

Tenant Scrutiny Group: Review of Complaints

This review covered three areas:

- **Is Soha's complaints procedure fit for purpose, including in the context of the new Localism Act?**
- **How well are informal complaints responded to?**
- **How well does Soha learn from complaints into repairs?**

Headline Findings

Is Soha's complaints procedure fit for purpose ?

1. The review finds that Soha's complaints procedure is broadly fit for purpose. However, some major changes are needed going forward to:
 - a. Meet the requirements of the Localism Act, in particular forming a Tenants' Panel by April 2013, and
 - b. Keep up with current best practice in complaints, keeping bureaucracy to a minimum, concentrating on quicker resolution and efficient administration and ownership by all staff.
2. The review notes the positive emphasis on quality in interviews with the Chief Executive and Director of Customer Services & Operations on the approach to complaints.
3. The approach taken in Customer Services and Operations of a Director spending time at the early stages of a complaint appears to reap dividends in the quality of response and the reduction in the number of complaints that escalate. We would like to see an ongoing focus on resolving complaints quickly and effectively.
4. The time limit for tenants to continue with a complaint could be reduced, ensuring that focus is kept on the original complaint.

Informal complaints

5. The review finds that Soha staff have a broad awareness of the difference between formal and informal complaints, though it is difficult to be precise about the distinction.
6. Informal complaints are not recorded systematically across the company, with the exception of Repairs. However, the repairs system is separate from the main CRM system, making it difficult to pick up trends across the organisation and for the co-ordinator to have an overview of trends in informal complaints.

Having a separate system also means there is potential that Customer Services staff aren't aware of an informal complaint, as there is not easy access to the information..

However, we don't want to see the baby out with the bath water and urge that any improvements do not increase time spent on admin too much.

7. The review recommends that informal complaints should continue to be dealt with at departmental level rather than by the Complaints Co-ordinator, with an emphasis on getting resolution. However, this is subject to recommendation 6, ensuring that there is access to this important information.
8. We would like reassurance as to how complaints from Berinsfield tenants are treated. If they come to the BCB, does Soha see them? Are formal complaints coming through to Soha?

Learning from complaints into repairs

9. Responsive Repair's systematic approach to recording and resolving informal complaints enables trends in complaints about repairs to be identified and dealt with. The Director and Assistant Director and the Complaints Co-ordinator all have good knowledge about patterns in complaints and should pool knowledge.
10. The procedures used by Repairs for logging and resolving informal complaints is a useful model for the rest of Soha (subject to recommendation 6).
11. The Review notes that fewer complaints have gone to stage 2 or 3 in the period 2011 -12, suggesting better resolution at stage 1.
12. A 'Repairs Lessons Learnt Survey' was carried out in late 2011. A number of changes to the service have been made and we are encouraged to see this.

Scope of review

At the outset, it was important to define the scope of this review as we were clear that this should not be a Tenant Inspectors' report (checking that service standards are delivered). We did need an understanding of how the procedure worked, but have focused on the changing landscape and how Soha will respond.

Methodology

The Group commissioned an independent briefing on complaints by Hookmoor Ltd.

The review has researched Government information and legislation, relevant Soha documents and information from other housing providers:

- Soha's 'How to make a complaint' leaflet for tenants
- Soha Complaints Procedure Guide
- Soha Report to Board on Complaints, May 2011
- Soha complaints statistics to date, 2012
- Soha 'Repairs Lessons Learnt Survey' October 2011
- Salix Homes Customer Senate Scrutiny Report: Complaints (March 2011)
- Salix Homes Customer Senate Scrutiny Action Plan (April 2011)
- Extracts from statutory consultation on revised regulatory framework for social housing
- Housemark Complaints Benchmarking: Summary of findings 2009-10
- Institute of Customer Service: Complaints Handling Fact Sheet
- International Customer Service Survey, 2006
- Full review of a number of complaints case files.

Interviews have been conducted with Soha directors, staff, and staff from other housing providers:

- Richard Peacock
- Maureen Adams
- Marisa Elliott
- Lee Hayward
- Margaret Connor, Salix Homes

The Scrutiny Group team for this review:

- Andy Dunsmore (review chair)
- Nasreen Razaq Al-Hamdani
- Valerie Edwards
- Vic Breach

Thanks to Chrissie White for her involvement in setting up the review.

Detailed report

Is Soha's complaints procedure fit for purpose, including in the context of the new Localism Act?

Soha tenants are encouraged to make complaints to help Soha make continuous improvements to services. This is communicated in the tenants' handbook and features regularly in 'Hometalk'. The Scrutiny review finds that this is broadly supported by Soha's procedures and actions.

There is leadership from the top of the organisation to take a quality approach to complaint handling, and to learn from complaints.

The procedure requires updating, but the overall approach and ethos is positive.

Soha Directors were all positive in principle about the incorporation of a Tenant Panel into Soha's complaints system, but not as an additional level. There was general support for simplifying the existing procedure and incorporating a Tenant Panel into the final stage. The Scrutiny review recommends that options for this are looked at as soon as possible, bearing in mind there needs to be enough time to involve and consult tenants, and a timetable developed for putting this in place by April 2013.. The 'Homes for Haringey' system is referred to by both Marisa Elliott and Maureen Adams (see below) and might be a useful model.

Using the 'What matters most' comments from the International Customer Service Survey, there was agreement among all interviewees that timeliness and quality of response is more important than speed. However, Marissa Elliott and Maureen Adams both feel that the timescale for tenants to respond should be reduced to 2 months (from 3) to help maintain focus on the original issue.

Revision of the procedure should also consider the most efficient use of staff time and systems, ensuring that HCRM and other systems are used consistently and effectively, to minimise duplication of effort and maximise communication and information sharing.

Informal complaints

The review group considers this description useful:

Informal complaints tend to be those 'fixed' by the relevant department (eg, when a repair has not been completed or was not up to standard), and where the customer is happy the issue is resolved when the original problem is fixed.

This requires staff in Customer Service and the relevant department to exercise judgement. To be successful this requires continued

- Effective training
- Good communications
- Positive attitude from the organisation

Both Marisa Elliott and Maureen Adams recommend looking at the system used by Homes for Haringey, which incorporates this approach with a 'quick fix' informal complaint option, and a two-stage formal complaint process.

Responsive repairs includes negative feedback from the customer satisfaction survey in the 'informal complaints' category, and follows up on these.

Learning from complaints into repairs

A 'Repairs Lessons Learnt Survey' was carried out in late 2011. A survey report shows a number of outcomes and lessons learned, some of which could be shared across the company (e.g. sharing complaints reports with Forum portfolio holders).

The Customer Service & Operations Director, Assistant Director, and the Complaints Co-ordinator all have good knowledge about patterns and problems in managing both formal and informal complaints. Their combined knowledge could usefully be pooled when considering ways to improve complaints handling.

Repairs have the most developed system for handling informal complaints and the Customer Service team have extensive experience in talking customers through the process of resolving / directing customer complaints. This experience could be utilised to improve the handling of informal complaints across Soha and to improve consistency. The Review understands that Maureen Adams is currently looking at doing this across her departments.