

**Croydon**

**Housing Scrutiny Panel**



**Scrutiny of the Housing Customer Contact Service (Including the Contact Centre and Access Croydon) November 2012**

Housing Scrutiny Panel: Riki Clarke, Carol Bennet, Caroline Stenbridge, Guy Pile-Grey, Chris Crossdale, Sheryl Read, Ruth Alladice

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## **1. Introduction**

1.1 In April 2012 the social housing regulator, the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), introduced revisions to its regulatory standards. There is now a greater emphasis on local mechanisms to involve tenants in scrutinising landlord performance and resolving problems with housing services. The regulations state that

*“tenants should have the ability to scrutinise their provider’s performance, identify areas for improvement and influence future delivery”*

1.2 In response to these regulations Croydon Council, in partnership with its tenants developed a framework for tenant scrutiny. This included the establishment of and recruitment to, a tenant scrutiny panel. During early 2012 the panel members received a range of training to prepare them to conduct effective scrutiny exercises.

1.3 Following consultation with other council tenants and a review of performance data, the scrutiny panel decided that their first scrutiny exercise would be the housing customer contact service. Seven scrutiny panel members took part.

1.4 This report details the findings and recommendations of this scrutiny exercise, which took place during July, August and September 2012. The exercise included scrutiny of the telephone contact centre, email contact and the housing reception at Taberner House (Access Croydon). The customer contact service deals with all aspects of housing advice, housing management and repairs, while Access Croydon provide face-to-face customer appointments, dealing with all housing issues apart from repairs.

## **2. Scope and Methodology**

2.1 The panel received full co-operation from both management and front line officers which greatly aided the scrutiny process.

2.2 The panel was mentored throughout the exercise by an independent consultant. They met for a facilitated workshop on the exercise where they agreed the scrutiny process, their activities and identified key areas for scrutiny.

2.3 The Panel also received a presentation on the work of the Housing Specialist Team at the Contact Centre from Graham Cadle (Director of Customer Services and Communications), Karen Sullivan (Head of Customer Contact Centre) and Natasa Patterson (Team Manager) at the beginning of the Review. The Panel were provided with the following information:

- Performance Reports
- Team Structure

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- Staff Training Modules
- Customer Charter/ Performance Agreement
- Service Level Agreement between DASHH, Contact centre & Repairs
- Sample of complaints schedule
- Personal Development and Competency Schemes (PDCS) for front line officers
- Contact centre social housing support manual
- Benchmarking reports
- Sickness/staffing levels
- Access Croydon 2012 target tables including customer satisfaction statistics

2.4 To support their work, the Panel used lines of enquiry and some illustrative questions for the Customer Service Manager and Customer Service staff to ensure there was a structured approach in interviews. These were developed further during the course of the exercise. Likewise there was a standard set of five questions for the exit surveys covering time waited and satisfactions with various aspects of the service offered.

2.5 The exercise involved a substantial range of activities and meetings including:

- Thirty five exit surveys for residents leaving Access Croydon (Annex 1)
- Mystery shopping with 32 shops by telephone, 6 shops by visit and 5 shops by email (Annex 2)
- Thirteen interviews with Customer Contact managers and staff
- Eight work shadowing exercises with the Contact Centre and Access Croydon including observation of a team meeting

2.6 Individual panel members recorded the key points from their range of scrutiny activities then came together in another facilitated workshop to agree on their key findings and initial recommendations.

2.7 Before writing this report, some members of the panel met again with Graham Cadle to share their findings and seek his feedback on some of their proposed recommendations.

### 3. Findings & Recommendations

#### APPROACH OF CALL CENTRE STAFF

3.1 The Panel was impressed with the approach of the Call Centre staff. They saw examples of where residents contacted the Centre to thank staff for their work and during the mystery shopping, there was positive feedback about how the call had been handled. They also felt that the majority of the staff were committed to providing customers with an excellent service and tried their best to resolve all issues raised by the customer. They noted that the task of staff was sometimes hindered by the volume of calls they were required to handle, the aggressive nature of some customers, the vulnerability of some others and the failure by some back office staff to take ownership of the calls. There were concerns during the work shadowing about the support given by 'back office' staff to the Call Centre staff. This includes information not being completed and deflection of calls.

3.2 Some staff said that they sometimes felt frustrated when they thought that their ideas to improve services were not listened to and that there were few opportunities to influence service delivery. One of the service's pledges states 'We recognise the value of our people and we engage and empower them through coaching, development and talent management.' During the exercise, some staff stated they did not feel this pledge was being applied in practice.

3.3 The panel felt that the work environment was a depersonalised area to work in and the atmosphere very target driven and felt almost intimidating. The constant pressure to meet targets appears to cause a great deal of stress and some of the agents felt demoralised and undervalued. It appeared that there was little or no flexibility e.g 'if you get caught with a longer call you could miss your break'.

3.4 Panel members conducting interviews and work shadowing felt that staff did not have a full understanding of the purpose of the scrutiny exercise which in some cases panel members felt made open and frank discussion with them difficult.

3.5 It was felt by a number of panel members who interviewed staff that some were reluctant to make any negative comments about the service or their job. A number were fearful of their comments being fed back to management, thereby possibly putting their job in jeopardy.

#### Recommendations

R1 There should be an improvement in communication between managers and staff of the back office and the contact centre, to enable any call handling issues to be raised and solutions agreed. It is suggested that this be achieved by holding monthly meetings, which should be attended by staff and managers from both front and back office, where open but positive discussions can take place.

R2 The profile of senior management should be raised through regular floor walking and 'back to the floor' events.

R3 Management should encourage staff to raise issues and suggest service improvements. Perhaps an 'idea of the month' award for staff should be introduced. This should be a standard agenda item at all team meetings, where staff are asked to suggest any ideas for improvement to the service. In addition, senior managers should agree a rota to attend all team meetings on a regular basis. Team building activities, including the involvement of managers should be organised. It is felt that this would increase staff morale and make staff feel valued.

## PERFORMANCE

3.6 One of the main findings of the panel was that the delay between the telephones being answered and speaking to an agent is too long. The benchmarking results from Housemark (Annex 3) show that last year Croydon were at the bottom of the benchmarking club. Whilst there has been an improvement this year, the benchmarking scores show that Croydon remains below average and missing the current target. (Average handling time was 124 secs for 11/12 – target 80% within 20 secs).

3.7 The mystery shopping covered four standard areas – repairs, tenancy, anti social behaviour and complaints. The results revealed overall satisfaction with the courtesy and professionalism of advisors, but weaknesses in providing full information for all four areas. This was across all methods of approach - phones, emails and visits. See Annex 2

3.8 The weekly performance reports for the period ending 01.06.12 show the service level 19% below the 80% target and average handling times of 306 minutes being 94 seconds above the target of 210 seconds.

3.9 The monthly report for the year to date 11/12 (March) shows there has been a small increase in performance over the past 2 years, i.e. compared with YTD 10/11 (March) with a 1% fall in abandoned calls and a 5% improvement in the overall service level. It was also noted in the same period there has been approx. 6% increase in the base number of calls. Whilst these improvements are welcome, they leave a fair amount of room for further improvement.

3.10 The Exit Surveys from the reception area show over 1 in 3 customers waiting for more than 10 minutes.

3.11 Graham Cadle expressed his concern to the panel about whether the current targets were measuring the right outcomes. The most common complaint the panel

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heard in relation to the contact centre, was the time customers had to wait to speak to an agent.

3.12 The 2010/15 Customer Service Strategy refers to the piloting of 'Croydon Champions' to improve customer services. However the panel could find no information regarding the outcome of this pilot.

### Recommendations

R4 Provide staff and managers with regular training to ensure that they are able to provide customers with detailed and timely information.

R5 Management to commission quarterly mystery shops (using tenant mystery shoppers) to test the service and publish the results and resultant action plans.

R6 Review all response time targets to ensure that they are meaningful, realistic and can be benchmarked with similar organisations. Establish a joint officer/tenant steering group to develop these.

R7 Management to produce a report explaining why the majority of similar organisations appear to achieve significantly faster call answering times. The report to set out what can we learn from these organisations and what steps we are taking to improve performance. This report to be considered by the Tenant & Leaseholder Panel.

R8 Subject to receiving information regarding the outcome of the 'Croydon Champions' pilot extend this to include some 'Tenant Champions' to focus on housing services.

R9 The panel to explore with the Tenant & Leaseholder Panel if it would support additional HRA funding being diverted to the Housing Customer Contact Service to increase staff resources.

R10 Customer expectations can be high and some can be overly reliant on the housing service. Greater education is really an issue. More information should be given to the customer to reduce the need for some to contact the service. However, the panel would remind the council that many tenants are vulnerable and will continue to rely on regular contact with the council by phone.

### RECEPTION AREA

3.13 The exit survey showed that the main areas of concern of those interviewed were about privacy and the lack of information provided. Customers may need to discuss confidential or sensitive issues with housing officers but private areas were not offered and conversations could be overheard by others in the reception area.

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Other customers felt that the officer was unable to provide them with the detailed information that they were requesting.

3.14 Whilst conducting the exit survey, panel members noticed the lack of provision for young children, which resulted in some of them running around the reception area uncontrolled.

3.15 Concern was also raised regarding the requirement for homeless people to wait in the reception area with their baggage whilst their allocation of bed and breakfast accommodation was being organised. This is not ideal for customers as it may feel humiliating and embarrassing for them. In addition, large bags and suitcases can clutter the reception area and create trip hazards etc.

3.16 The Mystery shopping revealed that only 50% of staff were wearing name badges that could be clearly seen.

3.17 It was noted that the security personnel on duty during the time that the various elements of the scrutiny exercise were undertaken, were well informed, helpful and responded to 'security issues' swiftly and appropriately.

### Recommendations

R11 That a customer steering group be formed to work in partnership with officers to develop the new reception space at Bernard Weatherill House.

R12 That a play area and private interview rooms are provided as part of the new reception area at Bernard Weatherill House and offered to customers who require privacy.

R13 That a storage area be provided for the baggage of homeless people awaiting bed and breakfast accommodation, so that they can be offered a choice to either remain in the reception area with an improved level of dignity, or leave the reception area and return when details of their accommodation have been confirmed.

R14 That all reception staff wear name badges that are visible and regular checks are made to ensure this is happening.

## INTERNET AND COMMUNICATION

3.18 During the course of the exercise the panel became aware of the intention to complete more enquiries through the internet rather than through the Call Centre. Given the 'high' proportion of Croydon residents with access to the internet then the panel understands the shift to the internet for some services. However, for the 49% of council tenants who do not have access to the internet and who lack the necessary IT skills, additional support and resources should be available to them to



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ensure their needs remain catered for and that they are given the same priority as other customers.

3.19 The panel was also concerned that the council may lose sight of the fact that the housing customer, in particular, is more likely to be vulnerable and have complex, sensitive or multiple issues, which require face to face contact, or the need to speak to an agent at some length.

3.20 The panel recognised the importance of communicating with tenants about how best to use the Call Centre and its changing role.

### Recommendations

R15 That resources are made available in the self servicing area of the new reception area to ensure that those customers who require support are able to access this.

R16 To ensure that customers who are unable to access the internet or the self service area have suitable alternative choices to access the housing service and are not discriminated against in any way.

R17 Ensure that housing customers are regularly provided with up to date information on the choices for accessing housing services, including office and contact centre opening times, web site and email addresses, social media sites and texting options. This should include information in Open House, Your Croydon, the web site and on new tenant sign ups.

## WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH CUSTOMERS

3.21 One of the service's pledges is 'We will consult you regularly, welcome your involvement and act on your comments wherever possible'. The panel found no evidence of this happening in practice.

3.22 The panel found that communication with customers regarding the service and service standards was poor. The customer charter states 'We will review the Charter regularly and publish it and performance information on the council website' No performance information could be found on the web site or in the reception area.

### Recommendation

R18 That a customer steering group be established to work in partnership with the council to review the charter and monitor performance.

#### **4. Conclusion & Next Steps**

4.1 The panel is very impressed with the attitude and commitment of staff. They were also pleased with the commitment expressed by Graham Cadle to work in partnership with residents to improve the service.

4.2 The panel is particularly keen that tenants are provided with the opportunity to work in partnership with the council to develop new performance targets, be involved with future plans for self servicing and the development of the new reception area in Bernard Weatherill House.

4.3 The panel also want to thank the staff and managers of the contact centre for their full co-operation during this exercise and acknowledge the significant contribution made by them. The panel would welcome staff playing a role in developing and implementing the recommendations.

4.4 The panel hope that the council will welcome this report and agree an action plan to deliver the recommendations.

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Annex 1 – Summary of exit surveys

Annex 2 – Summary of mystery shopping

Annex 3 - Benchmarking results from Housemark