwari- McCabe and Helen Ladele
 - Jim Rooke – Observer and representative of Housing Scrutiny Committee
- 4.2 The SRG first met with officers on 13 May 2015, scoped out the review and identified the activities that would be undertaken by members of the SRG and officers. Appendix 2 sets out the detailed programme of activities. At the first meeting, the following timetable was agreed:

Agreed task	Task completed
Scope the review	13.5.15
Gather the evidence	May to September 2015
Evaluate the evidence	23.7.15
Agree recommendations	8.9.15
Present recommendations to panel of officers	22.9.15
Report to Housing Scrutiny	16.11.15

4.3 Evidence gathering

- 4.3.1 A desktop review was carried of the following documents:
- Relevant policies and procedures
 - Samples of letters and communication
 - Corporate Complaints Report (2015)
 - Housing Needs and Strategy learning report (2014 – 15)
 - Housing Operations quarterly report (Oct to Dec 2014 and Jan to March 2015)
 - Property Services report
 - Complaints compensation report (2014 – 15)
- 4.3.2 Detailed comments on the divisional performance reports are set out in Appendix 4.
- 4.3.3 To test the desktop research, members of the SRG:
- Met with residents and staff to assess compliance with current procedures and find out their views about how complaints were handled.
 - Assessed the quality of written responses at stage 1 and 2.
 - Carried out mystery shops.
 - Reviewed the quality of the training available to staff.

5. Summary of findings

- 5.1 On examining the evidence and conducting interviews; SRG members found a number of examples where the service provided for residents worked really well and wanted to highlight this good practice, as follows:
- The Corporate Complaints report and Housing Operations report both analyse performance;

- The number of complaints to Housing Needs and Strategy and Housings Operations are both reducing;
- The number of upheld complaints are reducing;
- All three divisions report learning to senior managers;
- Learning in the main, is being implemented;
- Compensation is being paid, where appropriate;
- Training on complaints handling is being offered to some staff;
- The Council has a Customer Care Standard;
- Officers were found to be courteous during telephone calls;
- There were some good examples of written responses that dealt with issues in an empathetic and polite manner, with appropriate apologies.

5.2 Detailed findings are set out at Appendix 3.

6. Implications

6.1 Financial Implications

Matt West, Head of Repairs and Maintenance, has advised that the Property Services no longer pays for missed appointments. In the past it had paid £20.00 for missed appointments but this was removed in agreement with the Repairs Integration Board in August 2014 and HMT in December 2014 as the service cannot bear the burden of additional payments to cover missed appointments.

6.2 Legal Implications

No direct legal implications arise as a result of the recommendations.

6.3 Environmental Implications

No direct environmental implications arise as a result of the recommendations.

6.4 Resident Impact Assessment

The council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and to advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations, between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it (section 149 Equality Act 2010). The council has a duty to have due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages, take steps to meet needs, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, and encourage people to participate in public life. The council must have due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.

A Resident Impact Assessment has not been completed as the Service Review Group is a resident-led body which is making recommendations to the council. The recommendations made are intended to improve the housing complaints handling process for residents. Services would need to consider any resident impacts arising from implementing the recommendations.

7. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

7.1 The recommendations reflect the key issues and areas for improvement identified by the SRG during the review. The recommendations identify that while there are good areas of practice in respect of handling and learning from complaints, not all staff are following existing complaints procedures and a more customer focused approach is needed.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Detailed recommendations

Appendix 2 – Programme of activities carried out by the SRG

Appendix 3 – Findings from focus group, mystery shopping and review of responses

Appendix 4 – Findings from performance reports

Background papers:

None.

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Appendix 1

Detailed recommendations

1.1 Ensure the experience of residents who use the complaints process is positive by adopting a more personal and empathetic approach to complaints handling

- a. Listen and be polite at all times.
- b. Arrange face to face interviews, where possible, when the resident requests this.
- c. Acknowledgements via mail or email should be sincere and empathetic.
- d. Letters should be written in a professional tone, sound sincere and be personal and empathetic.
- e. Acknowledgement and interim responses should start with the phrase "Sorry to hear about your complaint. We will do our best to resolve it"
- f. Apologise when the occasion demands, in an open manner, free from "ifs or buts".
- g. Be clear when asking residents for information to support their complaint.
- h. Help residents to "translate" their complaint by breaking it down in manageable portions; this will help those where English is not first language, where there are literacy issues or lack of IT skills.
- i. Consider introducing a payment of £10.00 for all missed appointments.

1.2 Produce a Complaints Customer Care Standard and consider including:

- a. Housing Needs, Housing Operations and Property Services divisions to implement section 9 of the Housing complaints procedure fully.
- b. On receipt of a complaint (via letter or email) staff should telephone the resident to confirm details of the complaint within the timescales set out in the complaints process.
- c. Offer face to face meetings to the resident to discuss the nature of the complaint.
- d. Log and respond to emails within timescales set out in the Customer Care Standard.
- e. Acknowledging complaints confirming the detail of the complaint within the timescales set out in the complaints process.
- f. Provide examples of good and bad responses for training purposes.
- g. Contact the resident on day 10 of the 21 day response cycle to confirm that complaint is being investigated.
- h. Provide a full response within 21 days as set out in the complaints process.
- i. If complaint cannot be responded to within 21 days then the resident should be advised when they can expect a response.
- j. If the complaint cuts across more than one area of the council; one officer to be a single point of contact for the resident.
- k. Avoiding using abbreviations and jargon.
- l. Request for information/copies of documents should be clearly set out using bullet points and plain English.
- m. If more than one issue is raised; each issue should be dealt with in turn.
- n. If the resident has a known carer/advocate then complaint responses should be sent to them if the council has appropriate consent from the resident.
- o. Check internal information systems to see if residents have specific needs (e.g. English as a second language, literacy, and mental health issues) and ensure response is tailored to the individual need.

1.3 Implement the Complaints Customer Care standard by:

- **Publicising the complaints process:**

- a. Tell residents that it does not cost them to make a complaint.
- b. Provide standard definition of a complaint and examples of what is/is not a complaint on the website, estate noticeboards, electronic noticeboards and Your Home magazine.
- c. Publicise the numbers of complaints and learning that has been achieved from resolved complaints on the website and in Your Home magazine.
- d. Publicise the difference between a repair service request and a complaint.

- **Making the complaints pages on the Council's website more accessible:**
 - a. Publicise the existing generic email address managed by the Directors Support Unit for the Housing Needs, Property Services and Housing Operations divisions.
 - b. Include a postal address and telephone number for the three divisions.
 - c. Increase the space on the online complaint form.
 - d. Consider updating web page with seasonal information advertising preventative measures, e.g. Top 10 tips for looking after your home.
 - e. Develop a template to enable a carer/advocate to complain on behalf of a resident.

- **Housing Needs, Housing Operations and Housing Repairs Divisions to adopt similar learning from complaints processes**
 - a. All three divisional reports to include trends and learning in their reports
 - b. Consider having named officers from the three divisions who will have responsibility for monitoring that learning outcomes have been implemented.
 - c. Officers from three divisions to regularly update Customer Relation Management database.

1.4 Monitor staff performance against set Complaints Customer Care standards

- a. All staff who deal with complaints to undergo the complaints customer care training.
- b. Introduce periodic refresher courses.
- c. Use the staff performance management system and ways of working to monitor performance against a set Complaints Customer Care standard.
- d. Managers should sample check complaints responses.

1.5 Continuously improve and develop complaints procedures through benchmarking and an annual check of a sample of responses by the SRG.

- a. Benchmark among other providers to identify good practice.
- b. Carry out a peer review of a % of complaints with other departments and other councils.
- c. A sample of complaints should be reviewed annually by members of the Service Review Group.
- d. Consider using a specialist officer(s) or team(s) to deal with all complaints.

Appendix 2 – Programme of Activities

	Activity	Type of activity
1	Mystery shopping of ease of making a complaint	Mystery shopping
2	Service Review Group to interview residents who have been through the complaints process	Focus group
3	Meet with officers who deal with complaints to discuss the process	Meeting
4	Consideration of complaints information, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Circulation of complaints procedure - Summary of number of complaints, escalation rates and subject of complaints 	Information sent out via email
5	Look at examples of where Housing Services have learnt from complaints	Information sent out via email
6	Assessment of quality of complaints	Information sent out via email
7	Consideration of compensation – how much does the housing service pay in compensation and how much does it cost to resolve complaints?	Information sent out via email
8	Review some long standing complaints cases for good practice– e.g. was the complainant kept up to date whilst the complaint was resolved?	Information sent out via email
9	Clarification of Property Services and Housing Needs and Strategy reports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are they circulated to? • Who monitors whether learning has been implemented? • Housing Needs report – why does report state no learning in cases which were upheld/partially upheld? • 	Information sent out via email
10	Provide examples of learning that have been applied, e.g. a policy has been amended or repair carried out etc.	Information sent out via email
11	Provide guidelines for compensation	Information sent out via email
12	Feedback on number of not complete cases in the compensation report	Information sent out via email
13	What training do staff receive to respond to complaints? – copy of training package	Information sent out via email
14	Complaints website – sending the link out to the area on the website where residents can make a complaint and explaining the process	Information sent out via email

Appendix 3 – Detailed findings

Mystery shopping findings

SRG members carried out three mystery shops and presented two scenarios to officers. These scenarios and the outcomes of the shops are set out below:

Case 1 – (telephone query) I made a complaint and I am not happy with the findings, how can I escalate the complaint?

- Response 1 response was very positive, officer explained process, was patient, well informed and understanding.
- Response 2 – initial response negative – officer not helpful in helping to clarify issues but after 20 minutes of explaining the officer was helpful.

Case 2 – (Email query) I'm a new tenant and I wish to complain about the housing office. I don't want to come to the office though. Is there anyone who can come to see me?

- Response by email – 3 courteous responses but question of home visit not answered.

Focus Group Findings

The key issues identified by five residents during two Focus Group meetings were:

- Lack of updates
- Lack of empathy
- Lack of face to face contact
- Process does not take into account residents who may struggle with writing (e.g. English as a second language, lack of literacy/IT skills and mental health issues)
- Require one officer per division who is an expert and trained to deal with a complaint. Could use scripts to assist
- Humanise process – dialogue and letters to be more personal
- Officers to update complainant via phone call/ letter around day 10 of 21 day response time to reassure that complaint is being investigated
- Web pages difficult to access. Make it easier by including generic email addresses for all sections, postal address, telephone number and increase space in on-line complaints form. use template allowing for an advocate to speak on behalf of the complainant
- Stop using abbreviations
- Apologise
- Request for information/documents to support a complaint need to be in plain English and set out in bullet points to make it easier for all parties to understand what is required
- If complainant has a known carer send complaint responses to carer if we have appropriate consent from complainant
- Provide a standard definition of a complaint and examples of what is a complaint and what is a service request on the website
- There should be a single point of contact for all housing complainants
- Officers should help residents “translate” complaint and break it down in manageable portions; this will help those where English is not first language, where there are literacy issues and lack of IT skills
- Publicise resolved complaints through “You said/we did” on the website and Your Home magazine
- Carry out a peer review of a % of complaints with other councils/ sections
- An independent resident should be used to carry out evaluation of the responses to complaints and to confirm whether the problem has been fixed.

- Tell residents that it does not cost them to make a complaint

Findings from the Staff Meeting

The key issues identified were:

- Reports are used to monitor how issues are raised and rectified
- Recognition that needs clearer communication with customers and keeping them informed
- Provide information seasonally to enable residents to take preventative measures, e.g. Top 10 tips for looking after your home
- Receiving and giving feedback to contractors is important

Findings of Stage 1 written complaints

SRG Members looked at seven Stage 1 written complaints and responses and found the following:

- Lack of updates
- Lack of acknowledgments
- No apology
- One complaint response was well written. This could be used as an example of best practice
- Some responses were off-hand
- Lack of empathy
- All responses were standard responses but some lacked empathy, You can say no but say it in a sympathetic/empathetic manner
- If more than one issue, each issue should be dealt with in turn
- Officers to receive training on best practice and appropriate responses
- The standard structure for how to respond to a complaint is good, e.g. apologising, then setting out what the issues are, then responding to each issue in turn. However, the quality of the individual officers' response within this framework seems to vary significantly. Sometimes it is very good, other times less so

Findings of Stage 2 written complaints

SRG Members looked at three Stage 2 complaints and made the following observations:

- Have apologies become tokenistic?
- Responses should have more empathy
- Acknowledgement should be sincere
- The automatic acknowledgement to emails should be standardised and have an empathetic tone

Findings of Upheld Complaints

- SRG members looked to see if learning had been applied by looking at a sample of complaints which were upheld and found that in the main learning was implemented.

Appendix 4 - Findings from performance reports

Members of the SRG looked at the reports listed below and made the following comments:

- Corporate Complaints Report (2015)
 - Shows the trends
 - Report indicates poor performance re: housing repairs on communication/ poor quality of work and length of time it takes for repair to be completed. These are all areas which service review members have expressed views on
- Housing Needs & Strategy learning report (2014 – 15)
 - Layout of report made it easy to read but there was no summary or focus on trends
 - Learning was not noted in all cases that were upheld or partially upheld
 - Not clear that an analysis of trends occurs in these reports
- Housing Operations quarterly report (Oct to Dec 2014 and Jan to March 2015)
 - Demonstrated trends and learning and was the preferred reporting format by the group
- Property Services report
 - Repairs reports were thorough in their investigation, but did not demonstrate trends and target dates or named officers responsible for dealing with any follow up actions in the action plans
 - A lot of officers dealing with one repair and complaint
 - A lot of follow up visits by different trades and members of the SRG asked if they were all necessary
 - No indication that recommendations in the action plan were monitored
 - £10.00 should be paid for missed appointments; even if a tenant doesn't ask for this compensation
 - If repair operative is running late a courtesy phone call to be made explaining the delay
 - Not clear that an analysis of trends occurs in these reports
- Complaints compensation report (2014 – 15)
 - SRG members looked the compensation report and noted that compensation payments were paid as a remedy but the complaints management system was not updated on a regular basis
- Other general issues raised were:
 - Who monitors that learning outcomes identified in the reports have been implemented?
 - There is no consistent reporting format across the three divisions
 - SRG members looked at to see if learning had been applied by looking at a sample of complaints that were upheld and found that in the main learning was implemented
 - SRG members looked at the availability of staff training and commented that they were happy with the training on offer, but that more training needs to be carried out on soft skills such as being empathetic, polite and interested in the complainant