



How to...

*improve your services with
CIT charter*



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1 What are CIH charters?

A CIH charter is a flexible framework that helps to identify what outcomes a good quality service can deliver. The charters focus on core areas of service delivery linked to our commitment to support organisations to get the basics right.

Each charter includes a set of commitments tailored to the core area covered. These commitments are underpinned by a range of outcomes that organisations should hope to achieve if they are signed up to the commitments. Together the commitments and outcomes provide a framework against which organisations can assess where they are now and where they aspire to be.

By signing up to a charter, organisations are making public their commitment to deliver high quality services which are clearly focused on outcomes for tenants. There are a set of fundamental principles that apply across all of the charters:

- sign up is voluntary and based on self assessment
- they have been developed using sector expertise
- they are flexible and can be tailored to suit outcomes that matter to organisations and their tenants
- they are focused on outcomes, not processes
- they drive sector-led improvement
- they are designed to complement existing frameworks or initiatives.

The first charter from CIH was the respect charter, which originated with the government in 2006 and was passed to CIH, HouseMark and the Social Landlords Crime and Nuisance Group in 2011. Following its success, CIH introduced charters for repairs and equality and diversity in 2012, and a charter for complaints handling in 2013. The charters have received over five hundred signatories from more than four hundred organisations in total.

Why do organisations sign up to a charter?

CIH conducted a survey of charter signatory organisations in Autumn 2013. Organisations told us their primary reason for signing up to a charter was to demonstrate their commitment to providing excellent services to tenants. A desire to assess organisational performance and to learn from other organisations were also cited as reasons to sign up to a charter.

When to sign up?

According to our survey just over half – 51per cent - of organisations signed up to a charter immediately, before any self-assessment or improvement work has been carried out or planned. Signing up to a charter straight away enables an organisation to show its commitment to improvement immediately, and allows improvements to demonstrate progress from 'default' circumstances.

Many organisations made a decision to carry out self-assessment before signing up to the charter. This enables the sign-up process to function as a focus point for introducing improvement plans to staff across the organisation. Organisations which sign up to a charter after work towards complying with the charter has progressed can demonstrate charter compliancy as a goal they are aiming for to staff and customers.

Where are we now?

The charters are designed so that compliance is measured through self-assessment. This can encompass several aspects:

- an assessment of current performance in the area of the charter against existing targets
- a review of whether the targets themselves need to be amended or updated
- consulting with staff, tenants, and partner organisations for their views
- development of a framework for improvement, based on the charter commitments and the organisation's individual circumstances and aspirations.

It is likely that much of the data required to perform this will already exist through standard record-keeping. This will show how well the organisation has been performing up to the present, and targets or projected outcomes will show where aspirations lie for future performance. Current record-keeping will also reveal gaps where new data will need to be collected in order to record the progress of new initiatives or changes to existing procedures.

How are we doing?

The self-assessment process can be viewed as an opportunity to discuss with staff and tenants how they view the services provided by the organisation. It is not unusual for initiatives and revisions to service provision to outlast staff members' time with an organisation, leading to teams implementing procedures that no member has had an opportunity to influence in a meaningful way. By involving staff in assessing services in this way, organisations can draw on their views and experiences of delivering the service and gain insights which cannot be recorded statistically. Similarly, staff who have been involved in delivering similar services in other organisations can turn a critical eye to the organisation's current practice in comparison with others.

Learning from others

Walsall Housing Group decided to carry out self-assessment prior to signing up to the equality and diversity charter; a decision arrived at following discussions between their Diversity Improvement Group and Better Business team. Self-assessment took place over the course of a year and involved reviewing evidence which demonstrated how they complied with the charter. The self-assessment process found that the organisation had no major gaps in its approach to equality and diversity and enabled them to identify areas for future development work.

Contact: Hyacinth Austin hyacinth.austin@whgrp.co.uk

Charters: a catalyst for change

Organisations which have been charter signatories for some time are already seeing the effects of being signed up to the charter in their work. By thoroughly implementing the charter framework, an organisation can transform its services and its working culture.

Learning from others

Together Housing Group carried out a review of existing equality and diversity work including best practice across the group's five housing association partners, in order to inform a new group-wide approach. Existing equality and diversity teams consisting of group members were consolidated into two geographically-based groups, meeting quarterly to discuss progress whilst continuing to share best practice, and to provide training for staff and tenants.

Contact: Hazel Neilson hazel.neilson@togetherhousing.co.uk

Starting small: don't reinvent the wheel

Often, organisations will have effective policies and procedures in place which make efficient use of resources and generate positive feedback from tenants, or they recognise that significant changes need to be made but that they face a long journey to turn the organisation around. In both cases, updates and revisions to established policies and procedures can improve standards, efficiency and tenant satisfaction without requiring major changes to the way in which staff approach their work.

Learning from others

Alabaré Christian Care and Support devised an improvement plan following sign-up to the equality and diversity charter, including several small-scale changes which improved awareness of relevant skills held by staff across the organisation:

- information leaflets were revised to make them more accessible to more client groups
- a list of staff with fluency in languages other than English (including British Sign Language) was compiled in order to support service users. One service was able to 'borrow' a Polish speaker from another team to assist with translations
- equalities training was planned which would include all employees, including administration staff and senior managers who were often overlooked.

Contact: Janet Herring j.herring@alabare.co.uk

Developing staff skills

In situations where an organisation is undergoing significant changes to its service provision following self-assessment, staff can expect to increase their knowledge and skills in order to deliver improvements. Depending on the nature of the changes and the area of the organisation's business that they affect, this may take the form of formal qualifications or training, or the development of existing skills or experience to deliver new initiatives.

Learning from others

Following feedback from residents and staff **Peabody** devised and implemented a domestic abuse training package for staff. Its success led to other housing organisations using the training package as part of the anti-social behaviour training for their staff.

Contact: Gudrun Burnet Gudrun.burnet@peabody.org.uk

Work together or stay solo?

In order to deliver effective improvements many organisations will find it necessary to work with other organisations or statutory agencies, either on an ongoing basis or for the delivery of a specific initiative. In most cases, this will not be new – for example, working with the police or schools to tackle anti-social behaviour, or working closely with contractors to deliver an effective repairs service. Other partnerships may be established for short-term or time-limited initiatives, which in many cases will be linked to funding being allocated for a limited time or project. The charters are designed to support effective partnership working to deliver services of a high standard, and to allow organisations to move on from partnerships which do not deliver services to an appropriate standard.

Learning from others

Following a comprehensive assessment process and the implementation of an improvement plan, the anti-social behaviour team at **New Progress Housing Association** now deal with anti-social behaviour for two other organisations within Progress Housing Group.

Contact: Linda Alcock lalcock@progressgroup.org.uk

Peabody previously used an external mediation service as a tool for tackling anti-social behaviour, but this proved unsatisfactory. A new in-house mediation service was established, and has trained 13 people to be mediators.

Contact: Liz Chambers liz.chambers@peabody.org.uk

Involving tenants

Working with tenants and residents – either on an individual basis or by working with tenant or resident groups – can be beneficial for the development of services responsive to the needs of residents and their communities. There are opportunities for tenants to be involved throughout all aspects of the process of signing up to a charter, from the decision to sign up through to the implementation of long-term improvement plans.

Many tenants who would be interested in being involved will already have experience of tenant involvement in other areas or forms, for example as tenant board members, attendance at community forum meetings, or participating in estate walkabouts or tenant training courses. Whether you decide to recruit tenants to become involved in work associated with the charter as a separate group or incorporate the work into an existing group will be dependent on the nature of existing tenant involvement arrangements; however, as with tenant involvement more generally, it is important to involve as broad a range of people as possible.

Learning from others

As part of their self-assessment process **New Progress Housing Group** set up focus groups comprised of tenant board members, housing forum members, and tenants volunteering for the first time. This was augmented by staff members joining the focus groups as guests where necessary, such as finance department staff giving evidence on value for money, ensuring that a professional opinion could be heard where it would constitute a valuable contribution to the debate.

Contact: Linda Alcock lalcock@progressgroup.org.uk

Ends over means

The charters are designed so that their focus is on outcomes rather than processes. This enables organisations to prioritise their customers' experience and regard this as the measure of success, rather than adherence to a structured procedure or the achievements of pre-ordained targets. This also takes into account the reality that no two organisations are the same – different sizes, locations, customer profiles, and history influence an organisation's day-to-day operations to an extent that standard detailed processes will not be suitable for all. Instead, organisations are united by their purpose and their drive to improve standards.

Learning from others

Yarlington Group signed up to the complaints charter with a keen desire to re-establish their complaints procedure as a more streamlined process which regarded all complaints and other feedback from tenants as valuable. The previous complaints procedure was a multi-stage process which required tenants to work through a rigid structure, and Yarlington wants to replace this with a system which focuses on resolving and learning from complaints as quickly as possible.

The new complaints procedure prioritises frontline resolution with complaints being dealt with at the first point of contact as the preferred result. All staff will receive training on the new process, with enhanced training for frontline staff whether they communicate directly with tenants face-to-face or via telephone. It is hoped that the new procedure will be more empowering for staff, will resolve complaints much quicker and lead to satisfied residents.

Contact: Amanda Carver amanda.carver@yhg.co.uk

Evolution never stops

Having a flexible framework enables organisations to develop or update service delivery as required following organisational changes, legislative changes or updates to guidelines relating to housing practice. The charters' emphasis on leadership, providing accessible services, resident involvement, responsiveness and continuous improvement is designed to ensure that progress does not remain static. The absence of an emphasis on methodology and prescriptive means to achieve results enables organisations to develop initiatives which are tailored to their own particular needs, objectives, and resources.

Driving up performance

Even if your initial self-assessment presents your organisation in glowing terms, there will always be room for improvement. This may be driven by customer expectations, the need to respond to external changes, or staff changes such as staff turnover and the impact of new skills of current staff. Self-assessment should not just be a one-off process – by re-evaluating services and their delivery you can ensure that they are:

- provided in the right place at the right time
- targeted towards people who can benefit most from them
- well-received by customers, and responsive to their feedback
- delivered by staff with appropriate skills, and allow for staff development
- cost-effective and not duplicating other provision

Learning from others

London Borough of Southwark introduced equality impact assessments to monitor their homelessness and housing options service, and the housing register and allocations services. These helped to drive performance management measures and the development of new services, including work to address issues resulting from the benefit cap which takes into account that 76 per cent of affected tenants are single parents.

Contact: Ian Swift ian.swift@southwark.gov.uk

The ability to spend organisational resources on developing and implementing new initiatives that can deliver more responsive outcomes for customers and create greater efficiencies for your organisation and customers is an aspiration for most housing organisations, but one which many do not get the opportunity to pursue as fully as they would wish to. By keeping track of how well services are being delivered and received and by documenting aspirations for service development and provision, your organisation will be keeping an eye on the future as well as the present. This is a vital tool to ensure daily work practices do not become hampered by dogged adherence to procedures which are no longer as effective as they once were.

Accountability and publicity

A commitment to continuous improvement requires a commitment to keep staff and customers informed of progress. While this should ideally be in line with an organisation-wide communications policy which enables staff and customers to have ready access to the information they need and which celebrates the organisation's successes with stakeholders and the wider world, the charters are an ideal starting point for refreshing an organisation's approach to keeping everyone informed.

Upon signing up to a charter, all organisations are sent a charter certificate to be signed by a senior staff member or board member, which can then be displayed as a public commitment to the charter by the organisation. This can be used as a starting point to demonstrate progress in achieving the aims of the charter and marking successes, but should not be regarded as a significant extra task because:

- achievements of external accredited standards or credentials are regularly publicised by organisations of all types as evidence of their reputation
- many new initiatives set up following work to achieve charter objectives will need publicity (internal or external) in order to attract enough involvement to be successful
- what works for one organisation could also work for another – be open to sharing positive practice
- publicity does not have to be on a large scale – social media, including CIH's Yammer charter networks, work more effectively with smaller amounts of information, and are quick and straightforward to use.

Sign up to a charter

In our survey of charter signatories, 90 per cent of organisations said that signing up to a charter had helped them to improve services. By signing up to a charter, organisations are making a public commitment to deliver high quality services which have a clear focus on outcomes for tenants. The charters are flexible and designed to focus on outcomes rather than processes, driving sector-led improvement.

To learn more about CIH's charters and to sign up on behalf of your organisation, visit www.cih.org/charters.

Useful resources and information

Tackling anti-social behaviour
www.cih.org/antisocialbehaviour

Complaints
www.cih.org/complaints

How to mainstream equality and reflect diversity
www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How_to_mainstream_equality_and_reflect_diversity

How to use diversity network groups to improve services
www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How_to_use_diversity_network_groups_to_improve_services

How to learn from complaints to improve services
www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How_to_learn_from_complaints_to_improve_services

How to work with tenant panels to resolve complaints
www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How_to%20work_with_tenant_panels_to_resolve_complaints

How to use technology to improve responsive repairs
www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How_to_use_technology_to_improve_responsive_repairs

How to build skills and capacity in repairs services
www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How_to%20build_skills_and_capacity_in_repairs_services

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Chartered Institute of Housing

Octavia House
Westwood Way
Coventry CV4 8JP
Tel: 024 7685 1700

www.cih.org