**10 Top Hints and Tips on Evidence gathering**

1. Gathering evidence
2. Setting the right questions
3. Researching best practice and networking
4. **Gathering evidence**
   1. **Keep an open mind**
      * Base decisions/findings on the evidence available. Bear in mind, particularly when reviewing complaints, evidence that was available at the time rather than information available after the complaint was responded to
      * Don’t focus on evidence that supports your views/opinions. Look at the whole picture
      * Clarify your understanding – if you need to, ask for more evidence of for an explanation of what the evidence is saying
   2. **Put personal experiences aside**
      * When scrutinising a service, don’t put too much emphasis on personal experience or anecdotal evidence. While this is important, it might ‘taint’ your view and prevent you from making an independent assessment
      * In complaints reviews, try not to over-identify even if you have had a similar experience. Each case is unique and you need to assess it on its own merits.
      * Beware projecting your personal feelings onto a complainant – you may not have been overly bothered by what happened, but they were. Or the other way around.
      * Empathy with complainants is very important and can help you to engage with them when they come to you to review their case. However, try not to let this affect your decisions.
   3. **Stay focussed on the line of enquiry**
      * For example, when reviewing a complaint about the length of time to fix damp in a property, try not to get overly concerned with the technical reports. It’s very tempting to research the issues and then to challenge the professional findings of qualified surveyors. Even if you *are* a qualified surveyor, try to stay focussed on finding a solution to the complaint rather than re-assessing the technical issues.
      * Each complaints panel may operation slightly differently, but the most usual line of enquiry in these cases is ‘were surveys done?’, ‘were they used to make decisions as to what work to do?’, ‘were surveys independent?’, ‘was everything suggested on a survey completed?’.
      * In Scrutiny reviews, it’s also easy to get distracted and lose sight on the line of enquiry. For example, a scrutiny review of rent collection services has overlaps into other areas such as vulnerability support, money advice, customer profiling, using profiling information… you can see how one minor diversion from the line of enquiry can lead to another and take you away from the original focus of the review.
   4. **Beware of hearsay – isn’t usually appropriate evidence**
      * One example is feedback from front line staff during scrutiny focus groups – front line staff might say ‘Our systems can’t record that’ or ‘we don’t have a process for that’
      * This might be true, but it’s always worth checking with the managers or with other staff – if the comments are accurate, you’ve found a recommendation. If they aren’t, you’ve found a training need! So, try to put hearsay and other anecdotal evidence/comments into context before framing any recommendations. It might not be telling you what you think it is.
5. **Setting the right questions**

**5. When conducting interviews, agree key questions in** advance, but try to stay flexible

* + - It’s quite common to allocate questions to different people on a panel but sometimes, you can be so focussed on getting your question out there, that you don’t notice it’s already been answered.
    - You will always need to ask supplementary questions that will come to you during the interview – it’s almost impossible to know every question you’re going to want to ask in advance. As the interview progresses, you’ll be thinking of other questions you want to ask or you might want to check your understanding. So, the original question list isn’t cast in stone. Make sure everyone has asked everything they want to before closing the interview.
    - Consider other ways of conducting the interview, for example, a chair to introduce and manage the interview, a note taker who is listening but not involved in asking questions, a single questioner who leads on the pre-prepared questions, and an observer who takes some notes, but provides an independent person to check understanding and to raise supplementary questions.

**6. Make sure every question has a purpose relevant to the line of enquiry,** for example:

* + - To fill a gap in evidence, particularly if that evidence couldn’t be provided before the interviews
    - To clarify your understanding
    - To clear up inconsistencies in evidence.
      * Take care when clearing up any inconsistencies in evidence provided for a complaint review. Errors in dates and times, for example, might be a genuine error but you can risk upsetting or insulting someone questioning their evidence. If it isn’t really relevant to finding a solution, be wary of doing this.
    - Or delving deeper including to understand the impact of the issue or service.

**7. Use different types of question (open and closed) to manage your interview.**

* + - Closed questions – where the answer is a single word (e.g. yes/no) or a short phrase (e.g. the Tuesday before Christmas)
    - The benefits of closed questions include:
      * You get facts
      * They are easy to answer
      * They are quick to answer
      * They give control of the interview to the *interviewer.*
    - Use closed questions to:
      * Open a conversation
      * Put the interviewee at ease
      * Test your understanding, or break a ramble (e.g. So, just to confirm, you wrote in on the Tuesday before Christmas?”
      * Achieve closure (e.g. “Am I right in saying that, if they do this, that’s a resolution for you?”)
    - Open questions – these deliberately seek a longer more involved answer (usually start with what, why, how or describe.)
    - The benefits of open questions include:
      * They encourage the interviewee to think and reflect
      * They give the interviewee opportunity to describe opinions and feelings (and therefore the impact on them of the issue/service/process etc.) This is especially helpful in building trust
      * They give control of the interviewer to the *interviewee* – they feel listened to.
    - Use open questions to:
      * Open up shy/quiet/nervous people (usually after you’ve asked some closed questions)
      * Learn about a person for example they needs, wants, preferences, problems
      * Get the interviewee thinking about the extent of any problems (e.g. when discussing what resources are available for complaint handling in a scrutiny review ‘So, what would happen if complaints suddenly increased?’)
      * Build a relationship/trust (e.g. “How have you been feeling since the operation on your knee?’)

1. **Researching best practice and networking**
2. **Best Practice – online resources are a great starting point,** but also ask other panels, ask your landlord. Good places to start online include:
   * HouseMark:
     + Case studies
     + ‘Inspection focus’ – info about inspection findings
     + Ombudsman says – examples of determinations in real complaints
     + Housing industry publications from other organisations
   * HouseMark is a great jumping off point to other online resources
   * Also, try the websites for the Chartered Institute of Housing, Housing Ombudsman Service, TPAS.
   * Not forgetting the Northern Housing Consortium website!
   * Also, look at housing industry press such as Inside Housing or the Guardian Housing pages.
   * Unsure about your internet skills? As you landlord to sit down with you and ‘drive’ the computer!
3. **One size doesn’t fit all**
   * With best practice examples, bring them to your landlord’s attention as an indicator of the direction you think a service might go in.
   * Be aware that some ideas are easier to implement with more ‘mature’ services or with newer ones – consider what part of the journey your landlord is at to see whether a best practice initiative is really achievable at that time.
   * If it isn’t, keep it in reserve if you really like it, and bring it up again in a few months/years!
4. **Networking – You only get out of it what you put in… so get out there!**
   * Northern Housing Consortium has great networking events and sessions etc.
   * TPAS similarly offers good networking opportunities
   * If you are a bit shy about approaching someone at an event, but their words strike a chord with you or they are asking the questions you wish you were confident enough to ask, *make a note of their name and organisation.*
   * When you next go to an event, see if they will be there – it’s much easier to start a conversation by saying ‘I remember you from…. You asked a question about …. Have you done anything more with that since?’ Great icebreaker!
   * Meeting up isn’t the only way to network.
     + If you like a best practice example, call the landlord or get contact details for the panel off the website.
     + Housing Ombudsman Service holds contact details for all registered designated complaints panels. Use it as a phone book.
     + You can also arrange an event yourselves and invite other like-minded panels along!