

Scrutiny Team Review of Complaints

September 2014 – January 2015

Prepared by:

The Scrutiny Team

Introduction and Objectives

In discussion with the audit committee and following discussion during our quarterly business meetings, the scrutiny team opted to review the current complaint processes and procedure to ascertain effectiveness, value for money, ease of use, clarity, objectivity, accessibility and fairness.

In addition to the discussions with the audit committee, we were also aware that the Localism Act 2011 made a change to the appeals process by the introduction of a further 'stage' before any complaint was referred to the Housing Ombudsman. This change is not reflected in the current procedures at Selwood which led us to the assumption that a detailed review was necessary.

The intention of this review was to examine the management of the complaints procedure with particular reference to 'the customer's journey' and to make recommendations for improvement if and where applicable, for the benefit of both the tenant and landlord.

Review Process

The scrutiny team undertook the following actions:-

1. Reviewed and examined the current complaints procedures as used by all departments.
2. Reviewed and examined the complaints procedure and advice to tenants as published.
3. A benchmarking exercise was undertaken to identify positives and negatives in comparison with other housing providers (mainly local).
4. A survey of tenants was undertaken to gain a range of views from tenants who had used the procedure and made a complaint within 2013/14
5. Staff were interviewed in relation to the procedure and process used by different teams on receipt of a complaint.

The reports for the above items 1-5 are available on request. A number of minor recommendations are made in the above reports that could be dealt with at a local level. For the purposes of this board report, the following findings and recommendations are those that the scrutiny team have considered a priority.

Findings

1. Reviewed and examined the current complaints procedures as used by all departments

- 1a. The complaints process is being used according to the understanding of the individual member of staff using it. Since there is little detailed training in dealing with complaints this leads to a wide variance in effectiveness and record keeping resulting in a distinct lack of consistency and therefore misleading reports being obtained from the QL system.

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1b. More training is required in order to advise tenants when a complaint needs to be upgraded to the next stage. It is understandable that staff do not wish to encourage a tenant to escalate their complaint but there is a fine line between encouraging/inviting this and actively discouraging the tenant by lack of information and advice. A cultural change could be initiated in that staff be made aware that if everything has been done according to the procedure and there is no resolution at this stage, it is a natural progression to upgrade the complaint and does not reflect on the member of staff. There is no room for personal defensiveness in the complaints process.

2. Reviewed and examined the complaints procedures and advice to tenants as published.

- 2a. There are failures in the documentation made available to tenants and the majority of these appear to be a failure in updating information regularly and comprehensively.
- 2b. The information and advice available to the tenant is not contained in any one area. It is difficult to find and access on the website.
- 2c. The complaints policy is comprehensive but is totally dependent on the way in which the process is undertaken. It should be carried out without variation by each team. Staff training is the key to prevent complaints of 'failure to follow your own published policy'.

3. A benchmarking exercise was undertaken to identify positives and areas of concern/for improvement in comparison with other housing providers (mainly local).

- 3a. There is very little variation between housing providers as the complaints process is specified by government. However, there are some practices that are not policy that could be utilised to improve processes and procedures.

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4. A survey of tenants was undertaken to gain a range of views from tenants who had used the procedure and made a complaint within 2013/14

4a. The survey did not produce any results that could be relied upon due to the small number of replies (47 sent, 6 replies received).

4b. The lack of replies adds to the proposal that another form of satisfaction measure should be investigated.

5. Staff were interviewed in relation to the procedures used by different departments on receipt of a complaint.

5a. Again the emphasis was firmly placed on lack of specific QL training. It became evident that staff in general are not confident in the use of QL (in relation to the complaints section of the package) and require in-depth training.

5b. When staff wearing Selwood identity badges (neighbourhood managers/repairs & maintenance staff/housekeepers & caretakers/surveyors et al) are working outside of the office they become a prime 'target' to whom many tenants voice their concerns and complaints. This can significantly delay/derail staff from performing their normal duties. This often results in the request/complaint not being fed through the proper channels and not appearing on the QL system.

Recommendations

- 1. Investigate the possibility of a dedicated complaints team or an individual designated as a complaints manager as part of their substantive post that would remove the necessity of in-depth training of staff in every team in the use of the QL system.**

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The team/individual would only handle stage 1 and above complaints. A time and motion study to ascertain the staff time and effort of handling complaints from start to finish would identify cost implications.

A dedicated complaints team would ensure continuity and increased efficiency in adherence to the policy and published information supplied to the tenant which would result in an increase in customer satisfaction. They would also be able to investigate and instigate more suitable satisfaction surveys.

A dedicated team/individual could research the reports obtainable from the QL system to allow much more information to be supplied to managers with regard to trends, statistics and successes and failures in the complaints process. The learning outcomes report would be particularly useful but through lack of training, is currently not being populated correctly at this time.

- 2. Aarion (the owners of QL) should be approached to provide in-depth training to several staff members (training the trainers) so that information and training can be tailored to the end user.**

Since the reorganisation of the business systems team, there would appear to be no QL system 'expert' in-house and therefore the training that can be delivered is minimal. We do understand that there are QL super users in some teams so it might be possible for them to receive further training to handle complaints information. The initial induction course that each member of staff receives on joining covers many different aspects of responsibilities but pays very little and very basic attention to the QL system. There should be ongoing training and updating, possibly after the probationary period is completed.

- 3. Change reception arrangements to ensure that tenants wishing to make a complaint are able to do this if they call into the office.**

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Tenants who visit Selwood reception appear to be expecting more of a response since they have made an extra effort to travel to the office. Investigation would be welcome as to whether the reception staff could ring the relevant department and ask for a member of staff to attend reception, either to assist the tenant in the completion of a 'complaints form' or to resolve the complaint should it appear to be easily completed (stage 0).

4. **Introduce a standing item on complaints at 1-2-1 meetings.**

Since staff have a 1-1 meetings with their appropriate manager on a monthly basis, the status of complaints could be updated and discussed at this time and any problems resolved.

5. **Implement staff training to actually investigate and resolve a complaint would build confidence in taking ownership and escalating if necessary.**

It would also be desirable to empower staff to make decisions with regard to small compensations or to make an apology in some other manner if and when appropriate.

6. **Improve information available to tenants regarding complaints on the website.**

Information and advice for tenants was found in 4 different places on the website. This should be placed under the green 'heading banner' on the home page and accessible by one click. The desirability of adding a facility to make a complaint online should be investigated as this is not currently possible.

7. **Stage 0 complaints should be re-named e.g. 'Quick fix', 'Right first time' being examples used by other Housing Associations.**

The Housing Ombudsman Service advises tenants to 'tell the landlord about a problem' – they may be able to put things right. If the landlord does not put things right that is the time to make a

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complaint'. This would indicate that they do not consider the first 'expression of dissatisfaction' to actually be a complaint – therefore the use of the term 'stage 0' is misleading, inaccurate and not user-friendly.

8. Revise the wording in the policy and procedure to more accurately reflect issues relating to a tenants panel.

The Localism Act is not fully or accurately reported in any Selwood publication. Since the new provisions offer more options to the tenant before taking their case to the Housing Ombudsman, this should be addressed as a matter of urgency, especially since this came into effect in 2011.

9. Revise effective feedback mechanisms in the reporting of satisfaction and complaints information

As feedback is vital to monitoring success or failures in the complaints procedure/process from a tenant perspective, attention should be paid to ensuring that feedback is sought in an effective and timely manner. It has been historically proven that satisfaction surveys sent to the tenant for completion are not effective and other ways of measuring satisfaction should be investigated.

On this basis a quick questionnaire could be introduced. Staff dealing with complaints could ensure that a questionnaire is sent out upon closure of the QL file, at least until another method of satisfaction survey is introduced. This would prevent complaints performance figures from being 'skewed' simply because cases are not being signed off at the appropriate time.

10. Offer assistance or other options for tenants in making a complaints – do not simply ask them to put it in writing.

Because staff are not confident in the use of the QL system, tenants are sometimes being asked to put their complaint in writing. This is not acceptable, especially since some tenants are not literate and possibly their first language is not English. Team leaders should

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ensure that this is not made common practice and alternatives should be found to assist tenants in making a complaint or a comment to the organisation.

- 11. We recommend all staff on the ground should carry a revised "comment cards". These cards should contain details of contacts, phone numbers etc. that can be handed to the tenant.**

This should be accompanied by an explanation from the member of staff that the best approach would be to contact Selwood directly to get the matter dealt with as quickly as possible. The responsibility is then handed back to the tenant to report their concern directly through customer services which will ensure that logging takes place as required, quickly and without becoming 'lost along the way'.