



Customer Excellence Panel

Empty Properties

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Report by

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Findings

- ✓ The Panel were pleased that evidence confirmed that 'first impressions' of a property were generally very good.
- ✗ External front areas have improved since the Panel's previous review in 2010, however the external back areas require further improvement. They were keen that problem gardens are tackled during tenancy.
- ✓ Decoration was generally good, particularly within Bedrooms and Living rooms. The Panel were happy with the service managers' proposals around decoration paint packs and they supported a pilot of such scheme.
- ✗ Cleanliness was an area that the Panel had most concern especially within Kitchens and Bathrooms, it was highlighted as the area needing most improvement in 64% of inspected properties.
- ✓ The Panel are in support of pilot of a proposed scheme were new tenants, for an incentive, clean their own home.
- ✓ The Panel were pleased that the Inspectors rated 71% of the visited properties positively and were very impressed that one property received the top rating for all elements checked.
- ✓ The satisfaction survey highlighted that repairs were not always completed when the new tenants moves in, the Panel did consider this a concern as a procedure was in place to deal with repairs efficiently.
- ✓ The Panel considered the Complaints for the service, they concluded that there was no concern and the service manager deals with them effectively making use of personal contact
- The Panel confirmed that the standard of a property should be consistent, they recommended that the Inspectors continue checking the standards of properties particularly around cleaning.
- ✓ No amendments or suggestions around set service standards were made by the Panel, however the Panel did confirm that standards must continue to be consistently met
- ✓ The Panel were pleased that re-let times had steadily improved (Quarter 2 2012/13 30 days) they are keen to see this continue.
- ✓ Tenancy turnover has risen, (Quarter 2 2012/13 9.4%) however the Panel understand that this is linked to Welfare Reform.
- ✓ The Panel have no concern with Void spend, in the past 12 months it has been consistently around £2000.

Key

- ✓ Area of excellence
- ✗ Area to improve
- Action

Introduction

The Customer Excellence Panel is one of a range of Helena's initiatives that aims to enable tenants to have a greater say in the decisions and have an influence in service delivery. The Panel provides an enhanced scrutiny role across Helena which is an important function to ensure that our customers receive a high quality service which also provides good value for money.

The Panel monitors Helena's performance mainly in relation to customer related elements of service delivery. They are not a consultation group and therefore do not advise on policy and procedure but as a scrutiny group who challenge and make recommendations to improve Helena's service's based on evidence from our wider tenant base. The Panel also set targets for performance along with reviewing and setting service standards. Inline with Helena's wider priorities the Panel look at how to improve value for money and maintain customer satisfaction

The Panel has been in place since 2009 and have since carried out a range of service reviews, the work of the Panel has gained significant amount of recognition and were thrilled to be announced as one of ten scrutiny groups who were awarded as 'Co-regulatory Champions' by the TSA for their progress around scrutiny.

For more information about the Panel along with details of how they carry out their reviews and how they prioritise their work please visit the Panel's website at www.excellenceathelena.co.uk

The Customer Excellence Panel made their decision to conduct a service review of Helena's Empty Properties during their Planning Day in 2012. They concluded that whilst overall satisfaction with a new home was high at 95% (2011/12) there were elements of the service that could be improved. 63% of new tenants expressed that they had reported a repair in their new home of which 49% had stated that it remained outstanding (The survey is completed at the Post Tenancy Visit 6 weeks after moving in). In addition the outcomes of the 2011 ABC exercise demonstrated that the service was performing at a high cost and a low quality, this required improvement. Finally the Panel wanted to investigate if the service were meeting set service standards.

Aims of the Empty Property Review

Specifically for this service area the Customer Excellence Panel service review aimed to:

- Review and scrutinise performance and customer feedback (including complaints)
- Review current service standards
- Agree Customer Excellence Performance Indicators
- Recommend areas of improvement and identify time bound actions
- Check that recommendations from a previous review have been implemented
- Consider if the service is providing good value for money and delivering an excellence service to tenants

Method

An overview of the Empty Property service’s performance information, from Key Performance Indicators to Customer Inspectors findings were presented to the Panel. Breakout sessions were held throughout the presentation to gather the Panel’s feedback on current performance, throughout the sessions the Panel challenged, scrutinised and questioned performance. At the end of the review members were given an opportunity to put forward recommendations to improve the service.

All feedback is structured around the Panel’s set workbook which aims to ensure decisions are based on evidence from wider feedback. The workbook focuses around the following:

- What matters most to our tenants? (*Complaints, Customer Inspector Findings and Survey analysis*)
- Service Standards
- Performance Indicators
- Value for money
- Future update

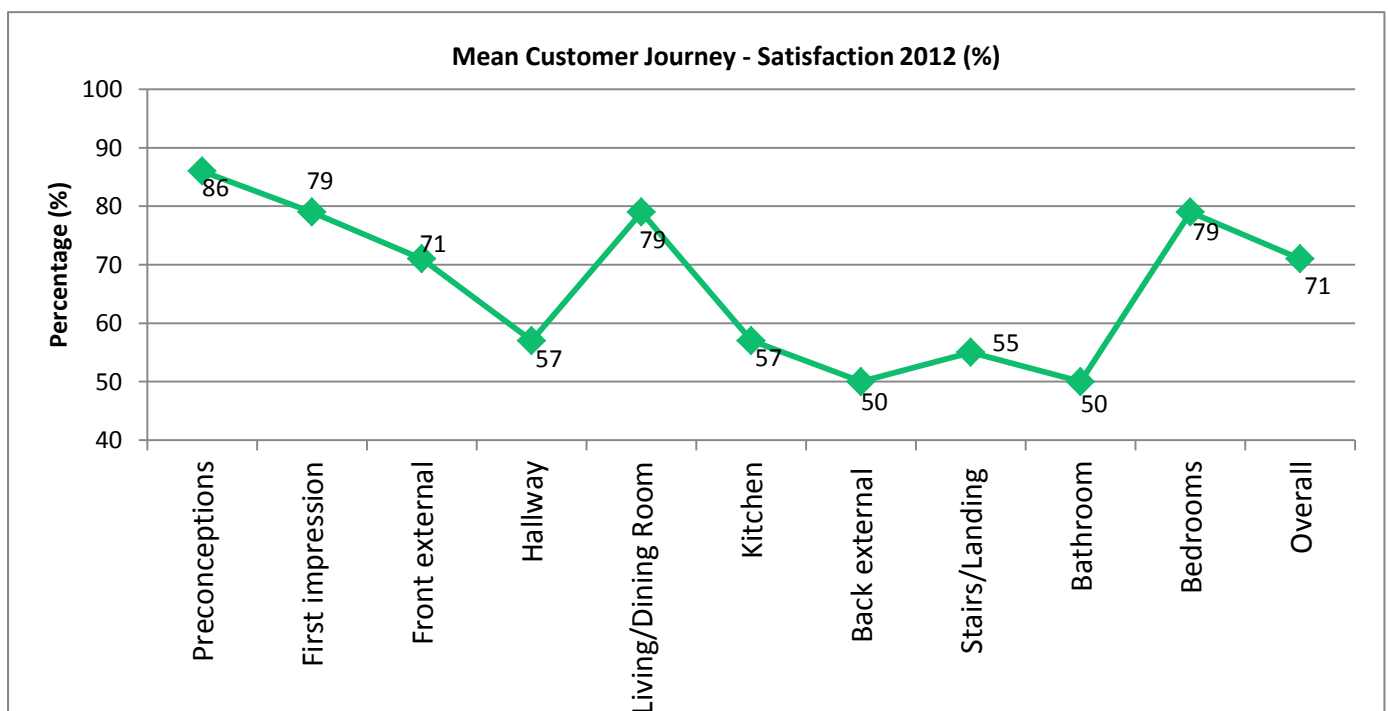
Throughout the sessions the Panel make recommendations for improvements to the service in line with improving customer satisfaction with the service. On completion of the workbook the Panel agreed an action plan with the service manager, Tom Bate



What matters most to tenants?

The first area the Panel considered as part of their review was ‘What matters most to tenants?’ this section enables the Panel to analyse all the feedback gathered from Helena tenants in regards to the service. Specifically the Panel reviewed feedback from the Customer Inspectors investigations of Empty Properties along with outcomes from the satisfaction survey and also customer complaints.

The graph below displays the outcomes of the Customer Inspectors experience’s in Helena’s Empty Properties.



Areas of excellence

The Panel found satisfaction throughout the Inspectors journey to be relatively high, more specifically 'First Impressions' at 79% confirmed that from the outside, Helena's properties generally look attractive, this is supported by the 71% overall satisfaction for the all external areas. Detailed within their report the Inspectors confirmed that 78% of external and internal areas were free from rubbish. This impressed the Panel who highlighted that it was an area highlighted as requiring improvement during the previous service review.

The Living/Dining Rooms and Bedrooms also scored highly both at 79% overall and both received 79% for their standard of cleanliness. The Bedrooms also received high satisfaction for their decoration at 80%. This impressed the Panel and they confirmed that these areas did not cause concern. In contrast to this the 2011/12 satisfaction survey found that overall decoration was lower at only 60%.

The sample of properties produced an overall satisfaction rating of 71%, this demonstrated a fairly high level of satisfaction. The Panel were particularly pleased with the property in Fingerpost which the Inspectors rated perfectly for all Internal and external elements. The Panel confirmed that Helena is definitely able to provide high quality Empty Properties to customers.

Areas for improvement

The Customer Journey also displays areas that could be improved, the Kitchen at 57% and Bathroom's at 50% was something that the Panel took particular concern over as they felt that they were important rooms within any home. Only 36% of kitchen cupboards were rated as clean and in good repair and also 36% of worktops were confirmed to have been power washed and were free from stains. Overall cleanliness rating within the Kitchens was also only 36%. In the Bathrooms the toilet seat being clean and in good repair and the bath, basin and toilet being clean and in good repair was again a low satisfaction level of 43%. Considering the evidence the Panel felt there was a need to improve the cleanliness of both the Bathroom's and the Kitchen's in empty properties. This was confirmed by the evidence by the Inspectors who stated that 64% had cleaning as their main improvement, a change since the previous inspection which was generally improvements in kitchens and bathrooms. It was recommended by the Panel that the standards should be issued to the new tenant when they move into their new property.

The Panel suggested that the Service Manager check the cleaning is consistent in all areas and the team delivering the service offers the best value.

The Hallway at 57% satisfaction and the Landing at 55% satisfaction, were areas that were rated more poorly than others during the inspections. These were acknowledged as areas which generally receive more wear and tear.

The external front of the properties were rated more positively than external back areas, which were generally of a fairly poor standard. Only 50% of external back areas were rated positively, 21% lower than front external areas. The Panel considered that the back areas should be more positively rated. Feedback from the 2011/12 satisfaction survey supported that gardens was an issue for customers with satisfaction at only 59%. The Panel were of the

opinion that Helena should be targeting problem gardens during tenancy rather than trying to deal with the problem when a property becomes empty.

The Panel were a little concerned that 62% of customers confirmed that repairs were not all completed when they moved into their new property, however they accepted that there will be repairs required when moving into a new home. It was confirmed that Helena has a good process for ensuring outstanding repairs are dealt with by the Voids team. In the event that a new tenant reports more than three repairs then an Inspector is sent out to consider all required repairs.

The Panel noted that on two occasions during the Inspectors visits there was a smell of damp. It was suggested that the Service Manager ensures that this is not a consistent problem as it is potentially a Health and Safety related issue.

The Panel considered that properties should all be of a consistent standard when they are let to a new tenant, confirm this they suggested that the Inspector should be the last person to visit the property.

The Panel confirmed that the information the Inspectors collect regarding Helena's Empty Properties is very useful and important, they suggested that the inspections to continue, this will help to identify if standards are improving and are consistent across the borough. In addition the Panel requested that if possible the sample size should be increased. To aid the Inspectors in their investigations of Empty Properties the Panel suggested that they are issued with the set cleaning standards and focus on the cleaning element of the property as it is a lower standard than other elements of the properties.

Customer Complaints

The Empty Property service from October 2011 to September 2012 had only received 12 complaints, this is only 3% of Helena's total number of complaints during this time period. The Panel were pleased to see that all 12 complaints were responded to within the set target of 5 days and that they had been completed using personal contact based methods. The complaints generally related to the previously discussed issues including cleanliness, gardens and decoration.

The Panel made no specific recommendations directly relating to complaints.

Service standards

On consideration of the presented evidence the Panel reviewed the service's set of standards, which are ultimately the promises to Helena customers.



The Panel were happy that the set of service standards for the service were along the right lines in regards to 'What Matters Most to Tenants?' – The Panel agreed evidence from the survey supported this.

Although making no changes to the actual service standards the Panel did highlight they must be met in all properties the Panel would like the Inspectors to continue checking that standards are being consistently achieved.

Performance Indicators



The Panel recognised the importance of measuring quantitative information to evidence compliance with set service standard and performance indicators. They have their own suite of measures which they can use to identify Customer Excellence, these measures are analysed on a quarterly basis.

Included in the performance measures are not only measures to assess regulatory requirements and financial viability but also satisfaction measures to ensure we meet the needs of our customers and ensure satisfaction with our services are high.

The Panel were pleased that re-let performance had continued to demonstrate a steady improvement. In 2011/12 re-let time for quarter 2 was 36 days, with an improvement, re-let time in quarter 2 2012/13 was 30 days. The Panel are keen to see performance continue to improve. The Panel were pleased that Helena were enforcing 4 week notices to help reduce re-let time and where possible making use of 'quick hits'.

The Panel voiced concern around incorrect photographs being used to advertise an Empty Property, however they did acknowledge that a 'best fit' photograph is used in order to prevent any delay in the advertisement of the property ultimately reducing rent loss.

Tenancy turnover has continued to rise, in quarter 2 2012/13 it was 9.4%, the Panel understand that this has been due to the impact of Welfare Reform with tenants downsizing in preparation.

Void spend has demonstrated a consistent level at around £2000 over the past 12 months, the Panel have no concern or suggestions in regards to this figure.

The Panel will continue to review performance of Helena's Empty Property service via the use of the suite of KPI's. Re-let time and cost of the service is already contained within the document and will continue to do so. Considering the impact of Welfare Reform the Panel will include Tenancy Turnover as a performance measure.

Value for money



With a changing economic environment it is important that the Panel consider the quality of the service in relation to costs and ensure Helena tenants are getting the most for their money.

The Panel discussed the fitting of electric fires in Empty Properties, these are installed in houses at a cost of £500. Helena are not obliged to fit these as each property is fitted with a central heating system. In the event that Helena stop's putting electric fire's in each new home it would result in a significant cost saving in not only installation but also in the cost of maintenance. The Customer Inspectors did not consider that the removal of electric fires to have a significant impact on the satisfaction of new customers in their home, this was a result of their investigations within a sample of empty properties`.

The Panel however were unable to reach a decision on the electric fires. Some members were in favour and felt that they would ensure tenants make use of the more efficient central heating system. Others felt that they required more evidence on the customer's opinion of electric fires before a decision could be made. In addition it was considered that the new tenant should be able to make their own decision on the installation of an electric fire.

The Panel considered the way in which current decorating vouchers are issued, they are distributed on an area basis also properties with extremely poor decoration are decorated. It was suggested by the Panel that it is unfair to incentivise lower demand areas in this way, a fairer scheme should be considered. The Panel did confirm that vouchers should be used to encourage tenants to live in some of the hard to let properties.

Tom Bate, Service Manager informed the Panel of a 'Paint Pack' solution where customers are provided with a set amount of paint for their home. The Panel were in favour of implementing a pilot of such scheme.

The Panel considered the proposal for incoming tenants to clean their own property on moving in, as often this occurs anyway. The savings would be put back into improving the properties and also incentivising the scheme. The Panel felt that providing a Health and Safety check of needles and other dangerous objects had been completed there was no reason why a customer could not agree to clean their own new property, if incentivised. With some concerns the Panel suggested that a pilot takes place and in doing this customer satisfaction must be monitored closely to ensure no negative impact.

**Please note that the Customer Excellence Panel normally review ABC within any service review, as the new ABC information was soon to be available value for money of the Empty Property service will be reviewed by the Panel separately.*

Recommendations

In order to ensure continuous improvements are being demonstrated and the service is continuing to listen to its customers and act on feedback the Panel have made the following recommendations:

- Improve cleanliness in Empty Properties particularly in the Kitchen and Bathroom
- The Customer Inspectors should continue carrying out regular Inspections of Helena's Empty Properties focusing on their cleanliness
- Ensure the external back of a property meets the same standard as the front
- Target problem gardens during tenancy
- Check that the concern of damp is not a wider problem
- Consistently meet set service standards
- Continue to encourage '4 week notices' and make use of 'quick hits'
- Gather further customer feedback on electric fires
- Continue to use decoration vouchers to encourage new tenants in 'hard to let' properties
- Pilot the 'paint pack' scheme
- Pilot the scheme whereby customers can take the opportunity to clean their own home for an incentive

Next steps

An action plan has been developed in response to the Panel's recommendations. Outcomes of the review will still be shared with all key senior members of staff and promotion on the Intranet to ensure all members of staff are aware will also take place.

Action Plan

	Recommendation	Evidence	Action / Service Manager Comments	Who	When
1	Improve cleanliness in Empty Properties particularly in the Kitchen and Bathroom	64% of Inspected properties considered the cleanliness to be the main area of improvement. In addition the Bathroom cleanliness was 50% and the Kitchen 57%	A pilot has been launched to incentivise new tenants to undertake Domestic Cleans to properties in reasonable condition. Longer term plans are to consider "hot washes" provided by a partner company.	TB	Pilot – tenants own cleaning April 2013.
2	The Customer Inspectors should continue carrying out regular Inspections of Helena's Empty Properties focusing on their cleanliness	The Panel found the Inspectors visits to provide invaluable information regarding the service meeting their set standards in particular around cleaning.	The Customer Inspectors will conduct additional inspections of Helena Empty Properties. This will be incorporated into the 2013/14 timetable.	HF	TBC
3	Ensure the external back of a property meets the same standard as the front	The external back areas of properties received only 50% satisfaction during the inspections, the front received 71%	This would require far greater expenditure than is currently available. The Green Space service will consider a proposal to work with PropertyCare to combine rubbish removal with a garden tidy.	TB	TBC
4	Target problem gardens during tenancy	Satisfaction with gardens from the 2011/12 survey was low at 59%	This will be considered as part of the Moss Bank pilot and reorganisation of the neighbourhoods service. Sue James is the pilot scheme Co - Ordinator.	SJ	M Bank pilot 2013 - 2014
5	Check that the concern of damp is not a wider problem	In two properties the Inspectors identified the smell of damp	Damp is already considered by Surveyors as part of the void inspection.	TB	Complete
6	Consistently meet set service standards	The Inspectors identified a number of areas around cleanliness where promises made by Helena had not been met (Specific evidence can be found within the report)	Poor cleanliness is now reported in feedback sheets by Lettings team to the Contractor. The contractor returns if the cleanliness is poor.	TB	April 2013
7	Continue to encourage '4 week notices' and make use of 'quick hits'	Reducing re-let time ensures minimum rent loss. Performance of re-let time has improved as a result of the identified methods.	Already a part of the process.	TB	Complete
8	Gather further customer feedback on electric fires	The Panel identified that further information is required regarding how customers feel about	Further evaluation is being done on this.	TB	TBC

		having electric fires in their home.			
9	Continue to use decoration vouchers to encourage new tenants in 'hard to let' properties	The Panel are keen that decoration vouchers are used in a fair way but also ensure minimum amount of rent loss.	Policy review is scheduled for later this year 13/14 to take effect of supply and demand with new markets and approaches to letting properties.	TB	TBC
	Recommendation	Evidence	Action / Service Manager Comments	Who	When
10	Pilot the 'paint pack' scheme	The Panel are keen to try new ways to improve services for new customers. Before confirming proposals by the service manager a pilot should be conducted to ensure it is effective. Performance must be monitored.	As above for decoration vouchers.	TB	TBC
11	Pilot the scheme whereby customers can take the opportunity to clean their own home for an incentive		This has commenced and is underway	TB	April 2013