



Report to Customers and Communities Committee

10 September 2015

Title: Response to TALISMAN Review of Customer Services

Report of: Director of Customers and Communities

Purpose of Report

1. To provide the committee with a formal response to the recommendations made in the TALISMAN (Tenant and Leaseholder Independent Scrutiny Management Panel) review of Customer Services.

Background

2. At its meeting on 1 May 2015 the committee received a report from TALISMAN on their review of Customer Services.
3. The review highlighted 9 areas of positive practice and made 18 recommendations which TALISMAN felt would improve the services received by customers.
4. The recommendations covered a wide range of issues that impact on the quality of customer service we provide. These include; telephony, training and development for employees, procedure guides, information provided to customers and facilities in customer facing offices.

Response to recommendations

5. Officers initially met with representatives of TALISMAN on 30 April to discuss the reviews findings. Overall it was felt the report was very positive and made a number of constructive recommendations.
6. A formal action plan was developed to implement the recommendations and this was presented to TALISMAN at their meeting on 18 August. The Appendix to this report contains that formal response. TALISMAN said they were satisfied with the response and our approach to the recommendations.
7. We have been able to action some of the recommendations immediately. For example a number of documents have been changed or deleted from the sign up procedure to reduce duplication. Training on Conflict Resolution and Housing Benefit Verification has been provided and further sessions are planned. We have also provided opportunities for Housing Management Assistants to shadow the Lettings team.

8. Feedback from the review including recommendations and our response has been shared with employees through a team briefing. A copy of the team briefing has been provided to TALISMAN.
9. Updates on progress with the action plan will be reported to the Involvement Service Improvement Group at their bi monthly meetings.

Link to values

10. This report relates to the Company of being: -
 - Customer focused
 - Open and honest
 - Accountable
 - Inclusive valuing diversity
 - Passionate about what we do

Impact on tenants

11. The recommendations focus on improving the services received by customers.

Risk Management Implications

12. Failure to focus on the customer has been identified as a strategic risk of the Company. Scrutiny by TALISMAN is an effective control to help mitigate the risk.

Financial Implications

13. There are no direct financial implications arising from the majority of the recommendations. However the recommendation relating to the delaying of tenancy start dates would if adopted have an impact on void relet times and therefore rental income. This recommendation is currently being considered by an officer group reviewing the Voids and Allocations process.

Equality and Diversity Implications

14. There are no direct implications arising from this report.

Value for Money Implications

15. The recommendations on training and access to updated procedures will help to improve the efficiency of employees and thereby deliver a more effective and comprehensive service. Value for Money will inform our approach to all the report's recommendations.

Health Implications

16. There are no direct implications arising from this report.

Environmental Implications

17. There are no direct implications from this report.

Consultation carried out

18. In carrying out this review TALISMAN consulted with officers from TGHC via focus group, examined the results of customer mystery shopping, surveyed involved customers and analysed the results from a Customer Service Survey.

Recommendation

19. The views of the committee are sought on the response to the TALISMAN review of Customer Services (Housing Offices).

Contact: Julie McCartney, Head of Neighbourhood Services Tel No: (0191) 4335304



Service Feedback to committee on TALISMAN recommendations



Service Area	Neighbourhood Services
Date of Response to committee	10.09.15

Recommendation	How is this to be implemented? (or if it can't be explain the reasons for this including any further discussions with TALISMAN)	Lead Officer/Service	Target date for completion	Where will progress be reported? (e.g. committee, relevant SIG etc.)
Consideration be given to changing the '0800' number to a '0300' number or publishing the local equivalent number. This will allow customers using their mobile phones to also make the calls to the service for free.	From 1 July 2015, as part of the UK Calling changes, all numbers starting 0800 or 0808 are free for consumers to call from mobile phones, as they are from landlines. The only charge would be from a business phone line. To publicise via TGHC website and publications.	Ian Clarkin – Communications Manager (Support Services)	N/A	A report on the review recommendations will be presented to Customers and Communities on 10/09/15. Progress updates will be provided to the Involvement SIG
Provide Freephone signage with instructions on how customers can make a private call and ask staff for	The free phone signage in each Housing Office has recently been updated and renewed. It doesn't make specific mention of using the	Ian Clarkin (Communications Manager) Support Services	Team brief circulated w/c 24.08.15	

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pens and paper.	<p>phone in an interview room to make a confidential call.</p> <p>However there is separate signage that informs customer's that confidential and same sex interviews are available. This will be updated to include the use of interview rooms to make confidential phone calls. In the meantime an update has been included in a team brief to be delivered to all Housing Office employees.</p>			
Adopt a consistent approach when putting a customer on hold regardless of the service the customer is contacting.	<p>Review and reissue guidance to all employees on telephone call handling.</p> <p>In addition a new telephony system is being rolled out by the Council from October 2015 which includes the Civic Centre and Housing Offices. This will provide an opportunity to review our corporate approach to telephony.</p>	<p>Rachel Harker (Organisational Development Advisor) Support Services</p> <p>Mark Pollard (Customer Services Policy Officer) Support Services</p>	<p>30.11.15</p> <p>31.01.16</p>	
HMA's to receive regular refresher training in key areas. – Particular reference to Conflict Management & Housing Benefit.	Discussions about training requirements take place as part of the appraisal process with each employee. The line manager refers to the skills matrix which outlines mandatory training by post and then updates the appraisal document. Courses are then arranged to meet	Housing Managers and Customer Service Officers (Neighbourhood Services)	Training to be completed by 31.03.16.	

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	<p>demand.</p> <p>Housing Benefit verification training has been delivered to HMA's in all Housing Offices as follows: 14.01.15 Central, 13.05.15 Leam Lane/Felling, 20.05.15 Blaydon/Dunston and 27.05.15 Wrekenton/Birtley.</p> <p>Conflict Resolution courses have been delivered on 16.05.15, 03.07.15, 17.07.15, and 30.07.15. A total of 34 employees attended these sessions. Three further sessions are arranged for 20.10.15, 17.11.15, and 26.01.16. A total of 33 employees are booked to attend.</p>			
<p>To consider shadowing for HMAs in other parts of the core business, for example Lettings.</p>	<p>Managers can arrange shadowing with any service as part of an employee's personal development and should be discussed at appraisals and 121's.</p> <p>In response to the comments an initial five slots have been made available for HMA's to shadow Lettings on 22.09.15, 29.09.15, 13.10.15, 27.10.15 and 10.11.15. Further slots will be arranged to meet demand.</p>	<p>Jackie Armstrong (Customer Services Manager) and Martin Poulter (Neighbourhood Services Manager)</p>	<p>To complete by 31.03.16</p>	

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	<p>We will also look at other ways to promote more joined up working between services that share a common function – for example through joint training events.</p> <p>Following completion of the Voids and Allocations review a full update will be provided to employees including joint training on changes made.</p>			
<p>Review the sign up procedure and implement changes. HMAs to be involved in the review.</p>	<p>Some initial “quick wins” have been introduced already to reduce duplication and five documents were withdrawn and a number had the content reviewed.</p> <p>The sign up process is being looked at as part of a wider review of the allocation process and HMA’s will be invited to attend a focus group to discuss and propose changes.</p>	<p>Martin Poulter Neighbourhood Services</p>	<p>Timescales for implementing recommendations from the Voids and Allocations review to be included in an action plan once agreed.</p>	
<p>To put a process in place for ensuring that Managing Tenancies on the Intranet is kept updated and any duplication is removed.</p>	<p>All company procedures are currently being updated and relocated to one central location (A to Z list) on the company’s new intranet site. In addition, employees will be able to find procedures via a new search facility.</p>	<p>Craig Gandy (Neighbourhood Services Manager) Neighbourhood Services</p>	<p>31.12.15</p>	

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Tenants should be informed of the two rent free weeks during Christmas and New Year	To be discussed at sign up with all new tenants and promoted via Company website and publications	Housing Managers/CSO's/Communications Manager	Reminded included in team brief circulated w/c 24.08.15	
Temporary Rent cards – not explained it was for rent only & not Council tax (previous TALISMAN recommendation in 2012 during its review of Rent and Income difference should always be explained to tenants.) All employees to be reminded of this recommendation.	An update has been included in a team brief delivered to all Housing Office employees. This will also be addressed as part of the sign up review and a prompt included in the checklist.	Neighbourhood Services	Team brief circulated w/c 24.08.15	
Mears should be able to send a gas service engineer within two days from the sign up	The process for arranging gas safety checks has recently been changed. The target we set our contractor is 3 or 7 days depending on the tenancy start date as we aim to carry out all gas safety checks before a tenancy starts. However if there are exceptional circumstances where we require a gas safety check to be carried out quicker than three days this can be requested. A reminder has been included in the team brief.	Customer Services	Team brief circulated w/c 24.08.15	

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<p>Tenant should be given a week free rent to arrange removal vans and gas check</p>	<p>It is acknowledged that customers' need sufficient time between viewing a property and the tenancy starting in order to make practical arrangements to move. This would also assist customers who are claiming Housing Benefit and provide an opportunity for the Company's RAIT to carry out a financial assessment. These issues are currently being considered as part of the Voids and Allocations review and recommendations will follow.</p> <p>Housing Offices do currently have the scope to award a rent allowance at the start of the tenancy which is effectively a "rent free week".</p>	<p>Customer Services / Neighbourhood Services</p>	<p>Timescales for implementing recommendations from the Voids and Allocations review to be included in an action plan once agreed.</p>	
<p>As all housing offices are now shared buildings with other Council services, a sign should be visible on the outside of all the building.</p>	<p>With the exception of the Civic Centre, all shared buildings do have external signage indicating TGHC is co-located in the building. There are two main entrance points at Leam Lane and the Housing Manager has confirmed both have signs indicating TGHC are co-located in the building.</p> <p>At the Civic Centre there is clear internal signage indicating the location of the Housing Company reception area.</p>	<p>Council/TGHC</p>	<p>N/A</p>	

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Ensure toilet facilities are visible to all customers in Leam Lane Office and consider moving the coffee/tea area further away from the toilets.	The Housing Manager at Leam Lane has raised these issues with the building manager and is awaiting feedback. Update on the outcome of those discussions to follow.	Kevin Roberts (Housing Manager) Neighbourhood Services – TGHC /Council	Work in progress	
Ensure that staff comply with data protection requirements at all times and do not discuss any confidential issues with their colleagues where other members of the public are present, for example in the reception area.	All employees are required to complete a data protection e-learning course. This is refreshed on a three year basis. In response to the review an update has been included in a team brief delivered to all Housing Office employees.	Housing Managers/ CSO's Neighbourhood Services	E- learning to be completed by 31.03.16	
Whilst it is accepted that these issues might be beyond the Company's control, the fact that that there are no public toilet facilities on the first floor and that the payment counters on the ground floor at the Civic Centre did not appear to comply with DDA regulations should be raised with the Council.	The Council is currently reviewing the layout of public areas in the Civic Centre including cash receipting facilities. Changes may be made as a consequence of this review.	Council/TGHC	Work in progress.	
Tenants from the West of Gateshead in small villages should be	Information regarding different methods of paying rent is included in a wide variety of Company	Support Services	N/A	

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reminded of different ways of paying their rent i.e. Direct debit, at a post office or by Paypoint in each separate village newsagents. The different ways to pay rent could be made available in housing offices	<p>publications and on the company website. In addition the annual rent statements include the national PayPoint website which lists the most up to date information on locations.</p> <p>There is a supply of leaflets that list all PayPoint locations in each particular Neighbourhood. These are available in Housing Offices. A pdf of each leaflet is also available on the TGHC website.</p>			