

# **Mystery Shopping Project Spring 2008**

***Redland Housing Association in partnership with Somer Community Housing Trust and TPAS (Tenant Participation Advisory Service)***

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## ***1. Executive summary***

1.1 This project provides a reality check of Redland's customer service; comparing what customers experience when they approach the organisation, with what Redland says they will do.

1.2 The qualitative data collected tells us what is strong about Redland's customer service and what can be improved. The majority of the results show Redland providing the quality of service it says it will, with a few exceptions.

1.3 Key findings showed that two thirds of the mystery shops were met with excellent or good service overall; two thirds of shops found that staff explained things well or excellently; and 11 out of 18 shops found that the answers given by staff were good or excellent in terms of accuracy compared with model answers.

1.4 Shoppers were impressed with the patience, understanding, sensitivity and empathy of staff in responding to their queries, and with how easy it was, in most cases, to speak to someone who attempted to help or who successfully helped them.

1.5 However, the project found that customers tended to have to fit in to the system to get a confident answer to a general query. Staff were sometimes reluctant to give information about Redland's procedures, for instance, how to make a complaint, or how to get an adaptation to a property, without knowing the name or address of the customer.

1.6 This report explains how the project was put together, presents the mystery shopping results and makes recommendations arising from the results to be considered by the Redland management team. The report also invites a response of agreed actions that intend to address the identified weaknesses of Redland's customer service delivery.

## **2. Introduction**

2.1 The concept of involving residents in inspection of housing association services is increasingly recognised as a way of making services more transparent to residents; allowing them to scrutinise processes and policies. Redland already involves residents in estate inspections and in monitoring performance indicators, and setting and measuring service standards through focus groups.

2.2 Mystery shopping, in particular, takes a snap shot of the service delivery, testing the customer services of an organisation.

2.3 Redland Housing Association aims to achieve excellent customer service by 2010 and recognises that continuous improvement is crucial to achieving and maintaining this standard of service.

2.4 Redland Housing Association and Somer Community Housing Trust (SCHT) worked together to deliver the project and so were able to share the costs of training and consultancy for the project. We approached three consultants experienced in supporting or running mystery shopping projects; House Mark, Shore (Social Housing Research and Evaluation), and TPAS (Tenant Participation Advisory Service) and chose TPAS to support us.

2.5 The project spanned 9 months, from planning and inviting consultancy quotes, to the presentation of the project findings to Redland's management team.

## **3. Methodology**

### **Method**

3.1 We chose scenario based mystery shopping to test services against published standards over a two and a half week period. In this method the mystery shopper's identity is not revealed and they act as either residents or prospective applicants of the association, their family members or supporters. This method allows a fast rate of collecting data and control of the specific areas shopped.

3.2 Real time mystery shopping involves trained resident mystery shoppers ringing up when they have a real query or repair, and feeding back their experiences via a form. This method will be considered in the future, as the rate of collecting data is much slower and unpredictable.

### **Recruitment**

3.3 We recruited volunteers by writing to all tenants whose tenancies began within the last year, and all residents on the Redland Residents' Panel with the exception of residents who are already well known to staff through being involved in activities before. With the letter was a flyer, shown in appendix 1, inviting residents to request an application form.

3.4 We had initial interest from 30 people, who filled in an application form. We required applicants to attend a taster session in order to meet them; for the volunteers to decide whether they wanted to commit their time to the project; and to identify any support needs they may have had. 13 people attended the taster session, and 10 people committed to the project

3.5 The mystery shopper team had been residents of Redland and SCHAT for varying lengths of time. Four were Redland residents, and six were Trust residents. A demographic profile of the mystery shoppers is shown in appendix 2 showing that we had a fairly diverse mix of people involved in the project.

### **Training and Support**

3.6 We ran two half-day training sessions for the mystery shoppers at the end of March and beginning of April which were delivered by Jenny Vernon, Senior Associate Consultant for TPAS. The training sessions covered the following areas:

- Explaining what mystery shopping is, and what it isn't
- Different methods of mystery shopping, and when to use them
- How mystery shopping links in to the inspection regime
- Choosing which areas to shop, how mystery shopping works to improve services, and the method's limitations.
- Setting guidelines – code of conduct, confidentiality, keeping safe and being fair
- Identifying practical skills – such as observation, listening, telephone techniques etc
- Developing scenarios and recording information
- Planning the shop – developing the timetable and deciding next steps

3.7 The mystery shoppers engaged in different tasks throughout the training to identify their strengths and weaknesses as mystery shoppers and agreed to have a professional and objective approach through their code of conduct, shown in appendix 3. Mystery shoppers agreed not to shop areas of service where they had had grievances in the past and felt they were unable to be objective about these services.

3.8 The mystery shoppers received phone support from TPAS, and Redland and Somer officers during the shop. They met three weeks after the end of the shop once the results had been collated by TPAS to discuss the findings and to make recommendations.

### **Scenario development**

3.9 The areas shopped were common repair and improvement queries; aids and adaptations queries; reporting complaints; anti social behaviour queries; and requesting information in alternative formats. Redland developed 12 scenarios across these areas, and a total of 18 shops took place. Priority was given to these areas, however, further scenarios were developed for testing other service areas in future.

3.10 Developing the scenarios began with a desk top review of the organisation's published standards carried out by TPAS with Redland and SCHAT officers. The table below shows the sources used in the desk top review.

Redland Housing Association	Somer Community Housing Trust
Redland Partnership Agreement Service standards for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer care</li> <li>• Dealing with nuisance and anti social behaviour</li> <li>• Communications</li> </ul> Customer Care policy Aids and adaptations policy Complaints policy and procedure Anti social behaviour policy Redland residents leaflet series	Comments and complaints procedure leaflet Customer care charter Repairs Standard March 2006 SCHAT Partnership Agreement
Data protection (Telephone Enquiries) procedure	

3.11 The majority of scenarios were put together by TPAS, with Redland and Somer officers providing model answers shoppers could expect. At the training session, mystery shoppers worked together to come up with a further four scenarios, with the model answers again provided by Redland and Somer Officers. The model answers for Redland were put together by the Tenant Liaison Officer and the Housing Manager.

3.12 The standards tested by the mystery shoppers were the following:

1. *Customer Care standard 1* - Redland will reply to written communication within 14 days of receipt.
2. *Customer Care Policy paragraph 2.8.3* - Letters will be clear, informative and written in plain English...
3. *Customer Care standard 2* - Offer a simple way to make a complaint, which residents understand.
4. *Customer Care standard 4* - Make sure callers speak to someone able to deal with their enquiry, usually when they first call, or if this is not possible, within one working day.
5. *Customer Care Policy paragraph 2.1* - Staff will be polite and helpful. Staff will be willing to listen to customers and will have access to relevant information enabling them to respond to customer enquiries. Staff will respond effectively and sensitively to the needs of the customer.
6. *Customer Care Policy paragraph 2.1* - Staff will provide accurate information and advice ....
7. *Customer Care Policy paragraph 2.1* - Staff will treat members of the public professionally and courteously at all times and will not enter into heated discussions or arguments with members of the public.

## **Method limitations**

3.13 Mystery shopping provides a snap shot in time, and we have to be careful in drawing the assumption that the service delivered during the mystery shopping period was typical of that delivered throughout the year. However, what is important is the customer's experience; so, no matter what the circumstances of the organisation during the mystery shop (for instance, IT systems not working, or staff shortage due to sickness) it is always fair to judge the organisation against its published standards.

3.14 The results are based on the customer's perception, and description of their experience, which is likely to vary from person to person. The planning and training process aimed to reduce subjectivity by agreeing with mystery shoppers to measure their experience against the published standards of the organisation. The code of conduct was developed and signed by all the mystery shoppers, and commits them to aim to be objective.

3.15 Keeping mystery shoppers' identities a 'mystery' required that they did not give their name and address. This limited the kinds of queries that shoppers could make to general enquiries.

## **Budget**

3.16 The total project budget was £8,000; £5,500 contributed by Somer Community Housing Trust and £2,500 by Redland Housing Association. The actual expenditure was as £7,049.61. Details are provided in appendix 5.

## 4. Results

4.1 These results have been collated from the feedback forms completed by the shoppers after each of the 18 shops, and explored by the shoppers at the feedback session on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2008. The feedback form they used is shown in appendix 4. The shaded boxes indicate comments from the feedback forms; the green shade indicates positive feedback, and pink indicates negative or neutral feedback.

### Overall Customer service

4.2 Seven shoppers said they experienced excellent service overall, five experienced good service, four experienced fair service, and two experienced poor service. Here are some of the individual comments from the feedback forms.

“I was treated with the greatest respect, patience, understanding, and sensitivity to the situation...”

“This letter would instil a great sense of trust. The closing phrase was particularly well done: - ‘...we are glad to receive complaints as they give us direct feedback on our services and a chance to put things right.’

“This person was a really good representative and was very empathetic.”

4.3 The shoppers added general comments about their general experience during the shops recorded at the feedback day.

“Accuracy was good for the limited information mystery shoppers could provide”

“Officers gave replies using natural language, it sounded like they were using their own words rather than a script.”

“They were sincere and sounded like they really cared. It was personal- in a good way.”

“Reception staff were really helpful”

“People had a friendly approach”

4.4 For two thirds of the shops, shoppers described the way staff explained things to them as good or excellent. Only one shopper described the ways things were explained as poor, and the rest were described as fair.

## **Measuring service against the standards**

### **Redland will reply to written communication within 14 days of receipt**

4.5 Of the two shops by letter, only one was replied to within the timescale. However, the response in the letter received outside of the timescale was accurate in comparison to the model answer and provided further information in a leaflet.

4.6 The four email shops received quick replies, all within published timescales, but two shops were criticised for not taking in to account circumstances stated by the customer.

“I felt my ‘world’ had not been entered into because the reply made no reference to my clearly stated hesitancy at getting involved.”

“I explained that my neighbour was hard of hearing but she was still asked to make contact”

### **Letters will be clear, informative and written in plain English**

4.7 Four out of six written responses were easy to read and written in understandable language.

“Very clear and well laid out response, certainly gave the impression time had been given to it.”

“Process was clearly stated.”

“Very kindly worded. Reply was factual and extremely well laid out.”

4.8 The other two feedback sheets for written shops did not answer this question. One was an email shop reporting a repair, for which the shopper was satisfied with the response. The other was an email shop in which the shopper said they did not receive any help or information, just a reply saying that once the tenant address was provided the query would be passed to the housing officer.

### **Offer a simple way to make a complaint which residents understand**

4.9 Of the four shops about how to make a complaint, one shop was deemed to have received excellent service, two good service, and one a fair service. The following comments refer to how easy it was to make a complaint:

“Factual and amazingly helpful.”

“The response said that they needed to know the severity of the complaint before providing the best way of making a complaint.”

“She told me to write the complaint and post to the office.”

“Because I did not give my name she told me to write in to Redland and that it would be passed forward to the relevant manager.”

**Make sure callers speak to someone able to deal with their enquiry, usually when they first call, or if this is not possible, within one working day**

4.10 For 11 out of 12 phone calls, shoppers were able to speak to someone who could answer their query. One shopper aborted the call because the staff member they spoke to was pressuring them to say where they lived.

4.11 On two occasions shoppers had to ring three times before a member of staff picked up the phone. These are the times when shoppers could not get through:

Date	No answer	No answer	Call answered
Friday 25 <sup>th</sup> April	2pm	3pm	3.20pm
Friday 2 <sup>nd</sup> May	11am	1.30pm	3pm

**Staff will be polite and helpful...will listen to customers and will have access to relevant information enabling them to respond to customer enquiries. Staff will respond effectively and sensitively to the needs of the customer.**

4.12 The results from 14 shops gave very positive feedback on the way staff related to customers. Here are some examples:

“Good, some slang used appropriately, which was done in a way that would put you at ease. Was clearly repeated back what they had understood the problem to be.”

“I was told that all cases were treated with confidentiality she was very respectful and sensitive to the situation.”

4.13 However, two mystery shop results said that staff did not show patience, understanding and sensitivity to the caller, one of which was an email and one a telephone call. Closer inspection of the feedback helps understand what made the mystery shopper feel that the staff member did not show patience, understanding and sensitivity:

“The response was in no way personalised to the request for help other than in the first line.” Email

“The response was sufficient, but did feel unfriendly especially since it was clear that I was ringing on behalf of someone who was nervous of the process.” Email

*When asked what was missing from the model answer, the shopper wrote:*  
“The assurance that the problem could be put right.” Email

"I felt they had little or no compassion or understanding of my need for anonymity." Telephone

### **Staff will provide accurate information and advice**

4.14 Shoppers were asked to say how accurate the responses were compared with the model answers. 16 feedback forms showed an answer, of which 11 said the accuracy was good or excellent, two said the accuracy was fair and three of which said the accuracy was poor.

"All questions answered to the model answers in the person's own words."

"Everything was covered with extra personal input."

"Only the reference to writing in and passing forward to the relevant manager was said to me."

4.15 One of the questions asked was whether staff referred to or offered further information in the form of a leaflet or the website. Of the 14 shops that covered a query for which Redland has a leaflet and information on the website, only four times did staff either refer to the leaflets or offer to send these to residents.

### **Staff will treat members of the public professionally and courteously at all times**

4.16 Of all the shoppers that answered this question on the feedback form (11 answers) everyone said that staff acted in a professional manner.

4.17 All 18 shoppers answered the question 'were you treated with courtesy and respect?' 16 said 'yes' and two said 'no'. The feedback forms tell us more

*"When asked whether they were treated with courtesy and respect, one of the shoppers wrote: "Not sure, the tone was quite curt (e.g. no salutation)"*

"I hung up as I felt pressurised to give more information than was comfortable."

### **Consistency of customer experience**

4.18 Though we must be careful drawing statistical conclusions from such a small sample, it is interesting that in terms of overall service, nearly the same number of shoppers described the service as fair or poor (six), as those who described the service as excellent. Even within this small sample we see that there is inconsistency in the quality of service experienced by residents.

4.19 Closer investigation of the feedback forms helps us analyse why some shops had less favourable results. It appears that sometimes callers found remaining anonymous made it hard to access help. Even asking for general information about procedures, or 'what do I do if...?' questions, sometimes

staff were reluctant to answer without probing for specific details about the caller's address. Here are some of the comments from feedback forms;

"Because I did not give the address, she was unable to put me through to the correct administration department." Telephone

"Eventually, but hesitating I was put through to maintenance department." Telephone

"They acted as though I was being unreasonable wanting to retain anonymity." Telephone

"Because I did not give a name, I was asked to write in to Redland." Telephone

"Frustrated! If this had been the real world, I would have backed off by the short albeit polite request for the tenants' details." Email

4.20 These results raise the question does Redland expect customers to fit in to a system rather than focussing on what the customer wants? Although it is reasonable and polite to ask a customer's name when they ring up, it is also reasonable for customers to withhold their name and address if their query is about general information, or if they do not feel safe to give it, for instance.

## **5. Recommendations**

5.1 The following recommendations were created by the mystery shoppers at the feedback session on 27<sup>th</sup> May with support from our TPAS Associate, Jenny Vernon, Redland's Tenant Liaison Officer, Philippa Barton, Somer Community Housing Trust's Community Investment Manager, Cathy McMahon, and SCHAT's Neighbourhood Services Manager Manager, Flavia Baxter.

### **a) Support for staff to answer general questions**

5.2 All the shops covered general queries that asked about Redland's procedures and policies. Scenarios where the answer depended on the address of the shopper were deliberately avoided. The shops that impressed shoppers were ones in which staff offered as much information as they could without knowing more of the customer's circumstances, and offered to send leaflets or further written information to follow up the query. The shoppers recommend that staff do this more.

### **Frequently Asked Questions sheet**

5.3 One way to do this is by providing staff members with a frequently asked questions fact sheet, to assist staff to give out accurate information. This could also be uploaded to the website to allow staff members to refer residents to further information to read at their leisure.

### **Residents leaflet series**

5.4 Redland already has a series of leaflets for residents about different aspects of their tenancy, a tenants' handbook and repairs handbook. As so few staff members referred to the leaflets which are ideal to use for general enquiries, it would be beneficial to review the purpose of the leaflets and raise awareness among staff that they can be useful in responding to general enquiries.

### **b) Consistent approach to customers**

5.5 The best shops were those where staff listened to or read the customer's enquiry and respected their confidentiality. This meant either answering the query according to the information they had been given, clearly explaining what they could do for them, but explaining what else they could do if the customer gave them their details. Shoppers recommended that every question be treated with the same respect, whether the staff member feels able to answer or not, and whether or not the customer chooses to remain anonymous.

### **c) 'Is there anything else?'**

5.6 Shoppers were asked in the feedback session what else would improve the service they received in the shops they made, and one of the Somer shoppers suggested that all staff ask 'Is there anything else I can help you

with?’ at the end of each call. Although shoppers did not record whether Redland staff already asked this question, it supports the ethos of customer care that Redland is pursuing.

#### **d) Further recommendations**

##### **Develop resident auditors from the team of mystery shoppers**

5.7 The mystery shoppers involved in the project have a wide range of skills between them which would, with training, enable them to be effective inspectors using other techniques such as auditing procedures by tracking case studies, or direct calling customers. This will involve investing in further training and project support.

##### **Recruit more mystery shoppers**

5.8 As mentioned in the methodology section, 30 people showed interest initially in the project. Our selection process which required applicants to attend a taster session inevitably excluded some applicants who were not able to attend this session. There is potential to go back to these people to invite them to be involved in the next phase of mystery shopping and be supported by our more experienced team of mystery shoppers.

##### **Consider real – time mystery shopping in the longer term**

5.9 To strengthen Redland’s focus on continually improving day to day customer service, the management team may consider installing resident mystery shoppers in a real-time mystery shopping project which could take place over the course of 6-18 months. This would give more detailed and qualitative data, as and when mystery shoppers use Redland’s services in real life. The real nature of the method would enable Redland to measure standards, not just of the first contact with staff, but would follow through the processes that make up the whole customer experience.

## **6. Next step**

6.1 This report invites the Redland management team to agree actions arising from the findings and recommendations of this report with the aim of being able to meet the published customer service standards every time.

6.2 The actions agreed by the management team will be reported back to the mystery shopping team to follow up in the next phase of mystery shopping planned for autumn/winter 2008. The results of the mystery shopping exercise and arising actions will be reported to residents through the Redland residents’ committee meeting in July 2008, via the website in summer 2008, and through the Redletter in October 2008.

## **7. Learning points**

7.1 With only four mystery shoppers for Redland, one of whom was not able to complete the project due to unforeseen circumstances, Redland's results are based on a smaller amount of data than first hoped. To combat this we can consider having residents from one landlord testing the other (for instance, Redland tenant shopping SCHAT's services). This gives the benefit of testing the services from the point of view of a totally new customer, one that is not used to the systems that that landlord uses. However, it also requires greater focus on the desk top review aspect of the project while shoppers familiarise themselves with the standards they are testing against.

7.2 Testing different landlords allows more flexibility so that the impact of one mystery shopper not being able to complete their shops could be minimised by another shopper covering their shops.

7.3 Our current mystery shopper team are keen to do more and to shop each other and other organisations – and have queried setting up a shopping group regionally to be used by other landlords. One shopper commented that they were 'glad to have done it', and would like to try face to face mystery shopping and real-time mystery shopping.

7.4 One shopper commented on the time commitment needed for the project in terms of training and analysis. The project was promoted as a 'different' way of making a difference to the landlord, and one which could be carried out flexibly at home, but in actual fact the time commitment in coming to essential training wasn't clear from the promotional material.

7.5 Another resident commented that the feedback form could be more user-friendly and include other aspects of the service. This particular shopper is working with us more closely to develop a new feedback form for the next shop.

## **8. TPAS Validation**

8.1 It is to Redland's credit that they have openly welcomed mystery shopping as a method of assessing and improving service performance. With the soon-to-be-formed Tenant Services Authority likely to place greater emphasis on resident-led inspection, this project, as an introduction to this process, is quite timely.

8.2 Staff were clear in their model answers, which greatly helped the shoppers assess their customer experience. Resident Involvement staff were instrumental in ensuring the viability, robustness and practicability of this project. Shoppers were enthusiastic in their enacting of typical customer experiences.

8.3 TPAS supported the shoppers (and the Resident Involvement staff) in the setting up, training and analysis of their shop. The team have now produced their report.

8.4 Redland have put processes into place to ensure that recommendations arising from this report are considered (and where possible enacted) by Redland. Feedback outlining the outcome of their recommendations will be provided to the shoppers.

8.5 Good practice considerations for next time:

- Hold a 'how was it for you' session to assess the project from shoppers/landlord perspectives – plan improvements for next time
- Residents and staff to jointly agree a programme of mystery shops
- Consider expanding into a resident inspection project
- Hold another feedback session in 12 months time to assess the impact of the shoppers recommendations (the difference that has been made as a result of their recommendations)
- Run 'short burst' training sessions on specific component parts of the mystery shop/inspection process (if you decide to adopt this) such as listening skills, effective questioning, interview skills etc
- Sell the difference that was made as a result of this project to residents – use this as a recruitment tool for encouraging new shoppers

## **9. Acknowledgements**

The success of this project has relied on residents who have generously given their time and input. They have been patient and gracious to the project managers for whom this project was a first, and have been dedicated in seeing it through to make sure Redland gets the right messages back about its service.

I would like to thank our ten shoppers, whose identity we hope to keep concealed for as long as they want to remain a mystery.

The shoppers that completed the project received a thank you present of £50 shopping vouchers as a token of our appreciation, though we recognise their input has been far more valuable than that. We hope that they will all want to continue with the project into its next phase.

I would also like to thank Jenny Vernon, Senior Associate Consultant for TPAS, and Debbie Lucas, Training and Development Manager for TPAS, who supported us through the project and helped us find our way.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff of Redland Housing Association for their support for the project and their willingness to learn from it.