

Housing Scrutiny Panel (HSP) Scrutiny Report

'Do the service charges for caretaking reflect the actual service received on each site?'



Nov

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Jan

2013-14

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Glossary/Acronyms

BCC	Bristol City Council
HSP / The panel	Housing Scrutiny Panel
SIT	Service Inspection Team (A team of tenants who undertook tenant surveys for the project)
TPT	Tenant Participation Team
HCA	Homes and Communities Agency
Caretaking Service	Cleaning and other services to blocks of flats. See page 5 for more details.
Site / block	A block of flats comprising of two or more individual properties
Service Charges	The money tenants and leaseholders pay for services such as caretakers, common rooms and cleaning, lighting and maintenance of common parts.
Pooling	Putting all of the service charge income into one pot and then spending according to what is needed for the whole service.
De-pooling	Charging and spending service charge income on a block by block basis.

1. About the Housing Scrutiny Panel

What is the Housing Scrutiny Panel (HSP)?

We are a diverse group of tenants and leaseholders whose role is to take a closer look at Landlord Services. We come from all over the city, live in all types of council property and some of us have worked with the Council in the past to help make services better. Between us we have a wealth of life experience and an interest in helping Landlord Services improve the services to its tenants and leaseholders.

The scrutiny, inspection and monitoring of services by tenants is recognised as good practice for landlords wishing to improve their services and ensure standards are being met. There are a number of ways this can take place of which, the Housing Scrutiny Panel (HSP) is one.

The work of the panel

We take an in-depth look at the various services provided by Landlord Services with regards to the running and maintaining of its homes and services. The panel takes a constructive and critical view and assesses performance against local and national housing standards. If we find any failings, we make recommendations for improvement. Working in this way can help improve BCC performance as well as increase tenant satisfaction and involvement.

2. Acknowledgements

The Housing Scrutiny Panel would like to thank all tenants, independent trainers and staff who were involved in this scrutiny process. We would like to express our gratitude to the Tenant Participation Team (TPT) and the Performance Improvement Team (PIT) that supported us through this process. The panel would also like to thank the Service Inspection Team (SIT) and the Caretaking Team managers for their help with this project.

3. Introduction

This project examines whether service charges for caretaking reflect the actual service tenants receive on each site.

Service charges are paid by more than 8000 tenants. The Housing Scrutiny Panel are keen to make sure information provided to tenants about service charges are transparent and that charges accurately reflect the service received.

Currently times are hard financially for tenants (budget cuts, benefit changes etc) and we want to make sure tenants are getting value for money, paying fairly for what they receive and knowledgeable about what they are paying for.

As an outcome the panel want to make sure that tenants are:

- *paying accurately and fairly for what they actually receive*
- *knowledgeable about what they are paying for in order that they can actively assess how satisfied they are with the service standard*

To help achieve the outcome, the panel would like to see:

- Information about service charges presented in a format that reflects the breakdown of costs for each block rather than by area
- Information reflects the cost and service provided for each block
- Further breakdown of the large amounts of income made available on request
- Blocks banded correctly for the service that is provided

4. Overview of the Caretaking Service

The Caretaking Service is provided to 8050 tenants' citywide (7600 tenants and 450 leaseholders) across 58 high rise blocks and approximately 135 low rise/walk up blocks (including 75 Sheltered Scheme's). There is a total of 105 front line staff split into 10 area teams citywide (including 2 mobile teams), 5 Managers and 2 support staff.

The main functions of the Caretaking Service are as follows:

Cleaning tasks (daily for multi storey and weekly for walk up blocks)

Internal: lifts, foyers, entrance lobbies, doors and surrounds, laundry/toilet, corridors/walkways, communal glass/windows, floors, walls/ceilings/skirtings, communal lighting, stairs, bannisters and landings, refuse/chute rooms

External (includes litter picking/jet washing and sweeping) car parks, garage areas, paved areas, grassed /shrubs areas (including communal gardens), bin rooms & also change bins, emptying litter bins, waste recycling areas

Site Management Functions: Monitor, report and take action re Anti-Social Behaviour, Bulky Waste, Fire Safety checks, Health & Safety checks, Repairs in communal areas, Grounds Maintenance, Car parking - abandoned cars/ untaxed vehicles, Laundry rotas, Gritting, Leaf blowing, Weed spraying

General - Graffiti removal, Bodily fluids removal, Sex and drugs litter removal, Liaison meetings with other agencies/teams, Monthly Site inspections with Tenants' Representatives, Arranging access for contractors/public utilities/emergency services, Attendance at tenant's groups meetings.

Tenant's and Leaseholder's who receive a caretaking service pay a weekly "service charge". Services charges are split into 5 bands as follows:

Band	2013/14 service charges
Band 1: Blocks with a range of facilities including lifts, laundries, bin rooms, chute rooms and communal areas with high foot traffic requiring a higher frequency of cleaning and site management plus a residential* service.	£9.49 per week
Band 2: Blocks with a range of facilities including lifts, laundries, bin rooms, chute rooms and communal areas with high foot traffic requiring a higher frequency of cleaning and site management with no residential service.	£8.25 per week
Band 3: Blocks with none or only one facility plus a residential service.	£7.22 per week
Band 4: Blocks with none or only one facility to be cleaned with no residential service.	£6.08 per week
Band 5: Blocks which require infrequent cleaning, generally quarterly or less	£2.56 per week
Sheltered cleaning only charge	£2.56 per week

Flats that do not require any cleaning **do not** pay a service charge.

* A residential caretaker is a caretaker who lives locally to the blocks they are responsible for. Their role is to respond to out of hours emergencies relating to those blocks.

5. Methodology

To answer the question “***Does the service charges for caretaking reflect the actual service received on each site?***” The panel adopted the following approach:

The panel used 3 methods of inspection. These were:

- Taking an in-depth look at current performance, procedures, costs and undertaking a benchmarking exercise to see what other housing providers offer to their tenants and therefore whether there is any ‘good practice’ that can be applied in Bristol
- Commissioning the Service Inspection Team to survey tenants
- Interviewing Caretaking Managers

6. Project Time Table

Housing Scrutiny Panel agreed a detailed plan for carrying out this project. The time table included:

- Planning meetings
- Dates for interviews with Caretaking managers
- Time for researching documents relating to the Caretaking Service
- A date to complete the final report on our findings.

Timetable

Meeting Dates	Milestones
10 th October 13	Project Meeting Brief HSP/ SIT.
10 th October 13	Presentation by Simon Westbrook (Caretaking Service Manager).
13 th October 13	Briefing note sent the SIT.
22 nd October 13	SIT meet to discuss project brief.
1 st November 13	Protocol letter sent to Landlord Management.
7 th November 13	SIT begin sending out questionnaires.
26 th November 13	HSP start to prepare report.
2 nd December 13	SIT collating information.
10 th December 13	HSP meeting to draft the report.
7 th January 14	SIT report to the HSP on the collated information.
14 th January 14	Produce draft report

7. Research Undertaken

HSP researched a number of key documents as part of a table top review. The performance data and statistics made available were:

- Caretaking Service Performance Reports from 2011-2013
- Caretaking Service Standards
- Service charges banding criteria
- Caretaking budget showing income and expenditure for 2013-2014
- Bench Marking information provided
- Star Tenant satisfaction survey results 2013

The panel also interviewed Caretaking Managers and commissioned the Service Inspection Team (SIT) to survey tenants who receive and pay for a caretaking service.

8. Key Findings

8.1 BLOCK BY BLOCK COSTS

The panel were able to ascertain how much **income** each block generates through service charges for caretaking. This ranged from £1233.70 per week, for the largest block on the highest band, to £24.32 per week for the smallest block on the lowest band. However, Landlord Services informed the panel that they are unable to provide **expenditure** information on a block by block basis, mainly because of restrictions with their computer systems. This information was only available on a city-wide or area basis.

When the HSP asked council officers whether service charges expenditure could be broken down on a site by site basis in order to provide greater clarity to tenants about what they pay for, this was their response:

- *There are legal restrictions around how Landlord Services can set service charges and some of these are linked to the tenancy agreement.*
- *The computer system (Northgate) is not able to manage different charging and expenditure criteria for individual blocks.*
- *Charging based on block by block costs could lead to some tenants paying a higher charge than they currently pay. This in turn could make some blocks unaffordable for certain families / tenants.*
- *There would be higher administrative costs to administer a block by block system.*

8.2 FINDINGS FROM CARETAKING MANAGERS INTERVIEWS

HSP interviewed the 4 caretaking service managers, gleaning that there are many positive aspects to the service and how it is delivered. All managers commented that there had been significant improvements within the last 3 years.

However the areas of concern for the panel were:

- On one hand the service was unable to provide a block breakdown of expenditure costs, however, the Caretaking Service Manager has stated that the de-pooling of service costs has been trialled in small sections of the service (via TMOs). This suggests to the HSP that service charges can be broken down on a site by site basis in order to provide greater clarity to tenants about what they pay for.
- Managers reported that caretakers regularly undertake 'additional tasks' (e.g. reporting ASB and tenancy management issues). However caretakers appear to be reluctant to report / record these additional tasks. This made it difficult to get a clear picture of the additional duties that take up a caretaker's time. The panel recognise that 'additional tasks' can take caretaker's away from their main duties (as reported in the SIT Caretaking project 2011). This can have a negative impact on achieving excellent service standards.
- Managers reported that individual staff morale is particularly low in blocks where there is repetitive cleaning work, due to tenant's misuse of facilities. Managers said there is little opportunity to vary the work in these cases without standards slipping.
- Area managers did not appear to share good practice e.g. what works/what doesn't work and staff training appears to be inconsistent across teams.
- Managers reported that poor performance was not down to staff themselves but attributed more to limited staff resources available. For example, when there are long term and unplanned absences, which is particularly difficult being a front line service. The service does have the ability to draft in operatives from other teams (but only when absolutely necessary) and whilst this keeps services going, it does have a knock-on, negative impact in terms of maintaining cleaning standards. There is currently no additional capacity within the service to cover long-term absences.
- Caretaking managers are constrained by the Councils corporate services, such as corporate procurement and contract services. Because of this, the service has no control over the cleaning service provided to Sheltered Housing tenants and no control over the procurement of providers for equipment and supplies (Pattersons). This does not help the service to get the best value for money.

- Managers agreed that there are variations in the standards between bands (high rise vs walk up flats) with walk-ups getting less value.
- The target for tenant involvement in site inspections is very low, HSP queries whether this is down to training issues for caretaking staff and are interested to know what skills caretakers have around encouraging tenant involvement.

8.3 TENANT SATISFACTION WITH SERVICE CHARGES

Official Survey results record high levels of Customer Care satisfaction; however in tenant interviews, there were high levels of dissatisfaction with the levels of Caretaking service received. On closer inspection these figures seem to contradict each other, as seen below:

- The annual figure from the Caretaking Satisfaction Survey in April 2011 indicates a High Customer Care Satisfaction overall (71% of the 72% Target), but only 50% (Target 90%) of complaints were dealt with in time. Of these all appeared to have been dealt with at the Stage 1 level.

In person, tenants interviewed were very appreciative of their Caretaker but then expressed dissatisfaction of the service in terms of 1) complaints often 'not being dealt with' (e.g. many of these are informal verbal complaints that are not necessarily formally recorded) , 2) where caretakers are re-located temporarily or otherwise , this often leaves essential work undone.

- More recently (Nov/Dec 2013) in a survey of high rise flats using face to face interview techniques, conducted by the Service Inspection Team, as many as 85% did not know which band they were in. 68% did not know their weekly service charge, 73% did not know the number of hours of service they were due each week. Yet 74% said 'yes' when asked if they receive value for money.
- In view of the generally high satisfaction figures for Customer Care via official Surveys and these contradictory expressed views of dissatisfaction the question arises: Who is being surveyed? Can people with little understanding of what to expect give a true indication of satisfaction that they are receiving value for money? Are the right questions being asked? Are different questions being asked in different forums? Are people producing answers they feel they are expected to give? Are tenants who often expressed appreciation for individual Caretakers (see SIT report) less likely to want to implicate the same through formal complaint (thus low figures) of a poorly delivered service? Unwillingness or inability to engage in formal complaint e.g. Fair Comment, as other tenants do. All these issues contribute to a less than true indicator of actual Customer

satisfaction or even the actual standard and consistency of Customer care given.

- In summary, the satisfaction information provided by the service was inconsistent, particularly when compared to findings from the Service Inspection Team. In addition the service inspection team also found that even where tenants said they were satisfied their verbal comments were often contradictory.

8.4 COMPLAINTS

Complaints not being dealt with on time, is consistent with SUG performance report figures of only 50% complaints dealt with on time. This was again inconsistent with the managers views who said that 'formal complaints were very few because they (complaints) were dealt with at the lowest level e.g. before the first stage of formal complaints process.

When the SIT team interviewed tenants, it was clear that many tenants felt an allegiance to their caretaker and were very complimentary about them on a personal level. It is suggested that this may influence the level and type of complaints tenants are willing to make about their caretaker/caretaking service. E.g. some tenant's feedback is that they did not want to get the caretaker into trouble.

8.5 BENCHMARKING INFORMATION

It was difficult to benchmark Bristol's Caretaking Service against other Landlords. When the panel asked for assistance with identifying other social landlords to benchmark with, they were informed by Council officers that this would be difficult as service charge structures are different for different organisations and therefore it is difficult to do a like for like comparison.

On this basis, useful benchmarking information was not available for this project.

9. Summary of findings from Tenant Interviews

The Service Inspection Team (SIT) is a group of tenant volunteers who take an in depth look at the services provided by their landlord, from a tenants point of view.

Between October and December SIT surveyed over 100 tenants and leaseholders who either receive a caretaking service or are involved with site inspections. These were tenants in all types of blocks; walk-ups and multi-storeys and from different parts of the city including Henbury, Hartcliffe, Redcliffe and Barton Hill.

What SIT Found Out:

- Most tenants don't know their service charge band, their weekly charge or the level of service the block is supposed to get.
- There can be a huge difference in views of the service, even between tenants in the same block.
- There were significant negative comments about how the service was delivered locally
- But also some tenants had positive things to say about their Caretaker whilst they were critical about the wider service.
- A majority of tenants thought the service did provide value-for-money
- Most tenants were satisfied with the overall Caretaking Service.....
- But, significant numbers of tenants (37% & 35%) gave a poor rating on both these areas.

SIT Recommendations:

1. Continue the high levels of monitoring that this service currently has.
2. Provide tenants with regular, detailed information about the full costs of cleaning their block.
3. This needs to include what revenue the block has brought in.
4. Ensure this is delivered regularly and in different formats.
5. Increase levels of tenant participation in site inspections to try and drive local improvements.
6. Increase the random site inspection process; maybe develop its own group of inspectors!
7. Provide better information to tenants on exactly what chemicals and specialised machinery can be used and why these are not used (if that is the case).

Recommendations 2, 5 and 6 are consistent with recommendations made as part of an earlier SIT report on caretaking in 2011.

10. Conclusions & Final statement

10.1 Conclusions

- It appears that computer systems are not adequate for de-pooling service charge expenditure across the board. However, the Caretaking Service Manager did state when interviewed, that the de-pooling of service charges has been trialled in small sections of the service (via TMOs). This suggests to the HSP that service charges can be broken down on a site by site basis in order to provide greater clarity to tenants about what they pay for.
- The constraints of BCC Corporate Services, such as Contract Services and procurement regulations (e.g. use of Pattersons for cleaning supplies), does not help the caretaking service to get the best value for money for tenants.
- Managers reported that staff morale is low, particularly in blocks where there is repetitive cleaning work. Sharing good practice across teams e.g. what works/what doesn't work and improving staff training across teams could help to improve morale and help staff to identify better ways of working.
- There appears to be some conflict around caretaker's duties. In some cases caretakers are taking on additional duties (including reporting ASB and tenancy management issues). Whilst this does vary the job a little, it also takes their time away from their cleaning duties. On the other hand, some caretakers struggle to maintain high standards as they work in blocks that require constant repetitive cleaning. These differences could create imbalances that impact on service received, staff morale and significant variation in workloads and expectations of the caretakers role.
- The service and service standards struggles when there are long term and unplanned absences. The service suffers further when trying to provide cover from its existing pool of staff and there is currently no scope to increase staff numbers.
- Managers agreed that there are variations in the standards between bands (high rise vs walk up flats) with walk-ups getting less value for money. HSP would like this to be investigated further.
- The HSP feels that the target for tenant involvement in site inspections is very low. All area managers expressed that there have been difficulties in getting tenants involved with inspections. The panel suggests that there may be other ways to encourage tenants to play a more active role in looking after their blocks and encourage or promote communities to take pride in their communities/block.
- There needs to be greater consistency and transparency between formal satisfaction (STAR) Survey results, information provided to the Service User Group and tenant's actual views / feedback.

- The HSP is aware that benchmarking is a standard procedure for all Local Authorities through organisations such as House Mark and would like the service to consider undertaking a benchmarking exercise following this project.
- HSP notes that recommendations 2, 5 and 6 made by the Service inspection team are consistent with recommendations made as part of an earlier SIT report on caretaking in 2011. The panel would welcome a progress report on what actions have been taken since the 2011 report and supports the more recent conclusions and recommendations made by SIT as part of this project.

10.2 Final Statement

The aim of this project was to answer the question; do the service charges for caretaking reflect the actual service received on each site.

There are many variable factors outlined in this report. Due to this, the lack of benchmarking, expenditure information and tenants mixed views/lack of understanding about whether they feel they get the service they pay for, the panel were unable, as part of this review, to fully answer this question.

The panel has however, identified that there is a strong need to make service charging more transparent; so that tenants can have such information available to them should they request it. As part of this project, the panel identified key areas for improvement that would help the service to achieve greater satisfaction and value for money. These are outlined in the conclusions and recommendations.

The issue of caretakers undertaking additional duties may well impact on tenants receiving the best standards/service for their money. Hence we are recommending that this issue is looked into by the service.

The panel hopes that as a result of this project, recommendations are taken on board and that tenants / tenant groups will in future, have a much better understanding of what they pay for and the ability to scrutinise further, if they wish to, due to the availability of much more transparent information.

Appendix a: Recommendations

Recommendation

1. Methods used to calculate block expenditure costs for TMO's should be used to help work out individual block costs and provided to tenants/tenant groups where requested in future. (As mentioned in 8.1, we understand that block by block charges could lead to some blocks paying higher charges for their caretaking. However we would like to see this exercise completed).
2. To bring contracted service's and procurement of services in-house, in order to better manage the standards delivered to sheltered schemes and to achieve better value for money.
3. More regular meetings (e.g. quarterly) between Caretaking managers. Focus on continuous improvement and the exchange of good practice between managers. For example, ideas regarding rotation of people around different blocks to create variety in workloads.
4. Identify a pool of resources (bank staff) to help maintain standards and service delivery. Specifically for absence cover and emergencies.
5. Review job title and job descriptions for caretakers making clear what is and is not within the scope of their role. E.g. Be clear about whether the role extends beyond cleaning and if so what is included.
6. The variation in the charging standards between bands 3-5 needs to be investigated, rectified and re-addressed in line with recommendation 1.
7. Set higher targets for Caretaking site inspections; more of a concerted effort from service to increase tenant's involvement in inspections; introduce tenants into the unannounced, ad-hoc inspections that managers undertake. These unannounced inspections should take place more frequently than once a year (in addition to the planned inspections with caretaking co-ordinator). Consider introduction of a panel of tenant inspectors for the caretaking services.
8. Further training for site managers; to achieve an attitudinal shift and ensure their terms / job descriptions flexible enough to meet/engage with tenants.
9. With regards to tenant satisfaction and complaints. It is recommended that Landlord Services responds to the questions raised by the panel in section 8.3 and seeks to develop feedback systems that are consistent and present a truer reflection of how tenants feel using a variety of methods to seek feedback.
10. HSP requests that the Caretaking Service undertakes a benchmarking exercise to test value for money identify best practice.
11. To take on board recommendations from SIT team