

Central Bedfordshire Council
Tenant Scrutiny Panel
Final report
Complaints

Contact Details: Julie Harnett, TSP Chair,
C/o Brett Douglas, Tenant Involvement Team Leader

Executive Summary

This report was undertaken for the Housing Service at Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC) to examine why not all complaints investigations are being achieved within the agreed timescales (as evidenced through the Housing Service Balance Scorecard performance indicators) and to recommend a long term sustainable solution. The report and its investigation has remained predominantly focused on the Housing Services' processes, rather than CBC Corporate Services, and therefore refers specifically to the complaints and MP enquiries service within Housing.

As a result, this report covers key aspects of the complaints process within housing, including how to access and report a complaint, as well as how the Housing service at CBC responds and then deals with the issues raised.

On scrutinising aspects of the complaints process, at the time of investigation, we found that in relation to investigating and answering the complaint, the workload appeared split between one or two individual staff only. We felt that this system does not work, particularly when these key staff may not be available.

There is a positive relationship between staff across the different business areas within the Housing Service, where the Interim Complaints Officer and colleagues work to ensure positive outcomes for the complainant. However we felt that if key personnel were not available, the knowledge they retain could be lost as we found that relevant information relating to the internal Housing processes may not be documented, and may not capture the key staff's knowledge and years of experience. Documenting such information would provide knowledge transfer to exist, and ensure continuity of service

We found from our investigations that more systematic communication between CBC Housing staff and complainants would be beneficial for the complainant, together with a reference number to provide complainants with a reference point. In our own mystery shopping and investigations, we found there was an inconsistent approach in terms of the time frames for responses received, dependant upon each of the four ways a complaint can be raised.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about whether or not the complaints process provides value for money as not all 'complaints' are logged and reported as a complaint, if they are resolved at first point of contact with the customer. However, this is in accordance with the current SCHH procedure. Therefore, costs in relation to this part of the service were not available and not benchmarked.

We have made 12 recommendations on this enquiry, which cover Staff Training, Staffing levels/cover, documenting of processes for housing staff, more consistent communication around the first point of contact and the tracking and recording of calls.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The TSP was set up in March 2013, recruited by Central Bedfordshire Council, following work completed by an independently facilitated Tenant Scrutiny Steering Group made up of involved tenants, staff and elected Members. Our main role is to scrutinise the council's housing service to ensure that they run their services and procedures to their own standards. The panel consists of five members: Julie (Chair), Mal, Maggie and Ron and Darren Lane who has joined us since our last enquiry.
- 1.2 Following the success of our Anti social behaviour enquiry we decided to undertake a review of the Complaints Process and its respective response timescales within the Housing Service. We decided this would be our next enquiry and were informed by looking at the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for housing, which highlighted a consistent under performance over a significant period. By studying the data from the KPIs, we were able to see that the target of 90% in relation to complaint cases being responded to within agreed timescales was not being met, and was consistently underperforming.
- 1.3 The first thing we decided to do was to read the SCHH Customer Feedback Procedure to try and find out what the standards are and whether it is being followed. We also checked for any flaws in the procedure, and gathered evidence to support us in making any recommendations.

We then held interviews with relevant staff within the Housing Service (specified within Appendix A). Four letters were sent to tenants who had made complaints previously, for their feedback. One reply was received.

We also did some mystery shopping, via the telephone and email, to check some of our findings. There were two telephone calls and one email in total. We also attempted to review performance benchmarking to compare the performance and standards to how others respond to complaints. The benchmarking was based on using data from five other local authorities via House Mark. All of these activities enabled us to complete this report and make our final recommendations.

2. Methodology

- 2.1 The scrutiny project was undertaken using the following methodology:
- 2.2 All data reviewed has been based within and related to Housing Services only.

- 2.3 Document review, including SCHH Customer Feedback Procedure and CBC Corporate Complaints Procedure as well as what can be accessed from the CBC Website. In this case all the Housing related pages available on the CBC website.
- 2.4 A series of interviews were held with housing staff (interim Complaints Officer and the interim Housing Services Manager) whom were responsible for managing and dealing with complaints from within the housing service. Please refer to the appendices for more details of staff interviewed.
- 2.5 Speaking with frontline staff and customers that had experienced complaints. Please refer to the appendices.
- 2.6 We also sent targeted communication via letter to customers that had experienced complaints.
- 2.7 We Examined data to test our findings.
- 2.8 Undertaking mystery shopping over the phone and via email to test the logging of a complaint. Also by completing a complaint form pro forma obtained from reception at Watling House and posting it in.
- 2.9 Analysis of benchmarking information and other data which was sourced using House Mark for other local authority data.
- 2.10 Please note this report is not in depth as it was undertaken against a limited timescale of 12 weeks in line with our work program.

3. Findings

- 3.1.1 At the time of investigation we found that the interim Housing Complaints Officers' workload was too great for one individual member of staff. The officer was responsible for complaints investigation, letter writing, and co-ordination of complaints and MP enquiries. We suggest a more even distribution of workload between staff – To allow the interim Complaints Officer to Better service the complainants. CBC housing service may want to consider defining a clear role for the interim Complaints Officer and other staff in relation to complaints.
- 3.1.2 Staff Cover – The interim Housing Complaints Officer at the time of investigation is currently relied upon to be both co-ordinator and investigate complaints. There are no other staff currently trained to cover this role, if the officer is off sick or on holiday. There is a need to implement a contingency cover arrangement so timescales are met when the interim Complaints Officer is not available. Please refer to appendices
- 3.1.3 In the Housing Service tracking and recording of complaints is inconsistent – Currently not all calls are logged as a complaint, when they are resolved at first

point of contact, which although is in accordance with the SCHH procedure, does not enable better customer insight/data for service improvement (due to lack of recording system within Housing Services). There are four ways in which a complaint can be made, telephone call, email, pre paid pro forma letter or via your MP. Consideration should be given to capturing all complaints even where resolved at first point of contact. CBC must have a consistent approach to each and every complaint.

- 3.1.4 We identified through anecdotal evidence from the interim housing complaints officer, that time is spent on complaints that cannot always be resolved due to differing stories between the complainant and the staff member who was originally spoken to. The interim Housing Complaints Officer stated that sometimes if a complaint was made, if during the investigating neither party agreed, a ‘benefit of the doubt’ scenario is used in favour of the complainant. CBC should consider if all calls should be recorded to minimise this occurring, if the problem is identified as significant upon further investigation by CBC.
- 3.1.5 We found that dependant on the route of the complaint; this would determine how the complaint was resolved, and the time taken to do so. For example, a letter would go directly to the interim Housing Complaints Officer and be dealt with accordingly, however a call to Customer Services on the 0300 300 8000 (the customer contact centre) needed more time to resolve as needed to be passed on to the relevant staff to deal with. This excludes the ‘resolved at first point of contact queries. CBC needs to consider if regular training to the contact centre and staff who field calls on areas of frequent complaints ought to be given, to improve the customer experience and enable more complaints to be resolved at the first point of contact.
- 3.1.6 The SCHH Customer Feedback Procedure refers to aim to resolve complaints within agreed timescales. Staff workload within Housing departments should be taken into account when discussing timescales with customers.
- 3.1.7 The Designated Tenants Complaints Panel (DTCP) has not been formalised. Panel members have been selected but not trained, and is not currently registered with the Housing Ombudsmen or publicised to tenants. CBC should clarify if they are proceeding with the DTCP and implement fully if they are. Alternatively they could use the selected panel members for a CBC ‘complaints panel’ which is recognised as good practice by House Mark. If CBC choose to formalise the DTCP it will need to be registered with the Housing Ombudsman and the current response letter will need to be updated to make reference to the DTCP as an option for complainants to take up.

- 3.1.8 More systematic communication between CBC Housing staff and complainants is needed together with a joined up logging system between customer relations and the housing service. There is an inconsistent approach currently to the four ways a complaint can be raised. For example: we found in our limited sample a complaint via telephone was slower in response compared to a Pre-Paid letter that can be used. . Emails gave a good response return but this medium does not suit all demographics. Complaints via your MP were not assessed during this investigation.
- 3.1.9 We also identified from the interviews with Housing staff members (see appendix) that timescales were not always met. The communication of timescales need to be kept to – it would improve the Customer experience if they were informed of the status of their complaints during the process.
- 3.1.10 When we met with the interim Housing Complaints Officer we were made aware they were not being supported and with regular supervision and guidance.
- 3.1.11 Best Practice – The TSP suggest that CBC check what other strong performing business organisations do in terms of staffing, and recording phone conversations.
- 3.1.12 To assist with providing consistency in the knowledge of staff which we saw missing in the evidence of the differing responses customers received. Despite Customer Relations guidance on the CBC intranet there was no evidence that Housing Services support staff locally, where by more experienced staff passed on their knowledge to other colleagues. We do not know if Housing Services staff is aware of the guidance via the intranet as this was not investigated.

3.2 Access to the service

We found that Housing customers may find information or log complaints in several ways.

- 3.2.1 Phone 0300 300 8302 (Housing Customer Services)
- 3.2.2 Email to www.customers@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk was used for mystery shopping purposes.
- 3.2.3 When attempting to find Complaints leaflets at Watling House they could not be found. A request was made to reception who said it appears they are just out of stock.
- 3.2.4 When the panel checked, they were informed that you can register a complaint at reception and they will contact an officer to come out and discuss.

- 3.2.5 The CBC website is available with information regarding Housing Services and advice available. It should be understood that not all tenants have access to this information though.
- 3.2.6 When one complaint was handed in at Watling House reception via the pre paid leaflet for complaints (for SCHH services) the interim Housing Complaints Officer received this complaint. We did not investigate whether the interim housing complaints officer logged this with the customer relations department retrospectively. We found that if other complaint mechanisms were used they took longer to get to the interim Housing Complaints Officer as they have other points of contact first.
- 3.2.7 Complaints are not logged if resolved at first point of contact in accordance with current policy however, if all complaints are not logged then learning is lost and the data is not a true reflection of complaint activity.

3.3 Response to first reports of complaints

- 3.3.1 We received different responses when we tested logging a complaint. For example out of the sample we carried out, the pre paid postal response was quicker than the complaints sent through by email, but as previously stated this may be because it went directly to the interim Housing Complaints Officer.
- 3.3.2 We tested making a complaint by phone, email and letter and all were responded to.
- 3.3.3 When a complaint was made by phone the complainant was transferred on phone to a person who it turned out could not resolve it.
- 3.3.4 When a complaint was made by letter the complainant was transferred to the correct person.
- 3.3.5 When a complaint was made by email the complainant received a response. An email response was sent back from Customer Relations to the complainant stating that as it was an Anti Social Behaviour issue this was a matter for the police and no further action would be taken. However, this email was received after the complainant had made a follow up telephone call where they were told that the call had in fact been referred to Housing for investigation under nuisance behaviour. A further email was then received confirming actions taken. It is unclear that if the complainant had not called in, whether the additional information would have been provided.

3.4 Staff

- 3.4.1 Information provided by the interim Housing Complaints Officer showed some issues with poor staff attitude. Please see Appendices
- 3.4.3 We found that customers were not consistently being directed to the interim Housing Complaints Officer for a first point of resolution, more training is needed for staff to help resolve these issues.

3.5 Tenant involvement

- 3.5.1 CBC Housing Services staff are advised that they should engage with the complainant at the outset of an enquiry.
- 3.5.2 Designate Tenant's Complaint Panel (DTCP): We clarified that members have been selected but no training has yet been supplied for members.
- 3.5.3 We found that the proposed DTCP members are not registered as a DTCP with the Housing Ombudsman. CBC will need to consider if they wish to implement this or have an informal panel as best practise.
- 3.5.5 The interim Housing Complaints Officer felt it would be beneficial if there was a group of tenants they could discuss complaints with to check their intended response before making it; i.e. DTCP or similar. This was also highlighted in the staff interviews with the Asset Manager Technical Services Team Leader where officers confirmed it would be good to have a means of checking prior to response.
- 3.5.7 We note that the intention of the DTCP is to check the process was followed by the organisation, but not to question the outcome and decision made regarding the complaint of the customer.
- 3.5.8 We found that tenant feedback, on whether complainants are unhappy with the complaints service and outcomes of their complaints is not being captured currently.

3.6 Satisfaction

- 3.6.1 We found satisfaction was an area that could be improved on by capturing customer opinion on responses to complaints. A small number of complainants were surveyed during the investigation, with one person responding and this suggested they would like this.
- 3.6.2 We did not have access to satisfaction data as CBC does not collate this currently.

3.7 Performance

3.7.1 Looking at the data supplied by the interim Housing complaints officer there was an increase of 50% of complaints not meeting the target time for responses from previous months.. Whilst we did not investigate the cause, this along with the balanced scorecard data gave us reason to feel some action is needed.

3.7.2 The nature of these complaints is varied in their subject.

3.8 Value for money

3.8.1 We wished to compare officer time against House Mark. This was not possible to benchmark as data not being available until 2014/2015.

4 Conclusion

Communication between staff and customers could be improved by more contact, and updating to customers.

A review of the Complaints Process and timescales was looked at with the Key Performance Indicators and investigated why complaints were not all being responded to in agreed timescales.

We have made 12 recommendations on this enquiry, which include Staff Training, Staffing levels/cover, Housing Staff following the process in accordance with the SCHA procedure, tracking and recording of complaints. We have undertaken an investigation on CBC's behalf. We hope you find our research and information of great importance to CBC, along with providing you with a very useful analysis of the complaints service that otherwise you would have had to undertaken yourselves.

We hope our recommendations will be accepted and implemented within our recommended timescales

We feel that as a panel we are being better received by the officers as we get to work with them more often.

With the tight time frame we set we did find it very difficult to adhere to as the information that we requested was not forthcoming due to officers work loads.

We would like to thank everybody who took part, the officers and team leaders that had extra work to do because of the enquiry and the Tenant Involvement Team in particular Brett and Samantha.

5 Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Priority	Timescale
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1	More even distribution of workload between staff – To allow Complaints Officer to better service the complainants. CBC may want to consider clear role for the Complaints Officer (CO) and other staff in relation to complaints Appendix A – Interview findings	High	3 Months
2	Staff Cover – At present the housing service is very reliant on the Complaints officer to coordinate all complaints. To implement a contingency so timescales are met when Complaints Officer is away. Delegation to a trained person in CO absence.	High	3 Months
3	Track and record complaints – Currently not all calls are logged when resolved at first point of contact, and there are four ways in which a complaint can be made. Consider defining complaints verses enquiries and capturing all complaints even where resolved at first point of contact for instance via Q/L. Must have a consistent approach to each and every complaint.	High	9 Months
4	CBC to consider if all calls should be recorded so less he said she said scenario - The Number of findings dealt with suggests that if calls were recorded at first point of contact there would be a reduction in lack of evidence when a complaint is being investigated. .	High	3-6 Months
5	Better Training to improve information provided – Providing regular training to the staff who field calls of resolutions in areas or frequent complaints, this will improve the customer experience and should resolve more complaints at first point of contact.	Medium	6-12 Months
6	Agreed timescales to be adhered to. When Timescales are agreed with the complainant the internal workload of	High/Medium	6-12 Months

	departments should be a factor and be appropriate to the urgency or type of issue. If the agreed timescale can not be met then the complainant should be contacted to re-agree timescales.		
7	CBC to clarify whether they will implement a formal (ombudsman registered Tenant Complaints Panel) or informal Complaints Panel – The panel members have been selected but not trained or registered. If CBC implement the formal DTCP, this needs to be formalised with terms of reference and be registered with the Housing Ombudsman. The current response letter issued will need to be updated to make reference to the DTCP as an option for complainants to take up. (Before going to the ombudsman, keeping this as an option to resolve within CBC and prevent escalation.	High/Medium	12-18 Months
8	Communication timescales need to be kept to – Customers need to be informed of the status of their complaints. A mechanism for tracking this and providing support to staff should be implemented.	Medium	Long Term
9	The Complaints Officer needs to be monitored - A clear monitoring process should be updated so the officer can be supported.	Medium/Low	6-12 Months
10	Best Practice – The TSP suggest that CBC check what other strong performing organisations do in terms of staffing and recording phone conversations.	Medium	6-12 Months
11	Reference/Procedure Manual – To provide a folder (electronic/binder) to ensure staff knowledge is available to draw on at all times and updated regularly (quarterly)	High	3-6 Months
12	Tenant Responsibilities – To promote the responsibilities of tenants against the services provided by CBC. To set tenant	Medium	12-18 Months

	expectations of what they can expect to be undertaken by CBC. (Via their tenancy agreement, whether they are a new or existing tenant).		
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6 Appendices

6.1 Staff Interviews:

- Lisa Eyre (Housing Complaints Officer)
- Peter Joslin (Team Leader Routine Maintenance – Asset Management)
- Paul Chambers (left CBC)
- Sonya Branagan (Customer Relations Manager) – telephone interview

6.2 Tenants questions - complaints process letter and questionnaire

6.3 Tenants questions – complaints process response

6.4 Mystery shopping email response

6.5 Complaint Types statistics

6.6 Complaints Breakdown

6.7 Complaints Breakdown (1st January 2014 – 30th September 2014)

6.8 Documents examined:

- SCHH Balance Scorecard
- CBC SCHH Customer Feedback Procedure – compliments, comments and complaints
- CBC Corporate Customer Feedback Procedure
- Pre Paid Complaints form

NOTE the documents listed above are held with the tenant Participation Team, please contact Samantha Few-Wiegratz should you wish more information.