



Report to Customers and Communities Committee

7 November 2013

Title: TALISMAN Review – Rent and Income
– Response to Recommendations

Report of: Director of Customers and Communities

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide committee with a response to the Tenant and Leaseholder Independent Scrutiny Management Panel's (TALISMAN) recommendations previously reported to committee in September 2013.

Background

2. TALISMAN reported outcomes to this committee following scrutiny of the Rent and Income Service. A range of positive practice was identified and in addition a number of recommendations for service improvement were made.

Summary

3. We welcome the report and recommendations made by Talisman. Feedback from the review and the recommendations made have been shared with the team through briefing sessions and team meetings.
4. A proposed response to the recommendations is attached at the Appendix.
5. A number of the recommendations have already been addressed fully or in part by the service. Training and development needs will be addressed as part of the employee appraisals and 1-2-1's between team members and their line managers.

Link to values

6. This report links to the following company values:
 - Being a listening and learning organisation
 - Being honest, accountable and transparent
 - Being customer focussed, innovative and professional

Impact on tenants

7. Scrutiny of the Rent and Income Service ensures continuous improvement is made in addressing the recommendations made. Improving customer satisfaction levels and the quality of rent and income work will impact positively on customers accessing RAIT services.

Risk Management Implications

8. Tackling rent arrears effectively is a company priority; failure to prioritise and tackle these issues is a risk for the company in terms of levels of customer satisfaction and reputation.

Financial Implications

9. There are no additional financial implications arising as a result of implementing the proposed recommendations within the action plan.

Equality and Diversity Implications

10. There are no additional Equality and Diversity implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Value for Money Implications

11. Ensuring accessible information for customers on the services we provide and improvements made will impact positively on effective and efficient service delivery.

Health Implications

12. There are no additional health implications associated with this report.

Environmental Implications

13. There are no environmental implications associated with this report.

Consultation carried out

14. The recommendations made by TALISMAN have been shared within the service in order to inform the response to the recommendations.

Recommendation

15. The views of the committee are sought on the proposed response to recommendations document outlined in the Appendix.



Recommendations for Improvement and Response

Scrutiny findings/Recommendation	Response
Information/Communication	
<p>Leaflets In two housing offices, old leaflets were found amongst the newer versions</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>Regular checks to ensure that leaflets are always up to date</i></p>	<p>The Rent and Income Manager will discuss with the Communications Manager how best to ensure leaflets are kept up to date and checked on a regular basis.</p> <p><i>Target date: November 2013</i></p>
<p>TGHC Website: Rent and Income pages Language used was considered to be negative and repetitive. The home page was mainly negative with very few positives. Readers could easily lose interest.</p> <p>Tenants who are financially vulnerable find it difficult to discuss their finances so the issue of confidentiality should be paramount. This wasn't made clear on the website.</p> <p>The drop down menu was found to be inaccessible.</p> <p>Different computer operating systems such as tablets can make it difficult to access information from some websites.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>TALISMAN understands that since this exercise was carried out the website has changed so the recommendation would be to revisit this section's wording and check links etc.</i></p>	<p>The TGHC website has recently been re-designed and some of the out-dated content and broken links have been removed/fixed.</p> <p>The content will be reviewed to ensure the information is both accessible and accurate.</p> <p><i>Target date: January 2014</i></p> <p>Once checked the RAIT team will review the rent related website content on a quarterly basis. The initial check will be carried out in March 2014 in preparation for next financial year.</p> <p><i>Target date: Quarterly from March 2014</i></p>
<p>Letter from Gateshead Council During the mystery shopping exercise, nine customers felt that the initial letter from Gateshead Council sent out in March 2013 was difficult to understand in three areas (see mystery shopping report at Appendix 3)</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>Gateshead Council be asked to take into consideration these comments when producing future letters around Welfare Reform</i></p>	<p>This letter comes under the remit of Gateshead Council and the content has been discussed with them. The letter is a system generated letter which contains a large amount of information set out in statute. The ability to manipulate stock letters is also limited due to system limitations.</p> <p>However, Gateshead Council do keep their letters under review and are keen to make them as user friendly as possible.</p>

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	<p>For example the Discretionary Housing Payment decision letter was recently amended following feedback provided by TGHC.</p> <p>Contact Helen Paine (Benefits Manager) for further information.</p>
<p>Arrears Intervention TALISMAN felt that information around arrears information was too negative and there was too much emphasis on the escalation process.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>More positive information about arrears intervention</i></p>	<p>The Rent and Income Manager will discuss rent arrears information with the Communications manager to ensure that a more positive outlook is presented where possible. We will endeavour to produce more good news stories related to Rent.</p> <p>Only recently a story about our clear rent account prize drawer winners was publicised in the quarterly newspaper.</p> <p><i>Target date: December 2013</i></p>
<p>Tenancy Agreement The Tenancy Agreement has not been updated since 2008 and needs updating to reflect Welfare Reform and its impact on tenants.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>Review of Tenancy Agreement needs to reflect Welfare Reform and its impact on tenants.</i></p>	<p>The Tenancy Agreement is currently under review and the Rent and Income Service will play a part in this process to ensure that all rent related aspects are covered sufficiently.</p> <p>Welfare Reform and its impact on tenants will also be included in any new tenancy documentation.</p> <p><i>Target date: March 2014</i></p>
<p>Rent Card – Sign Up The review found that in some cases, it wasn't made clear to new tenants during the sign up that they needed to ask for a separate card to pay for their Council Tax and that it could not be paid on the rent card. TALISMAN found four examples where summonses had been sent to tenants because they had mistakenly paid their rent and Council Tax together on the same card.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>Make it clear to new tenants during sign up that Council Tax cannot be paid on rent card.</i></p>	<p>The sign-up procedure has recently been reviewed and the rent and income service played a significant part in this.</p> <p>The new process is far more robust in relation to rent and housing benefit matters and more emphasis is put on ensuring the new tenant knows both what to pay and how much they need to pay.</p> <p><i>Implementation for the revised sign up procedure: December 2013</i></p>
Customer Involvement/Engagement	
<p>Service Improvement Group (SIG) There was currently no SIG for rent and income. The establishment of a Rent and Income SIG allowing for</p>	<p>SIGs have recently been reviewed and a decision taken not to have a dedicated Rent and Income SIG, however the Rent</p>

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Scrutiny findings/Recommendation	Response
<p>regular customer engagement on the service. This also means that customers are not involved in the process for setting targets for the year as is the case in other service areas.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>The establishment of a Rent and Income Service Improvement Group.</i></p>	<p>and Income Manager frequently attends other SIGs to give updates on rent related matters.</p> <p>Only recently a focus group with tenants was held to discuss a new style rent statement, so the RAIT service do consider tenant involvement an important part of service management.</p> <p>We recognise that more regular customer involvement would be beneficial for the service.</p> <p>We will therefore begin taking more regular updates to the Tenancy and Allocations SIG as well as continuing the practice of bringing customers together to discuss important changes on an ad-hoc basis.</p> <p><i>Target date: February 2014</i></p> <p><i>The establishment of a rent and income service improvement group will be considered when SIGs are next reviewed.</i></p>
<p>Timing of Surveys Surveys had been sent to tenants just after the rent increases which could result in a negative response from tenants.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>Better consideration of all relevant factors before determining when to send out surveys.</i></p>	<p>The rent survey is posted with the quarter 1 rent statement. This survey is 4 months after the rent increase letter is received by tenants.</p> <p>In order to allow for effective comparison the survey is posted out at the same time each year.</p> <p>However, the opportunity to look at this recommendation again will be taken when the survey methodology is next reviewed.</p>
<p>Young People The Rent and Income Team tried hard to engage with young people but more work should be done to ascertain what other organisations were doing.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>Identify good practice from other organisations when engaging with young people.</i></p>	<p>The rent and income team work hard to sustain all tenancies and put particular emphasis on under 25's.</p> <p>The Rent and Income manager will ensure that Young People and tenancy sustainment is on the agenda of the next Northern benchmarking group meeting that is held. This will enable TGHC to</p>

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	<p>identify good practice from other organisations.</p> <p><i>Target date: February 2014</i></p>
Performance/Service Standards	
<p>Performance Report Some targets were reduced for the next year, however it wasn't made clear in the narrative of the performance report that this had happened or the rationale for reducing them.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>Narrative in performance report make it clear when a target has changed for the next year and the rationale behind the change</i></p>	<p>The rent and income manager will endeavour to make it clear the rationale for any changes in performance targets.</p> <p>Performance targets are set around February/March each year and any explanation for amendments will be included on performance reports.</p> <p><i>Target date: April 2014</i></p>
<p>Target Setting TALISMAN were concerned that the Rent and Income Manager set all the targets without the involvement of the managers within the service or front line employees.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>More involvement of other staff in target setting for them to take ownership and understand how their role contributes to the overall performance of the service.</i></p>	<p>The rent and income management team meet on a monthly basis to discuss all aspects of the service, one of which is performance.</p> <p>These meetings inform decisions on performance setting and these targets are discussed with the RAIT management team during appraisals and 1-2-1's.</p> <p>Greater emphasis will be placed on the input the team have on the target development and setting for 2014/15.</p>
<p>Sharing of Good Practice TALISMAN felt that in order for teams to share good practice with each other there should be a standing item on all team meeting agendas as this appears to happen on an ad hoc basis.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>Standing item around sharing of good practice on team meeting agendas.</i></p>	<p>This recommendation is something that has recently commenced within the service. During the Wednesday afternoon briefing sessions all employees are given an opportunity to share good practice or indeed express concerns they have.</p> <p>These issues are discussed and brought to the attention of the management team. The service as a whole will also be coming together on a regular basis to share thoughts and issues as a team.</p> <p><i>Target date: November 2014</i></p>
<p>Publicising of Service Standards TALISMAN found two instances where service standards were different in some documents.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i></p>	<p>Service standards should be the same in all documents, the rent and income manager will review both the service standards and documents they are published in when the standards are</p>

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<p><i>Ensure that service standards are the same in all documents</i></p>	<p>reviewed at the end of the year.</p> <p><i>Target date: March 2014</i></p>
Training	
<p>Training</p> <p>Training was discussed with managers and front line employees and highlighted that some training has been provided to existing employees although there were some gaps.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> <i>Conflict and resolution training needs to be provided as soon as possible for new employees during induction. There should be a consistent induction plan for new employees prior to them undertaking the role rather than this varying for each employee.</i></p>	<p>Training is important and each team members training needs are addressed through appraisals and 1-2-1's.</p> <p>Conflict and resolution training has been given to every member of RAIT in early August as this was seen as imperative for the role of the rent and income team.</p> <p>The Rent and Income Manager has recently met with HR to discuss a consistent induction plan for new employees to ensure all staff are offered the correct training prior to undertaking the role. This should be rolled out in the near future.</p> <p><i>Target date: February 2014</i></p>