

Agenda item

Report to: East Durham Homes Board

Date: 28 March 2013

Title of report: CIIP Inspection of the complaints service

Reported by: Customer Inspection and Improvement Panel

Report for: Decision/Information

1. Purpose of report and link to strategic objectives

The purpose of this report is to outline findings from the recent inspection of the complaints service, and highlight any recommendations.

The report links to 3 of the strategic objectives:

- Providing quality homes
- Involving customers to improve services
- Delivering excellent services to all

2. Recommendations

As a result of the CIIP inspection 15 recommendations have been made. These are outlined in an action plan in appendix A for the Board's consideration.

3. Executive summary

This is the fifth inspection carried out by the Customer Inspection and Improvement Panel. Before carrying out the onsite inspection, the CIIP completed a desktop review including the Customer Feedback and Compensation policy, the guide to making complaints, compliments or suggestions, performance indicators and contact centre scripts. The inspection also involved job shadowing, journey mapping, telephone interviews, and interviews with members off staff at East Durham Homes,

Kier, Wates, Keepmoat, and Morrison Facilities Services. The inspection takes into account complaints concerning EDH services as well as those in connection with the partners.

4. Risk Implications

Not resolving complaints consistently and effectively could be costly to business and result in possible compensation being paid out. In addition customers may lose confidence in the company if they are not kept informed about their repair, and can cause controversy if customers feel they are not being listened to or they have to repeatedly contact the company to find out about progress.

Furthermore if confidence is lost from customers then any potential long term reputational damage may threaten the company's strategy through the current Stock Option Appraisal process.

5. Consultation

As part of the inspection, the CIIP has consulted with the following people:

- Service Improvement Officers
- Performance and Quality Manager
- Contact Centre Supervisor
- Service Managers who had recently dealt with a complaint (Repairs & Maintenance (Client) Manager & Tenancy Services Manager)
- Morrison Facilities Services Community Involvement Officer
- Project Managers for EDH, Kier, Morrison Facilities Services, Keepmoat and Wates
- Telephone interviews and journey mapping with customers who had recently been through the complaints service

On completion of the inspection, the CIIP consulted with the Performance and Quality Manager to review the recommendations.

6. Background

The Customer Inspection and Improvement panel agreed to look into the complaints service as findings from a previous inspection of communication around repairs highlighted a need. The panel felt it was prudent for a review of the complaints procedure in line with Dale and Valley Homes and Durham City Homes. In addition the panel noted the recent Localism Act 2011, the

regulatory requirements that landlords review complaints procedures from tenant panels or a designated body by April 2013, to work together in the implementation on complaints handling.

7. Options appraisals and proposals

The Customer Inspection and Improvement Panel thought the Performance and Quality team's attitude towards their work was outstanding and were particularly impressed by the team doing their utmost to resolve complaints; sticking to policy following the same procedure for all customers; and taking pride in their work. The CIIP noted the team members' satisfaction when a complaint was resolved as well as their frustration surrounding some customers who make unreasonable demands and threaten to take complaints straight to the media. It was noted from service managers and the Performance & Quality Manager that it is everyone's responsibility to resolve complaints and then to learn from complaints in line with the complaints procedure policy.

The CIIP found that customers were very keen to know whether their complaint has been acknowledged and that it was being dealt with and not ignored. The panel was very impressed with the Performance and Quality team's approach to calling the customer back the same day if possible. The CIIP recommends that all departments within EDH and its partners if possible adopt the same approach to notify customers as soon as possible.

Customers also raised concerns that the handyman service just called out rather than phoning customers ahead to let them know they're on their way, resulting in customers sometimes missing appointments.

After reviewing the complaints policy, the CIIP concluded that the procedure works really well in practice. The number of ways customers can report complaints is sufficient. The Performance and Quality team contacts the complainant within 24 hours as well as writing to them within 3 days. Letters are sent out within the time allotted and are tailored to the customer so that he/she is fully informed. In addition, the Performance and Quality Manager deals with every letter that goes out, and if he is not available, the team checks each other's letters to ensure they address every point before they are sent out. Moreover, all information is captured on the database and when an action is complete, it is marked off on the system, meaning that progress with the complaint can be easily monitored.

The CIIP recognised that staff from Kier, Wates, and Keepmoat were switched on to complaints procedure and do everything they can to resolve an issue as soon as they can e.g. before stage 2, which was evidenced by the manager visiting straight away to resolve the complaint. The panel was also impressed that partners paid high importance to Health & Safety above everything else. When consulted upon, the partners reported that the EDH's complaints procedure was fair and that there was enough time to resolve complaints. They also mentioned that operatives should be reporting back and updating work's progress in order not to prolong the complaints procedure.

In contrast to the other partners, Morrison Facilities Services Community Involvement Officer deals with complaints, and the Partnering Manager only gets involved at the final stage due to the volume of complaints. Unlike the other partners, the number of complaints Morrison receives is seasonal depending on weather i.e. on average 16-18 complaints in summer and 37-41 in autumn. The CIIP was impressed from the amount of money paid out in compensation was reasonable and well within the budget allotted compared to the number of complaints received.

The CIIP recognises that if all complaints concerning Morrison Facilities Services were passed directly to the EDH Performance and Quality team, the workload for the team would be too great. However, it would be beneficial if Morrison Facilities Services was committed to keeping EDH informed of the progress made with complaints.

Many customers consulted pointed out that they had waited for a call back from Morrison Facilities Services that never came, and subsequently had received a TNI from Morrison Facilities Services without prior knowledge of the appointment. The CIIP recommends that Morrison Facilities Services ensures complainants are contacted within 24 hours to guarantee the service provided is consistent. Furthermore, the promise of a call back should be removed from the script unless Morrison Facilities Services can ensure it will happen. The CIIP was concerned that Morrison's performance in resolving complaints is not being logged on Keyfax. Introducing evidence-based monitoring would help the Performance and Quality team to monitor progress and improve communications in general.

As mentioned previously, customers raised concerns around the time delay in getting back to them about their complaint. From the telephone interviews and journey mapping carried out, it was clear that customers did not know what was going on with their complaint, particularly in relation to repairs carried out by Morrison Facilities Services. This highlights and supports the CIIP's previous concerns from the inspection held on communication around repairs.

The CIIP was concerned that complaints relating to Morrison Facilities Services were resolved by their Contact Centre staff. However, if complaints are not being resolved quickly and efficiently by Morrison Facilities Services, this also reflects badly on EDH, even though EDH may have no knowledge of the concern.

The CIIP acknowledges that Contact Centre scripts are good at capturing information and have vastly improved over the last few years. However, it is important to note that the scripts are only as good as the information/answers that they capture.

The CIIP recognised that some complaints are not being captured, even though the customer is clearly not satisfied with the service they received. Some customers complained that they had been promised a call back from the Contact Centre but did not receive it, meaning that they stayed in, waiting a call that never came causing further frustration. The CIIP recommends that the word 'complaint' is included within in scripts rather than 'official complaint', and operatives ask the customer directly if they would like to make a complaint. The CIIP emphasises resolving issues through the complaints service is not endorsing blame culture, but rather that if customers complain, they can improve the service for others.

The CIIP was also concerned that questionnaires relating to a service's performance are not being consistently promoted by operatives or returned by customers. As a result, the feedback that is received may not be an accurate representation of customers' opinions. It was noted that Wates send surveys out 2 to 3 weeks after work completed. The CIIP believes Wates should send such surveys within the last week of work being completed (or better still, on the same day) so that surveys are more likely to be returned. The CIIP recommends that operatives are more intentional about handing out cards or completing surveys on a handheld, in order to improve the service provided. Partners should consider collecting such feedback mandatory in order to make survey results meaningful. The panel recognises that it is in customers' own interest to return surveys, which could be made clearer on survey forms in order to encourage them to respond.

8. Impact for customers (including access and customer care)

While it is worth noting the recommendations highlighted and the potential impact to the customers, it must be recognised first that the delivery of service provided is greatly affected by the quality of information volunteered by the customer when they make the complaint.

As a result, customers are not always be kept informed which often depends on who they speak to i.e. which organisation or department. For example, recent evidence has shown that the Handyman service needs to contact the customer before arriving to properties unannounced or tenants are unaware of their appointment. Feedback will further improve if future contract requirements with the tendering process of repairs can be explored with the Home service standard. This could be achieved by amending this standard so that partner organisations can also contact the customer within 24 hours to acknowledge their complaint.

Promoting and encouraging customers to complete surveys and ensuring that job cards are filled out should increase the feedback into a service in question. This will not only improve that service but will enhance a positive culture and relationship, whereby the customer sees the value of feedback and the provider has taken on board their issue.

By separating the two roles in which Morrison Facilities Services currently covers with the same personnel that of complaints and of community involvement will provide a greater focus with an increase satisfaction levels to the customer and their local neighbourhoods.

9. Impact on equality and diversity

There may be health risk implications for East Durham Homes to understand from captured profile information for those customers suffering from either a physical or mental disability. Therefore if complaints are not resolved correctly or to the required level of needs of the customer within the service standards, any delay could trigger off that customer's disability or deteriorate their wellbeing.

10. Impact on value for money

Resolving complaints as soon as possible rather than allowing complaints to drag on will be better value for money. It was also found that a problem could worsen in the meantime e.g. if the problem persists/due to mould/condensation etc. The panel came across a number of incidents where a case had been closed off but the customer did not see it as resolved or the work had not been carried out.

Training of staff to help them to identify or distinguish the difference between a standard complaint and an actual 'official' complaint being raised will produce a more cost effective way of handling the initial call. By resolving complaints

soon as possible in this way rather than allowing a problem to worsen through protocol or procedure will also allow a number of cases to be closed off to satisfaction levels of the customer.

If Morrison Facilities Services is incorporated onto the Keyfax system so that calls are followed up and tracked will improve service delivery especially duplication of calls and tasks.

11. Legal impact

There is no legal implications in this report arising from the actual inspection, however if complaints are not handled correctly then legal obligations may face East Durham Homes in resolving disputes with injured parties associated.

12. Financial impact

By handling the initial complaint in the correct procedure will not only resolve the issue quicker it will also result in savings in both officer time and compensation claims through complaints stage procedure.

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