

Short Notice inspection Improvement Plan

Feedback from Somer Residents Committee special workshop 18 May 2010

1.0 Introduction

67 residents involved with either Somer Residents Committee, one of the five Area Panels or the Homeowners Group, were invited to a special workshop to discuss the Audit Commission recommendations following inspection and give feedback on priorities and actions. 21 residents attended the event and after a brief introduction broke up into workgroups to consider a number of questions structured around one of 4 themes of access and customer care, diversity, value for money and gas servicing, lead by the lead officer for the theme.

2.0 Access & Customer Care – Lead officer Julie Evans

The group looking at access and customer care considered a number of questions:

- Do you feel we make it easy for you to contact us and get the information you want in the way you want it?
- How would you rate our telephone service? What could we do better?
- Do you know what to expect from our services? What performance information would you like us to give you?
- We are reviewing how we deal with complaints. Do you feel we make it easy to make a complaint? If you have made a complaint, were you happy with how we dealt with it? Did you feel we learned from it?
- What do you think of the proposed lettings standard? Do you think we should do other things that we haven't included?

Positive feedback:

- Communication between tradesman and customer is good with tradesman telling when they are arriving.
- Appointment letter for gas servicing is very good, mobile phone text sent when people on way.
- Somer service is better than British Gas.

Negative feedback:

Telephone contact:

- Staff making comments when waiting on the telephone –“she can talk to me if she likes, but I can't tell her anymore than I've already told her”.
- Rang to re-arrange appointment. Message taken but not passed on, staff member turned up.
- Too many times people take messages but don't pass them on.
- People get confused with the repairs message – particularly sheltered residents.
- People are not aware of what areas are covered by 'Keynsham & Villages'.
- People want to get through to someone straight away.

- People shouldn't have to wait for days for someone to ring back.
- Part-time working is a problem, don't know who is who.
- Salutations normally given, but people saying things too quickly – could do with speaking more slowly, especially when leaving a message on an answerphone.

Information:

- Somer Times – people think that people put in bin. The group saw this as a waste of money and an ineffective method for communicating with the majority of residents.

No positive experience was identified about complaints. Feedback included:

- Awful experience– never resolved regarding an officer
- Didn't attend when promised
- Long time to wait for a response to the formal complaint
- Complaint co-ordinator not giving sufficient information
- Not dealt within timescales and not resolved, complaint not closed
- Not enough information or understanding of the complaints procedure
- In both cases, person involved was sick and this elongated the process.

Suggestions for improvements include:

Telephone contact

- Front desk customer service centre – the group was ambivalent. They did definitely not want to consider a call centre which was not run by the organisation, but they saw the merits of having Trust staff offering a front line service dealing with run of the mill enquiries as long as the staff were able to do so properly.
- Telephone numbers for the different teams, also give people direct line numbers, what they do.
- Welcoming of a free phone number so costs are kept low, but also welcoming of an 0345 number that ensures all residents pay the same rate regardless of their circumstances or location.
- Officers should be encouraging tenants to ask them to ring them back so that the Trust bears the cost of the call.
- Would welcome appointments

Information

- Want more info but in different formats, short sound bites.
- More information about the teams.
- Information leaflet for leaseholders as well as to who to contact and how.

In relation to performance information, the group wanted to know what they want and expect – they welcome the new service standards and look forward to understanding what.

Regarding the lettings standard, the group felt the standard was good, and made the following suggestions:

- would prefer to have visual as opposed to all words

- Would also like to see us giving recommendation for local decorators/ handyman / carpet fitters
- Also if Somer could provide a handyman service.

3.0 Diversity – Lead Officer Angela Gascoigne

The group looking at diversity considered a number of questions:

How can we shape our services so that we are able to reflect and respond to the diverse needs of our residents and potential residents?

Lettings –

- Be very transparent about how to access services and about the process and the outcome.
- Monitor who gets the properties against the 8 equality strands and report this to residents. You need to make sure that all households can access the process for letting homes equally – e.g. can people with a disability do this as easily as everyone else?
- Also make sure that the process is easy to use – e.g. do we need to provide more computer access? Are we sure that emphasising computer access is not having a negative effect on any groups of people?
- Be very clear with the councils how people are accessing the services and work with the councils to make this as easy and transparent as possible.

Gas safety –

- The Trust needs to ensure that we limit the use of sub-contractors and where we are using them that we ensure that they are keeping to the equality and diversity aspects of the contract.
- The Trust should offer late appointments for people and appointments on Saturday and Sunday and should advertise the fact that they do so. This will help people by being flexible.
- The Trust should text people before they go to the appointment just to make sure that they are there so they don't have a wasted journey if they are not at home.
- The Trust is good at dealing with more vulnerable people and should continue to be very flexible so that their needs are accommodated.

How can we communicate our commitment to all the diversity strands – age, faith/belief, gender, race, disability, trans- gender, socio-economic factors which lead to disadvantage, sexuality etc.

- The Trust needs to understand what people value within the services they offer and then make sure that these things are delivered for people – e.g. convenience, safety, flexibility etc. The things that people value may differ from group to group and from person to person. For the gas services, for example, if you were a family with children or a pregnant woman you might need to be texted with the appointment just to remind you and you might need an out of hours appointment or a Saturday morning appointment.
- There needs to be a corporate commitment to equality and diversity across the whole group so that this is seen in Job Descriptions, training

opportunities, induction programmes so that what staff do and say is aligned with the value of respect.

- Make sure that the tenancy agreement and the handbook cover these areas.
- Use Some Times to communicate the commitment and make sure that we have a range of tapes, dvds, cds for people as well which communicate our commitment.
- Make the spoken media funky so that people will want to use it – it's not just for people who have visual impairment its also for people who don't read well or at all.
- When asking people for equality information they can feel uncomfortable about this. Make sure that you find out why and try and put their fears at rest by explaining face to face why we need the information and how it is used.

How do we ensure that we are able to communicate the need to carry out the tenant profiling and how we will use this information effectively to improve services for all residents and particular groups who we may be failing to serve effectively?

- This needs to be part of the communication of our ethos and values such as the respect value
- . At lettings explain to people why we need the information which is to make sure that we improve services.
- Report back to residents what a difference what they told us made.
- Find people where they go – e.g. mums clubs.
- Make sure that personal information is kept confidential and that people are safe.
- Make sure that our staff are communicating the right way – you need to be prepared to visit and listen to what people tell you.
- Provide training in living the values and make sure that people are treating residents well and showing the right attitude, and asking the right questions in the right way.
- Give the gas engineers information about issues so that they can flag up any problems which the housing staff can deal with.

How do we involve residents effectively in carrying out Equality Impact Assessments and ensuring that the action we need to take is carried out?

- Be specific about what you want to achieve. Make sure that there is a value in the activity you undertake. Answer the question – what's in it for me? Is it going to improve my service?

How do we get the equalities information we need when carrying out the satisfaction surveys?

- Be targeted – don't take a blanket approach and don't keep asking the same questions over and over again as this breeds suspicion.

- Take time to listen to people,
- Communicate the ethos and values in Somer Times, on the website by audio tapes, texting, training staff.
- Do more face to face surveys and phone people
- Undertake straw polls on the web.
- Give prizes to people.
- Every letting is personal and this message is clearly communicated and you can get the profile information then for new tenants.

How can we encourage people to report domestic abuse and hate crime and how do we make sure we respond effectively?

- Be prepared to tackle it when it happens.
- Make sure people are safe.
- Have partnerships and tell people about them.
- Train all staff on how to respond to incidents they see or get reported to them so the first contact is good.
- Perhaps you could have a Careline into the organisation so you can respond confidentially. Could we partner with Child Helpline or the Samaritans?
- Be very clear about the processes and the outcomes you can achieve with people.

How do we continue to raise the profile of equality and diversity within our resident involvement structures and activities?

- Make this about the community not corporate.
- Educate area panels really well on local diversity issues.
- Help people to develop welcoming skills and have a strategy in place for residents to welcome residents to the area. Make sure that Area Panels can give new residents information on the local area. Make the welcome pack from the Area Panel so it is from residents to residents.
- Ask people from the Area Panels and the SRC to attend the BME Residents Group.
- Have a residents day focussed on equality and diversity.
- Have lots of activities around diversity. Have a food festival so that people can share their recipes and food.

4.0 Value for Money – Lead Officer Rob Church

The group considering VFM began by thinking about what value for money means to them:

- Rent is VFM compared with private sector, but in sheltered it's expensive (thinking about rent, facilities and supporting people payments)
- Keeping properties empty was seen as not VFM and an example was given of an ex-warden's property in Peasdown that had been empty for over 3 years, which is a waste of money
- No waste

Gas service and VFM

The group was asked how they would rate the gas service on a scale of 1-10. They agreed 10/10 because:

- Appointment date sent
- Workmen introduce themselves
- Attitude of workmen
- Clean up after the work
- Really efficient
- Seen as good VFM
- Resident satisfaction – suggestion that Somer incentivises the survey by committing to giving a donation to charity for every returned survey

Voids and lettings and VFM

The group was asked how they would rate the voids and lettings service on a scale of 1-10.

They gave 7/10 because:

- Some properties let to the wrong people, which affects the neighbourhood; eg drugs etc.
- Property void for 3 months yet not decorated before the next tenant moved in
- Experience of waiting 4 months for a transfer to a bungalow but not getting an offer, whilst understand that opposite there are 5 bungalows sitting empty

One member of the group fed back that she's been inside a property owned by another housing association that was horrible and they didn't feel it was good VFM.

Choice and flexibility

- The group felt there needed to be flexibility in relation to incoming residents, e.g. for decorations
- Choice of properties – do we have enough of the right properties? The group felt if we could build bungalows people might be more willing to give up family homes

Information and Communication

- Get a breakdown of what services cost.
- Felt that the new kitchens were VFM but for those who hadn't had a new kitchens and bathrooms, they wanted information about where they were in the programme
- Information in plain language – they felt that loads of buzz words are used which loses tenants and suggested that Somer uses the people who work closely with the residents for example sheltered housing officers, to help get the language right

Asked about methods we could use to communicate financial information and where we are achieving VFM, the group fed back:

- Somer Times could be used to publicise what services cost; for example “for each gas service it costs £X per year so make sure you're in”

- They felt Somer Times was too positive and sometimes we should include shock reality
- information about what the costs are and how that compares with other organisations.
- Information on Somer-wide services but also compared across neighbourhoods, eg fencing on a specific estate.
- Important to bullet point “it costs this much for that”
- More meaningful information about the services required – suggest provide to area panels in really basic simple language where the money goes and area panels could feed back ideas about what residents want.

5.0 Gas Servicing – Lead Officer Neil Bolton

Customer Access

- Feeling that although the standard letter approach worked for most, it wouldn't work for all. How are we taking account of mental health issues and people with deteriorating health conditions (alzheimers etc)
- All residents felt the repairs/ gas number was difficult to use particularly if you were in a panic....too long and too many options.....residents felt this raised an E&D issue. It was confusing/ off putting for residents with learning difficulties or mental health issues.
- We need to offer flexible appointments...evenings and weekends

Customer Experience

- All residents in the group were very positive about their own experiences of the servicing regime. Letters arrived, reminder calls were made, the engineers were polite, helpful and cleaned up after themselves

Service standards

- Unclear how long it would take to restore heating and hot water? What was acceptable? Residents need to be clear
- One resident spoke of a poor “turn on and test” experience for her neighbour, taking over a week to get the supplies up and running
- All felt that it would be particularly helpful if we would design a simple leaflet to explain what should happen during the visit with photos...eg engineers would remove fire fronts, check the flue. Should they check TRVs and radiators? This would be helpful in then assessing the performance of the engineer against this.....could be a tick sheet for engineers to run through with residents

10 month servicing programme

The group felt that gas safety was of paramount importance and that it was clear that we needed to give ourselves more time to resolve the access problems before services passed their 12 month anniversary date. They felt that a proportionate increase in expenditure to achieve this would be a reasonable cost if it ensured continuing legal compliance.

Adding extra value to the service

- The Group felt that there were additional things that the engineers could do whilst at the property. Suggestions included testing smoke detectors and offering advice on running your heating cost effectively. There are simple fixes that capable tenants should be made aware of to reduce number of call outs....how could this be shared? Another service would be to signpost the residents to social tariffs via CSE
- There was a lot of discussion about carbon monoxide detectors and the merits of installing them. All agreed that solid fuel would be the top priority for them. Could we install them?

Quality Checks

- Two of the group were aware of the quality checks by energy serv. Both had received adequate warning from the company and both were pleased that we were checking the work. All felt this helped to reassure the residents that we were dealing with gas safety in a very thorough way.