A Housing Scrutiny Panel Project

Housing Scrutiny Panel (HSP)
Scrutiny Report
Customer Service Centre

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Contents

Glossary/Acronyms

BCC	Bristol City Council
HCA	Homes and Communities Agency
HSPP/SIT	Housing Scrutiny Panel Project/Service Inspection Team
TPT	Tenant Participation Team
CSC	Customer Service Centre

1. About the Housing Scrutiny Panel

What is the Housing Scrutiny Panel?

We are a diverse group of tenants and leaseholders whose role is to take a close look at certain aspects of the services provided by Bristol City Council's Housing Delivery Service. The scrutiny, inspection and monitoring of services by tenants is recognised as good practice for landlords wishing to improve their services and ensure that housing standards are being met. The Housing Scrutiny Panel (HSP) is just one of the ways this can be done.

As a panel we take an in-depth look at Housing Delivery in relation to the running and maintenance of homes and services. We take a positive critical eye and assess performance against both local and national standards. If failings are found we make recommendations for improvement. Working in this way can help improve BCC performance and increase tenant satisfaction and involvement.

2. Acknowledgements

The Housing Scrutiny Panel would like to thank the tenants who were involved in this scrutiny process, independent trainers who supported us and Bristol City Council staff who took part.

3. Introduction

This report details the findings of the Housing Scrutiny Panel project to review the Council's Customer Service Centre. The project was tenant-led and triggered in response to a request from the Housing Management Board. The aim of the project was to review current performance and quality of service and make recommendations on how best to improve the tenant experience of the Customer Service Centre.

4. The Customer Service Centre

The Customer Service Centre handles customer enquiries to Bristol City Council by telephone, email or via the web. They have just over 90 customer advisors split into small teams by specialist area depending on the type of enquiry. Last year more than one million calls were logged.

As one of its specialist services, the Customer Service Centre offers a telephone service for council housing. Council tenants can use this service to make enquiries and report a range of issues such as repairs, rents, estate management and caretaking.

The Service Standards for the call centre are:
- 70% of telephone calls to be answered within 50 seconds.
- Less than 10% of calls should be abandoned by the caller.

The target response time for all written correspondence, including emails is 10 working days. Last year the CSC Housing section failed to meet its target to answer calls within 50 seconds.

5. Methodology & Timetable

The Housing Scrutiny Panel carried out this project between May – July 2014.

To scrutinise the Customer Service Centre, the Housing Scrutiny Panel assessed information supplied by the council's Performance Improvement Team (PIT) and Customer Service Centre. The panel also visited the call centre, conducted a Staff

Survey, looked for examples of good practise from other housing providers and commissioned a tenant questionnaire from the Service Inspection Team (SIT).

6. Key Findings

6.1 Findings from desk top research

- The annual tenant Survey called 'Star' indicated two years in a row that 'telephone' is the preferred way in which tenants want to contact and be contacted by the council. Source: STAR Survey Results 2012 – 2014.

- CSC performance and customer satisfaction information for the past 2 years Performance information showed that the call centre was not hitting performance targets. Feedback from the Housing Management Board and from the tenants surveyed as part of this project indicates that tenants are not happy about the lengthy call waiting times.

- The panel found information on the council's website about how to contact council housing services to pay rent, report repairs etc. However, there was no published information about the performance, aims or standards of the call centre.

- The panel was not able to find recent or current information in relation to service agreements between housing and the call centre.

6.3 Findings from the visit to the call centre

- The "Service" that tenants receive from the call centre can depend on the time the call is made to the centre, the volume of calls being received at that time, and the staff available to take the calls.

- The volume of calls is increasing whilst staffing levels remain the same.

- The number of staff required at any given time is analysed based on historical call volume data and then the number of staff needed is negotiated with the call centre Manager. However call centre data may indicate, for example, that 8 staff is needed but only 6 staff recruited due to budget restraints. This means that there could at times be a shortfall of staff needed.

- It can take up to 3 months to recruit a new member of staff.   Agency staff is used but they also have to go through an interview and training process. A high level of training is given and a lot is invested into individuals - making them more "desirable" and they are sometimes "poached" by other departments.

- The attrition rate per year for call handlers at the CSC is relatively low at 2.67% when compared with other similar call centre statistics.

Panel Question: Is this acceptable? Is Housing able to provide / fund more staff?

- There may be a misconception from tenants about how the call centre operates. Tenants may be unaware that calls are first answered and then passed to the relevant section to be dealt with. These are two separate sections (front and back office). These two sections are to be located in the same office at the end of June 2014.
- The time and accuracy of updated information from the back office, for the front office staff to use, is an issue. On the 2nd call from a tenant, the system should be updated immediately - this is not always happening. If the system is not updated there could be the need for the call centre to make several calls to the back office before understanding what has or has not been done. Hand held technology (for repairs) should update the system "real time". There are plans to upgrade the PDAs used by the technicians for this.

- Any repairs entered on-line generate an email and requires a call back to get more information – so still requires a conversation on the phone. Success of call back depends on the ability to contact customer.

- Performance information is not collected for contact made via email, social media or the web.

- Customer Service Points are mainly used for the following services (in order of volume): Benefits, Home Choice, Estates and then Rents. In the call centre Rents and Home Choice advisors are now combined – due to the fluctuation of calls at different times of the week. Staff is trained equally on both topics.

- There is a dedicated team looking at performance analysis continually forecasting trends and staffing requirements. This team also produces regular management reports. Every minute of every day is accounted for and this makes for a pressurised environment. Averages are taken and these averages are used to drive performance.

- After 6.00pm Emergency control is done by a separate department and is a back office decision with priority being decided by protocol.

6.4 Summary of findings from the Staff survey

- A short questionnaire was completed anonymously by staff at the CSC. The result of this survey reflected that staff consider themselves valued, well-trained; most are aware of the service standard and are generally satisfied with their own efforts as call handlers.

- Most staff felt that their performance was hindered by that of the" back office."

It is important to note here that although some conclusions have been drawn from 'front office' "narrative" in this survey, they remain the views of just one of the two integral parts of the CSC service. In the interests of both having a more balanced view and to facilitate a more cohesive working relationship between the 'Front' and the 'Back' office it is recommended here that a similar survey be conducted fairly soon to allow for 'Back office' representation as well. This would provide more reliable and up-to-date results to enable conclusions and to provide a staff-friendly scaffold for further improvements to this essential service.

- From 'Front 'office staff's narrative /survey responses it is apparent that CSC performance is very influenced and occasionally overshadowed by a few other, notable variables:

  o the "time and volume" of calls
  o Not enough use of Job Reference numbers, to ensure traceability, better communication between service users and service givers, to reduce avoidable calls and to enhance an accountable attitude to work promised /completed.
  o Caller's perception of how the Call centre operates (front office).

- Comments to improve the organisation of, accountability and communication within and between the "front and back office" in relation to repairs were dominant in staff specified area for improvement (from narrative response to CSC Staff Survey Question 9)

  For example staff especially high-lighted areas of concern here being-
  o Lack of helpful notes online such as frequent callers requesting repairs or follow/ up on repairs where information was insufficient first time around.
  o Customer not informed of delay / inability to take / to complete a repair,
  o Promised follow-up phone calls to customers not made as promised as well as explanations where repairs cannot be done.
  o Lack of adherence to policy about appraisals and fulfilling agreements/ penalties following poor performance to improvement
  o Often absence of a sense of "this being a team effort" instead of 'us and them'.
  o Vulnerable people (people with special needs emotionally, mentally and physically and people whose first language is not English) may need to be redirected to specialist advisers, set aside for specialist help.
  o Better budget control especially estates and repairs.
  o Consistency in completing Repair jobs.
  o Identify and re-direct to specialist advisors, those callers with higher frequency (mostly concerning housing benefit and rent arrears.
  o Earlier updates made available to CSC staff would make re-direction and handling of calls more efficient.
  o Services need to accommodate elderly, frail / vulnerable or even working adults who cannot always answer the telephone / front door swiftly, so as not to miss appointments.

6.5 Summary of findings from the tenant survey

- The panel commissioned the Service Inspection Team (SIT) to interview tenants who had called the CSC during the past three months. The surveyor straw poll was carried out between 16th June and 5th July 2014. 120 potential contacts were randomly selected from callers who had used the Customer Call Centre within the previous three months. There were 25 successful responses (20%), of which 2 of these were incomplete.

- The main findings from the tenant survey were:

  o Most callers commended the politeness of CSC staff but most were unsatisfied with the long call waiting times and attempts to get through.

  o Most had waited 7-9 minutes before their call was answered.

  o Only three of all the surveyed callers received a 'Job Number' to use as a reference if a 'call-back' was necessary.

  o When questioned about other ways of accessing Council services, tenants were aware of the alternatives, but said that the phone was their preferred choice of access to service in spite of dissatisfaction with the service itself. The full report is included in appendix 1.

6.6 Identifying good practise with other housing providers

- The panel made contact with three similar sized, social housing landlords. The panel asked five questions go to appendix 3 relating to the ways in which their tenants preferred to access their services and how they were using technology to improve access to services. Our findings were as follows:

  o A number of things become apparent from the answers given by the three organisations. The most noticeable being the response to Question Five: "Can you share any information about what is and isn't working well?" where, apparently, everything is working well or no-one wanted to disclose that some things don't!

  o More points that stand out are that the preferred method of contact, overall, is by telephone with face to face being second choice & tenants using the internet to access services/information are in the minority. These preferences are comparable to those chosen in the Bristol City Council STAR tenant's survey 2014.

  o As with BCC they all use a website and social media to one degree or another, only one seems to profile preferred use by age. This is, obviously a very limited exercise but does give an indication of the trend with like organisations & on the whole. BCC seems to be using/making available the same methods as other like bodies.

7. Conclusions

- In conclusion, it appears that the Customer Service Centre is currently the best way for tenants to access Bristol City Council services, not least because it is predominantly the preferred choice of contact for tenants.

- However from the information available to us we are given to understand that other variables undermine CSCs general performance. This service consists of two integral parts, that of a 'Front' and a 'Back office'. On the one hand, evidence from the CSC staff survey / Front Office clearly indicate, that most staff are aware of the service standard (currently under BCC review), consider themselves well trained, valued and are satisfied with their call handling efforts within their given remit. Their perception as to why their overall performance is hampered – is clearly seen in their 'narrative' comments (CSC on-line Staff Survey conducted by HSP in June/ July 2014). The 'undermining variables' expressed here in large part have to do with both misdirected tenant expectations of this service and inefficient communications between the 'Front and Back Office'. As noted earlier it would be prudent to conduct a similar survey to allow for the views of the 'Back Office ' staff also to be expressed (not possible in this instance due to planned geographical departmental moves and major changes in the BCC). This in the interests of having a more balanced view. This would serve to facilitate a more cohesive working relationship as well as to further integrate and improve these essential services.

- With regard to alternate and current access to the internet via PCs /Smart phones, recent research seems to indicate substantial increase in access to the internet in Bristol through these. Additionally it's associated social – media alternatives such as Face Book, Twitter, Email among others are favoured particularly among the younger demographic. However essential data as to what percentage of these are Tenants is not available at present. Anecdotal evidence also positively suggests an increase in email contact, but with no Job Reference numbers or current record of these communications, true evaluation of its' potential in reducing CSC call volumes and waiting times, or its effectiveness as an alternative difficult.

- It would seem that there are clear indicators, that the growing popularity of applications, queries and requests via the internet is potentially the most efficient alternative means to communicate with Bristol City Council with or without the available data to support this. Another necessary consideration in this regard would be to create a service standard that is internet-specific, in order to develop and maintain a reliable and trustworthy partnership service for all parties involved.

8. Recommendations

1. The panel would like to see improved working relationships, integrated and cohesive effort and joint ownership of issues between the CSC and the repairs

back office. Our recommendations to achieve this and help improve the tenant experience are:

- Ensure all tenants who call the centre are given a reference number. This would increase traceability and efficiency and accountability for those tenants who need to make a follow up call.
- Operators should record more detailed notes to help continuity of service between call handlers.
- (The panel feel it is essential to do the same for email and any other contact as well).

2. We welcome the co-location of services at Temple Street offices. The HSP requests a performance report 6 months after the co-location of the front and back offices at Temple Street in order to help us monitor whether there are overall improvements in performance.

3. Ensure consultation with tenants on any changes to the customer interface via the council's website (for housing and customer service pages). As part of the consultation listen to tenant's ideas about how web interface can be made more user friendly and accessible for older people and people with visual impairments.

4. To help create a channel shift and reduce calls to the call centre (housing section). The council should consider (as part of setting up new IT systems) set up and promotion of alternative access options that are popular to younger people. There must be the ability to make a service request and/or access the service. For eg via Facebook, twitter, BCC website, Virgin Media, SKY and SMS. Monitoring systems should be put in place to help collect data about media use.

5. Feedback from tenants gave an indication that suggests the call back feature is not as efficient as it can be. Tenants are not being called back with the specified time. To help reduce avoidable calls to the call centre review the 'call back feature' to make sure it works e.g. call backs on time, allows enough time for tenant to answer call.

6. Promote more use of libraries as places to access housing services via computer, Freephone on their initial call to housing services.

7. Provide information to tenants about what can and cannot be provided by the repairs service including approximate or estimated timescales in order to reduce repeat calls.

8. Review and update arrangements (formerly SLA) between housing delivery and customer services and ensure service standards and targets are in place. Tenant involvement in helping to shape standards and targets.

9. More staff provided in the CSC to cover peak times and consider specialist staff to help deal with complex needs such as mental health and lingual issues.