



Report to Customers and Communities Committee

26 July 2012

Title:	Respect – ASB Charter for Housing - A review of anti-social behaviour case management
Report of:	TALISMAN – Tenant and Leaseholder Independent Scrutiny Management Panel

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of the report is to inform the Committee of our review into how The Gateshead Housing Company (TGHC) manages Anti-social behaviour (ASB) and make any recommendations that we as a panel consider will improve service delivery.

Background

2. Since 2010, the Council and Company working with Wood Holmes and Gentoo considered the opportunities to develop an independent tenants' organisation within Gateshead.
3. The Tenant and Leaseholder Independent Scrutiny Management (TALISMAN) panel were appointed in September 2011 from a three stage recruitment process of:
 - Self assessment questionnaire
 - Group exercise
 - Individual interviews

To qualify for selection an applicant would need to be either a tenant or a leaseholder, and be motivated in improving housing and neighbourhood services for the good of all and not for personal gain.

4. The panel have undertaken a series of training activities to develop their skills and experience.
5. TALISMAN have a number of tools at their disposal to collect evidence including:
 - Interviews of individual employees
 - Focus groups of employees or customers including service improvement groups
 - Requesting mystery shopping exercises
 - Completing a 'Request for information' form

- Co-opting external advisors to provide additional information on a specific subject area

Selecting an area for scrutiny

6. It was proposed the first area to scrutinise would be the ASB Charter for Housing - Respect. This is a sector-owned replacement for the Respect Standard for Housing Management and was developed by Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH), Social Landlords Crime and Nuisance Group (SLCNG) and Housemark.
7. The purpose of the Charter is to be outcome focused and improve services dealing with ASB. There are seven commitments: -
 - Demonstrating leadership and strategic commitment
 - Providing an accessible and accountable service
 - Taking swift action to protect communities
 - Adopting a supportive approach to working with victims and witnesses
 - Encouraging individual and community responsibility
 - Having a clear focus on prevention and early intervention
 - Ensuring a value for money approach is embedded in the service
8. The Charter framework was a natural first point of consideration to establish how TGHC deals with ASB. The framework was examined in detail and led to investigation of how the company puts this into practise when delivering the Neighbourhood Relations Service in Gateshead.
9. The panel were assisted by their Customer Panel Support Officer throughout the scrutiny activity and held their inaugural meeting in December 2011. TALISMAN reviewed the breadth of the charter and decided to focus their review on ASB case management. The findings and recommendation within this report therefore focus on this area.

Overall findings

10. Overall findings showed that there is a high level of commitment by managers and employees to tackle and support customers experiencing ASB.
11. There is a range of positive practise identified which is summarised in the Appendix.
12. Using the scrutiny tools at their disposal and following extensive and methodical research by the panel they also identified a number of recommendations. These are detailed in the Appendix.
13. The following sections explain the work undertaken by TALISMAN to gain a broad perspective of the service and how they have arrived at their final recommendations.

Website and desktop review

14. TALISMAN scrutinised the company website as they considered for those customers experiencing ASB this would be a natural source of information. The ASB section was easily accessed, showed clearly the company's commitment to

dealing with ASB and how customers could gain further information or assistance by contacting housing offices or reporting ASB via the on line tool.

15. However some conflicting information was identified that may mislead or confuse customers. For instance the out of hours service is actually available until 7pm however some web pages showed the service available until 8pm. In addition there were problems downloading documents advertised which were no longer available.

Desktop Review

16. Through extensive desktop research TALISMAN concluded TGHC have robust and efficient policies and procedures in place for tackling ASB. Research also identified the high level of victim & witness support available, performance targets were met consistently, reports to TGHC board are detailed, informative and available to customers via the website.
17. A number of tools can be used to manage ASB including formal warnings, extending introductory tenancies, acceptable behaviour agreements and much more. TALISMAN were impressed with standard and quantity of literature available to customers. All information was clearly set out, easily understood and available in accessible formats upon request.
18. Information leaflets are available in housing offices and to download from the website however, there was some information in the leaflets which was identified as out of date. This included references to UNITE mediation which the company no longer have a contract for and the Neighbourhood Wardens service which has been withdrawn. TALISMAN were concerned that when customers were at their most vulnerable they would be misinformed, misdirected and their expectations falsely raised.

Mystery Shopper Exercise

19. TALISMAN commissioned the assistance of independent, trained, mystery shoppers in order to gather evidence on their behalf relating to customers experiences reporting anti social behaviour in Gateshead. The exercise took place on 2 April 2012, for the duration of 2 hours to encompass a busy Monday morning and lunch time period.
20. Mystery shoppers were to remain anonymous, scenarios used were developed with mystery shoppers and based on standards set out in 'A guide to the services you can expect from The Gateshead Housing Company'. They focused on the theme of case management related to noise nuisance and hate crime.
21. Mystery shoppers gained valuable service delivery information from across the borough. Results identified: -
 - Employees in all offices contacted gave the company name in their greeting
 - The approach provided to customers varied from office to office depending upon the query and on the level of experience of those employees
 - When calls were made anonymously some employees were reluctant to provide detailed advice

Neighbourhood Relations Team Manager Presentation and Question and Answer session

22. Neighbourhood Relations Team (NRT) Managers delivered a presentation to TALISMAN in March 2012, this was followed by a question and answer session in May to allow TALISMAN to clarify and explore further areas. It was evident managers were highly committed, passionate about improving service delivery and enhancing the customer's quality of life.
23. This exercise has shown TGHC focus on all parties to ensure fairness in dealing with ASB. The emphasis on support for victims, witnesses and perpetrators displays an impartial compassion by the organisation and its employees for all those affected by ASB.
24. TGHC partnership working with Northumbria Police, Gateshead Council's Safer Communities Team, NHS Foundation Trust and others was highlighted as positive practise allowing for an effective joined up approach to managing ASB.
25. Through research it was identified that TGHC's reporting of performance and service standards was good and results generally positive. TALISMAN however identified that the process to randomly select customers to survey should be more rigorous and IT based as opposed to the current manual system. The percentage of customers surveyed should be increased to allow for more meaningful statistical returns. This will ensure more robust data collection which could be used by managers and the SIG to improve procedures, systems and customer service delivery.

Neighbourhood Relations Team Service Improvement Group

26. TALISMAN met with representatives from the ASB Service Improvement Group (SIG) to understand their role more thoroughly and how TGHC tackles and manages ASB.
27. The SIG receive regular performance indicator (PI) information and have worked with officers to ensure performance report comments are more descriptive.
28. The SIG are involved in performance target setting. Although comparative information with other housing providers isn't shared with the group, there have been previous discussions on learning from other housing providers such as South Tyneside and this is an area of development the SIG would like to explore.
29. TALISMAN noted the SIG felt empowered, were enthusiastic and committed to their involvement. They showed an excellent understanding of the service and benefits of partnership working to enhance service delivery on estates.

Employee Focus Group

30. In May TALISMAN met an employee focus group which was made up of Neighbourhood Relations Officers (NRO) and Estate Officers (EO) to talk about their role in ASB case management.
31. The focus group felt the most effective aspects of the service included: -

- Mental Health Link Worker (MHLW) who provides a good, effective, direct link to the NHS for employees and vulnerable customers
 - An EO in Central area considered Caretakers and Concierge in multi storey blocks to be an excellent resource for collecting evidence to support customer ASB cases. This is a good example of using wider services to gain a thorough understanding of what is happening in the local neighbourhood.
 - Employees highlighted they have a 'two way relationship' with Police Community Support Officers (PCSO) and their involvement helps to reduce ASB. PCSO have an interest in their patrol areas, a good local knowledge, will take part in joint visits to perpetrators, provide a visual deterrent on estates and will increase patrols when requested.
32. The focus group identified obstacles to carrying out their role some of which they felt to be an 'occupational hazard' such as the length of time to conclude ASB cases when the legal system is involved. TALISMAN acknowledged that the loss of support services has impacted on the company's ability to deliver effective housing services including the loss of Neighbourhood Wardens, mediation service UNITE, victim support services and family intervention officer. Employees also discussed referring cases to children and adult social services, highlighting that currently they were not aware of one central named contact or a direct link into these services.
33. Employees combat these hurdles by managing customer expectations with empathy and understanding, they also: -
- Provide customers with realistic timescales to achieve positive ASB resolution
 - Agree an action plan with customers
 - Work with Police to progress (where involved)
 - Keep customers updated on all case developments
34. Overall TALISMAN were impressed by the level of experience and immense amount of knowledge amongst individuals and the group. This was underpinned by the strong working relationships established between NRO's and EO's. Employees showed a high level of commitment and passion to carrying out their roles to enhance the lives of customers.
35. The discussions did however show that a great deal of knowledge is based on experience which was highlighted by TALISMAN as a possible issue for new officers or any less experienced customer facing employees. It was considered that the *ASB Guidance Procedures (revised in January 2011)* accessed by the Managing Tenancies Intranet should be updated periodically and drawn to the attention of employees. This will provide a resource to all employees and ensure that the service is delivered consistently across the borough.

Summary

36. TALISMAN conducted their first scrutiny activity within six months and utilised all resources available to ensure sound and accurate evidence was collected.
37. Scrutiny of the service has highlighted ten areas of positive practise including how officers manage the service using the estate matrix, partnership working and supporting customers experiencing ASB.

38. It also resulted in the identification of ten recommendations which if implemented will result in tangible improvements to customer service delivery and assist in managing the service more effectively.

Communicating Findings

39. Following presentation of the findings at this committee some further actions will be taken:
- Discussion and feedback with the service about how the recommendations were reached to inform the action plan and response
 - Article in TGHC news summarising the review
 - Article in the Annual Report to Tenants and Leaseholders to include information on this review
 - Feedback to Gateshead Council's Housing Services and Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Link to values

40. This report relates to the following company values: -
- Being a listening and learning organisation
 - Being honest, accountable and transparent
 - Being customer focused, innovative and professional
 - Caring and respecting

Impact on tenants

40. TALISMAN's focus has been to drive forward service improvements in this emotive area of customer service delivery. It is envisaged that recommendations made will improve the lives of customers.
41. Tenants and leaseholders are likely to be more satisfied where they feel they have had the opportunity to influence service provision. Regular publicity will inform the wider tenant population of the company's willingness to progress under co-regulation.

Risk Management Implications

42. The regulatory framework places a requirement on registered providers to prevent and tackle ASB in areas where they own properties.
43. Failure to tackle ASB effectively has been identified as a risk for the company and recommendations made support the framework requirement.

Financial Implications

44. Recommendations made have no significant financial implications and relate to improving processes, protocol and service delivery.

Equality and Diversity Implications

45. TALISMAN's code of conduct includes specific expectations around equality and diversity. They have undertaken training to ensure that scrutiny activities conducted and recommendations made are accessible and inclusive to all.
46. Part of questioning and investigation in this review was specifically related to considering how people with different needs use the service.

Value for Money Implications

47. TALISMAN have a remit to consider value for money within the scrutiny activities they conduct. Recommendations made will help improve customer satisfaction whilst encompassing the Value for Money regulatory standards.

Health Implications

48. TALISMAN felt that managing ASB effectively is essential due to the serious impact it has on the mental and physical wellbeing of customers.

Environmental Implications

49. There are no direct environment implications associated with this report.

Consultation carried out

50. There has been extensive consultation carried out with NRT managers, the SIG, employee focus group and the use of satisfaction data to gather valuable evidence.

Recommendations

51. The committee is recommended to
 - note recommendations attached and review positive practise; and
 - request a formal response to TALISMAN's recommendations from the Neighbourhood Relations Team to be presented to the next committee and subsequently to report this response and action plan to TALISMAN.

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