

Central Bedfordshire Council
Social Care, Health and Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee

24 August 2015

Tenant's Scrutiny Panel report on Complaints.

Report of (Cllr Carole Hegley Executive Member for Social Care & Housing Advising Officers: (Julie Ogley), Director of Social Care, Health and Housing and (Carol Rooker) carol.rooker@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

Purpose of this report:

The Tenant's Scrutiny Panel has completed a report on the complaints handling process of the Housing Service. Their recommendations complement actions that the Housing Service wants to implement to provide excellent customer service, including dealing with any complaints received and learning from them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to:

1. Receive the report and acknowledge the work of the Tenants Scrutiny Panel
2. Acknowledge and support the Panel's recommendations for supporting improvement in the complaints process
3. Acknowledge and support the action plan that the Service has drafted in response to the recommendations made by the Tenant Scrutiny Panel, as part of its plans to improve customer service delivery, and the complaints service in order to improve customer outcomes and learn from complaints.
4. Acknowledge that the Tenant Scrutiny Panel is supportive of the Service's response to their report, and looks forward to working with the service in terms of delivery of the action plan.

Background

The Housing Service, and specifically the Complaints and MP enquiries processes for Housing have seen significant change within the last year. Last year, the Service received 47 compliments and comments, 434 MP enquiries and 88 complaints. Out of the 88 complaints received and investigated, 69% were upheld. Many take a significant amount of time to deal with, as they can be complex and wide ranging, and it is important to provide a cohesive and satisfactory outcome for the customer.

The definition of a complaint can sometimes be unclear, but the Chartered Institute of Housing define it as “any expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, action, or lack of action.”

The Council, and the Social Care, Health and Housing Customer feedback procedure, recognise that any expression of dissatisfaction is important and therefore adopt a “get it right first time” approach to its handling and investigation from the customer.

As the Housing Service has grown and developed, so too has its requirement to manage a greater volume of compliments, complaints and MP enquiries. The Service uses this feedback to implement changes in its service to in-bed “lessons learnt”. We value this insight to inform service delivery.

The Housing Service works closely with its corporate partners-Customer Relations and the Customer Contact centre in managing the complaints for housing. Customer Relations are responsible for overseeing the compliment, complaints and feedback for the Council as a whole. The Customer Contact Centre handles all general enquiries for the council as a whole, including the Housing Service. Both corporate partners may be the first point of contact for a customer wishing to raise a concern about the Housing Service.

Any complaints referred to our corporate partners about the Housing Service are passed to the customer service and complaints officer within housing, for the investigation and response to the customer. Customer relations will log and track the progress of any complaint recorded, and assist with monitoring response times.

Complaints and MP enquiries within the Housing Service

In early 2014/15, due to staff changes, and restructuring of the Housing Service, the timely response to customer complaints for the Housing Service was not consistently satisfactory. Performance dipped with only 62.5% of responses being responded to within laid- down timescales.

The Tenants Scrutiny Panel (TSP) agreed to investigate this area of service delivery, following the completion of their first enquiry on how the service deals with anti social behaviour. The launch of their inquiry was closely followed by the Housing Service commencing its own review of its own internal processes at the end of 2014. A new service manager immediately implemented significant changes to the Housing Service’s processes, to improve service delivery.

The TSP’s report on their findings and recommendations is attached at Appendix A. The TSP will also deliver a presentation to the Committee to show case their work to show how it is developing its relationship with officers and its commitment to working in partnership with the Council to improve customer service for tenants. The presentation is at Appendix B.

Housing Services response

The findings and subsequent recommendations from the TSP report have provided invaluable customer insight for the Housing Service, to enable significant changes to be made to housing processes, which addresses all of the recommendations and findings within the TSP report.

In addition, the Housing Service has also identified a need for the managing of complaints, to become a service delivery in its own right, for housing. This has led to the launch of a customer care improvement programme within the Service. See Appendix C outlining the actions to be implemented taking account of the findings of the TSP report.

The Housing Service is working closely with corporate colleagues to deliver a training programme that addresses both cultural change as well as process improvements. All of these actions encompass the TSP's recommendations, but also builds on them, to formulate an 18 point action plan delivered by a service project group.

Many pressing actions have already been implemented, since the TSP enquiry was commenced, with the average response rate for dealing with complaints improving for the April/May 2015 period to 83.95%. This is a significant improvement on last year, and one that the Service wants to continue and ensure a consistency of approach.

Housing Services future approach to its customer and complaints services

This new approach embeds a cultural change towards more comprehensive complaints and enquiries management and encompasses not only the previously underperforming response times, but more proactive measures to address why customers complain, and how we can improve our services on the front line.

We are working with corporate partners to ensure a seamless and efficient approach to our improvements, capitalising on the support and expertise of our Learning and Development partners, and Customer Relations in particular.

1. Council Priorities

Indicate how the proposed action supports at least one of the Council's priorities, listed below:

- enhancing your local community – creating jobs, managing growth, protecting our countryside and enabling businesses to grow.
- improved educational attainment
- promote health and well being and protect the vulnerable
- better infrastructure – improved roads, broadband reach and transport

- great universal services – bins, leisure and libraries
- value for money – freezing council tax

As a landlord, the Council is responsible for providing good quality homes and services to the Council' tenants, many of these tenants are vulnerable. Tenant scrutiny provides a means of ensuring that the Council has sound financial and service management and this will contribute to the Council providing value for money, and enabling the Council to successfully deliver its priorities.

2. **Corporate Implications**

Risk Management, there are risks associated with not addressing the outcome of the Tenant's Scrutiny Panel report. These include: poor service delivery, lack of value for money and reputational risks. In addressing complaints in a timely and thorough manner the Council mitigates the risk of further escalation and potential legal or statutory costs.

3. **Legal Implications**

In April 2012, the Localism Act changed parts of the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 and established standards that social housing providers are expected to achieve.

As part of this revised regulatory framework for social housing providers standards under the 2011 and 2008 acts, in particular require registered providers to comply with specified rules about methods of enabling tenants to influence or control the management of their accommodation and environment.

The Council, as part of the new revised regulatory framework for social housing providers, is expected to give tenants a wide range of opportunities to influence, and be involved, in the following areas:

- Formulating their landlord's housing related policies and priorities
- Making decisions about how housing related services are delivered, including setting service standards
- Scrutinising their landlord's performance and recommending how performance might be improved

Whilst there is no prescriptive solution as to what methods are used to achieve this, a Tenants Scrutiny Panel provides us with good local mechanics, and the formal scrutiny role for tenants, who will, if necessary, hold the Council to account for any concerns they have with the services that they receive. Panels are also mentioned in consultation documents published just prior to the changes being implemented by the 2011 Act.

4. **Financial Implications**

The costs involved in developing and supporting the Tenants Scrutiny Panel, as well as the delivery of the action plan, can be covered within the existing Landlord Service Business Plan.

5. **Equalities Implications**

The Council, as a public body, must act to eliminate unlawful discrimination, victimisation, and harassment against people on the grounds of race, religion, or belief, age, sex, pregnancy and maternity, gender reassignment, sexual orientation and disability. Further the duty requires the Council to advance equality of opportunity between different groups, and foster good relationships between different groups.

The National Standard for housing providers on Tenant Involvement requires that the Council understands and responds to the diverse needs of tenants. The Tenants Scrutiny Panel assists in progress on meeting this aim.

6. **Conclusion and next Steps**

The Housing Service has been through a significant amount of organisational changes over the last year, and the process of managing complaints has evolved as part of that structure. Measures are now being implemented to further embed customer excellence, not only in our front line service delivery so we get it right first time, but also in our handling of all enquiries and complaints, to ensure that customers receive a timely and professional response.

The area of complaints is a complex and multiple layered area of the business, however, we are confident that with the TSP report findings, and their ongoing support, coupled with the delivery of our action plan, we will achieve consistent improvements with this important service area.

Appendices

Appendix A Tenants Scrutiny Panel report

Appendix B Tenants Scrutiny Panel presentation

Appendix C Housing Service Action Plan incorporating TSP recommendations.

Background Papers

None