



Report to Customers and Communities Committee

21 February 2019

Title: Gateshead Housing Customer Scrutiny Panel – Review of Customer Service in Neighbourhood Housing Offices

Report of: Gateshead Housing Customer Scrutiny Panel

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of the report is to inform the committee of the findings and recommendations from the Gateshead Housing Customer Scrutiny Panel's latest review.

Background

2. Having completed seven reviews, the panel chose to review customer service delivered by Neighbourhood Housing Offices. The review focussed specifically on customer contact by telephone and by e-mail.
3. The panel used the following tools to collect evidence and to produce this report:
 - Presentation from Head of Neighbourhood Services (South and East)
 - Desktop research
 - Mystery Shopping exercise by phone and e-mail
 - Neighbourhood Service Assistants focus group
 - Customer Service Officers focus group
4. The review has identified examples of positive practice which are highlighted in the report.
5. A total of 25 recommendations were made which have been grouped into five main areas:
 - Consistent Customer Service
 - Training for employees
 - Updating procedural guides
 - Internal communications and working relationships
 - External communication with customers
6. The panel is of the view that if the recommendations are implemented it would result in improved customer service and more effective relationships between different teams.

7. A copy of the panel's final report is attached as an Appendix to this report.

Link to values

8. This report relates to the following company values: -

- Fair
- Customer Focused
- Open and Honest
- Accountable
- Inclusive and Valuing diversity
- Innovative
- Passionate about what we do

Impact on tenants

9. The panel's focus has been to drive forward service improvements in this area of customer service delivery. It is envisaged that recommendations made will improve the link between customers and the company.
10. 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 and learn from the findings of the panel's review.

Risk Management Implications

11. A failure to consult customers on their views of service delivery will significantly decrease customer confidence in the company. The recommendations in the report look to mitigate this risk by encouraging customers to use other methods of contact and in the longer term the introduction of a self-serve facility that allows customers to interact online.

Financial Implications

12. There are no financial implications directly arising from this report. Any financial implications implementing any of the recommendations will be identified by officers when formulating its response.

Equality and Diversity Implications

13. The panel'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.

Value for Money Implications

14. The panel has 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

15. There are no health implications directly arising from this report.

Environmental Implications

16. There are no direct environmental implications as a result of this review.

Consultation carried out

17. There has been consultation carried out with Neighbourhood Housing Assistants and Customer Service Officers to gather evidence for this review.

Recommendations

18. The committee is recommended to:
 - note the final report and the recommendations attached.
 - request a subsequent progress report including an action plan to be presented at the next meeting of the committee.



Customer Scrutiny Panel

One customer, one approach

Providing a consistent customer experience.

A review to evaluate the customer experience when contacting Neighbourhood Housing Teams.

Gateshead Housing Customer Scrutiny Panel

1 February 2019

1. Introduction

The aim of the review was to evaluate the customer experience when contacting Neighbourhood Housing Teams (NHTs). More specifically in relation to contact by telephone and email.

This review was carried out between June and December 2018 by the Customer Scrutiny panel; Margaret Gale, David Chambers, Pauline Bedford, Chris Sleight and Pauline Hawkins. Additional help with the mystery shopping was provided by involved customer Tapiwa Semwayo. Officer support was provided by Simon Hand and Mark Pollard from the Customer Involvement team.

The review process included; a presentation by Hazel Forster (Head of Neighbourhood Services); mystery shopping exercise by phone and email and a series of employee focus groups. The panel also considered a range of additional desk top information.

2. Summary of findings

Mystery shopping

The mystery shopping was carried out by telephone and email. Common customer enquiries were identified, and questions drafted to reflect these. The same questions were asked of each Neighbourhood Housing Office (NHO) and the results collated.

Key themes identified.

- Politeness and willingness to try and answer queries at the first point of contact
- If this wasn't possible enquiries were followed up in a timely fashion and customers were kept updated.
- If a paper form was required, it was received very quickly (1-2 working days)
- On some occasions officers proactively offered to help customers complete forms if required.
- Out of Hours messages were provided for every office with emergency telephone contact info.
- Emails responded to promptly (except for one office)

Improving the customer experience

- Leam Lane didn't respond to two email enquiries.
- Use of jargon and terminology in both conversations and on forms that weren't understood. E.g. assured tenancy, Secure tenancy, Tyne and Wear Homes Application Form and Permissions form.
- Paper forms not offered as an email version or available online.
- Email enquiries out of hours are not acknowledged.
- Engaged phone line – this happened frequently during the mystery shopping. Also, if the main number was engaged there is no comfort message.

- There appears to be a requirement to provide your name and address as default regardless of whether it is required to answer an enquiry.

Focus group discussions

The mystery shopping exercises identified a number of issues which the panel wanted to probe further with employees. Three separate employee focus groups were arranged; Neighbourhood Service Advisors (NSA's), Customer Service Officers (CSOs) and representatives from specialist teams. These included, Rent and Income, Multi Storey team, Lettings and Older Persons team. Each session was facilitated by two panel members.

Key themes identified

The panel noted several positive themes from the focus groups. These included:

- Willingness to engage with the panel – employees in all three groups were very open in their responses to questions.
- Employees were passionate and came over as very committed to providing the best possible customer service, despite some obvious barriers.
- The specialist teams displayed an appreciation of the challenges faced by Neighbourhood Housing teams when dealing with a wide range of customer enquiries.

Comments from the focus groups

Training

- Induction – it was felt that this was an area that could be improved. There is very little opportunity for “buddying” up and the corporate induction is often delayed. There is also little in the way of “formal” training around Northgate.
- Infrequent training provided by specialist teams to NHOs.
- New/temporary employees are put on the “front line” without adequate training.

Inconsistencies in the way customer enquiries are handled

- Some NSA's will only deal with enquiries relating to the areas covered by their specific office whilst others will try to deal with any enquiry regardless of location.
- Assistance with completing forms varies. Some NSA's will offer as routine others will require the customer to state why they need help. Staff resources was cited as the main reason why they might not help. In Central Housing Office room availability is also a factor.
- Sending forms by email. Is not always offered. There is an insistence on paper copies signed and returned by post.
- Repairs log customer contacts so they know about previous contacts. NSA's don't do this but CSOs think this would be helpful.

Access to specialist teams by NHTs

- It is often very difficult to get through to specialist teams via the phone. Repairs and Lettings were highlighted as the most difficult. However, these services say they operate an “open door” policy and welcome any enquiries.
- Central Housing Office – the above is a big problem for Central. It is not just a NHO reception but also acts for a reception for Civic based teams. They deal with a wide variety of queries for the whole company & Council including appointments for other services. They receive large numbers of calls from the CSU in the Civic that are for other services in TGHC. They then experience problems either getting hold of the right person or team.

Procedures

- Managing tenancies – the procedures are rarely updated and are often long and complex. There was an expectation that the Business Support Officer role would lead on this, but this has not happened.
- Different NSA’s apply the same procedure in different ways, therefore they are reluctant to deal with each other’s enquiries.

Alterations procedure

- Customer Journey – convoluted, goes backwards and forwards between customer, Office and Surveyors.
- There appears to be an element of “buying time” by making it a longer process for customers
- There is an overuse of jargon by surveyors. This has led to some NSAs googling words used to gain an understanding.

ICT training

- NSA’s don’t fully understand and therefore utilise Northgate e.g. lack of recognition of what MyPortal is.
- They still relying on multiple spreadsheets for recording information.

Telephony

- In most cases there is only one handset per office answering the advertised office number. This means that only one call at a time can be dealt with. This increases the likelihood that when a customer rings the phone is engaged. A lack of employee resources to have more than one handset connected is cited as the main reason for this arrangement.
- Officers try to answer queries at first point of contact. This is seen as good customer service by NSAs/ CSOs. However, this can take time to resolve, meaning the main number remains engaged. This is not good service for those customers trying to get through.
- There is a reluctance to take an enquiry and ring back with the answer later. NSA’s say they are too busy to do this.

- There appears to be confusion as to what happens with phones during out of hours or Wed training. Some CSOs think it goes to another service who take messages others that it goes to a voice mail. It goes to a message and then asks for a pin number to access voice mail. This has now been addressed.
- Non-use of Voicemail by NHO when out of the office can cause problems. There numbers are diverted to the main office number and often they forget to remove the divert when they get back.

Internal communication

- NHO teams are not always told about changes to procedures when they are first implemented.
- There is a lack of engagement with NHOs around In House which results in a feeling that “it’s not for us”
- There is also a perception that internal communications isn’t something NHO teams are encouraged to read or engage with by their managers.

Working relationships

- NSA’s and CSOs expressed a feeling that they were in some respects isolated from teams at the Civic
- They felt that the Senior Management team could do more to engage with NHTs
- However, when specialist teams were co-located in the NHOs it strengthens working relationships and understanding of each other roles.

Roles and responsibilities

- Having undertaken the review the panel felt that many customers will not be aware of the split in roles and responsibilities of the NHTs and specialist teams based at the Civic.

3. Recommendations

The following are a list of recommendations that have been grouped together in common themes. They are not in order of importance, but do indicate where the panel feel a recommendation should be a priority

Customer service - aim to ensure that all customer facing employees provide an excellent, consistent and clearly defined standard of customer service across the whole organisation.

- Review the help offered to potential customers with the Tyne and Wear Homes application process. The panel feel this is a crucial area to be addressed and should be a priority. Letting properties is a priority for the company and we should make sure that the process does not put applicants off by offering help at each stage in the application process.
- Ensure that help is offered and available to complete any form as a matter of routine and without the customer having to demonstrate that they need that help.

- Address the issue that NHTs have raised in relation to ease of contact with specialist teams. This is impacting on their ability to deal efficiently with customer enquiries at first point of contact.
- Customer contact – review the current telephony arrangements to improve the customer experience including:
 - Introduce changes to the way telephony is managed to reduce the frequency of failed calls.
 - Work towards a “contact centre” approach to telephony whereby customers ring one number and calls can be answered by any NHO. The same should be applied to contact via email.
- Recording customer contacts – introduce a process of logging contacts on Northgate like the repairs service. Training to be provided to ensure that this being done and in a consistent way. The panel feel this is a crucial to delivering excellent customer service and should be adopted as a priority.

Training

The panel feel that NSA’s require a specific set of skills to deliver excellent customer service. To achieve this the company must invest in training.

- Review the Induction programme delivered to new NSA’s both permanent and temporary to ensure that they receive a consistent level of training that provides an adequate level of knowledge and understanding of customer service.
- Develop a programme of periodic refresher training of the most commonly used customer service related procedures.
- Specialist teams to diary in a programme of refresher training to NHTs. Content to be agreed with CSOs.
- A programme of Northgate training tailored to specific job roles to be delivered to NHTs.
- Wed training – to ensure customers can access NHOs change the approach to closing all NHOs on a Wed afternoon for training. Stagger training days across the NHOs and ensure sessions are fully utilised.

Procedure guides

Review and update the most commonly used procedures on managing tenancies. This should be from the perspective of the customer journey and address issues identified in the review including:

- Reduce the time procedures takes by simplifying them. This should start with the alterations procedure.
- Where possible reduce the need to fill in forms to request a service.
- Where form filling is required ensure that they can be completed and returned via email or website without the need for printing out and posting back.
- When reviewing a procedure ensure that it utilises Northgate wherever appropriate.

- Develop the company's approach to self-serve to provide the opportunity for customers to request services without the need to make contact by phone or email.
- Stop the use of jargon and adopt a plain English approach to writing procedures.
- Ensure that procedures are applied consistently across all NHTs.
- All procedures to be allocated a review date no longer than 3 years.

When reviewing procedures that impact on customers the review process should include customer engagement to ensure their needs and expectations are met.

Internal communication and working relationships

Address the feeling of "isolation" that was expressed by the NHTs in the focus groups. This should include improved communications:

- Internal communications to engage and reflect more activities undertaken by NHTs.
- Housing Managers/ CSOs to encourage NHTs to engage with internal communications during the working day.
- Take steps to tackle employee's negative perceptions of how customers view the organisation (TLF mirror survey). Update NHTs as to the results of the TLF survey and the positive feedback in relation to their teams.
- CSOs to continue to be allowed the time to meet collectively and share experiences and learning
- Where possible encourage co-location with specialist teams including "hot desking" in NHOs.
- Members of Senior Management Team to seek opportunities to proactively engage with NHTs

Customer communication

- Promote via website, TGHC News and social media the roles and responsibilities of the different specialist teams and NHTs. The aim is to ensure that customers understand the range of services we offer and how they can contact them.