

**Tenant Scrutiny Panel**

**Report on: Complaints**

**November 2017**

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1. **Acknowledgements**

The Tenant Scrutiny Panel (TSP) gratefully acknowledges the support, guidance and assistance provided by the members of the Housing Team, including Glyn Jones, Neil Barks, Chris Lambert, Joanne Day, Rommel Villarico and additionally Andrew Hickling from the Business Improvement Team. The Panel would also like to thank the Resident Involvement Team – Justin O’Brien, Laura Smythe and Steve Everson, and also Cllr Roger Bayliss, Portfolio Holder for Housing for his ongoing encouragement, support, and guidance. Also many thanks to Rob Webb for his training on the subject.

1. **Executive Summary**

The TSP made the decision to inspect the Complaints Service as a result of analysing data (as reported in the NWLDC STAR Survey 2015, appendix 1) revealing that the level of customer satisfaction for how the Housing Service deals with complaints was lower than expected. It became apparent from information gathered during our inspection that the current NWLDC Complaints policy leads to high tenant expectations.

1. **Strengths:**
   * The TSP is a group of (currently) six volunteers who are tenants and residents of NWLDC. Individually they have various different skill sets and, as part of their aims and objectives, seek to improve their skills and value to the group and to NWLDC by identifying development needs and attending relevant training.
   * Each member has completed the level 2 qualification in ‘Understanding Scrutiny’ delivered by tpas.
   * Each TSP member recognises the importance of adopting a flexible attitude and approach and each displays a high level of commitment to their voluntary involvement in working with NWLDC to improve Housing services to tenants and streamline processes.
   * The TSP mission is to be a “critical friend” to the Council, facilitating service improvements for Council tenants whilst improving tenants’ perception of their landlord.
   * The TSP uses differing methodologies to analyse data, collect evidence, report on outcomes and make recommendations to NWLDC to enable changes and improvements to be implemented.
2. **Vision and Strategy:**

The vision of the TSP is to increase its knowledge of NWLDC’s ways of working, and policies and procedures in order to be able to strengthen the group’s knowledge and improve its offer to tenants and NWLDC alike and to play a strategic part in the way services are delivered and improved in the future.

1. **Report**

The TSP has reported on its findings as factually as possible and without any bias. Our inspection has, on occasion, increased awareness of the complexity of the work done by NWLDC and other agencies. However our findings and subsequent recommendations have led us to be critical of certain parts of the process of reporting/investigating complaints in line with the policies and procedures in place.

1. **Methodology**

* Training with Rob Webb to look at Complaints Policy & Procedures
* Desktop Review of relevant documents
* Meeting with Andrew Hickling (Records Management Officer – Business Improvement Team) to get a corporate view of complaints.
* Meeting with Rommel Villarico (Business Support Team leader) to discuss data and recording of complaints
* Joanne Day (Support Services Team Leader) attended the May TSP meeting to give feedback on the handling of complaints and the problems faced by those who record and monitor them, with an emphasis on the Asset Management Team (AMT).
* Meeting with Chris Lambert (Head of Housing) to identify why the bulk of outstanding complaints were with the Asset Management Team (AMT) and what actions were being taken to resolve the situation.

1. **Aim of the Exercise**

To investigate why customers were reporting low satisfaction levels in respect of complaints handling and suggest recommendations to improve how NWLDC deal with this aspect of their services to tenants.

1. **Findings**
   * As expected, the highest number of complaints were received by the AMT and the majority arose from tenants advising of required repairs where the service subsequently provided has not met their expectations.
   * When there was a lack of AMT resources dedicated to processing repairs responses to complaints the backlog of outstanding complaints was high. Evidence suggests that historically there was consistently insufficient emphasis and resources put into resolving this problem.
   * There was dramatic improvement during several months of 2016 when an officer was asked to concentrate on reducing the huge backlog of outstanding complaints that had accumulated; this action brought the backlog down to an acceptable level. However the officer then left NWLDC and with the loss of this resource the backlog of outstanding complaints rose quickly to exceed the original level. (see appendix 4)
   * From reviewing relevant data from 2014/15 onwards tenant complaints appear not to have always been responded to within the timescales outlined in the complaints policy. This resulted in a number of Stage 1 complaints progressing to Stage 2 simply because of a lack of communication about what was happening with regard to tenants’ particular issues. (see appendix 4E)

* It is interesting to note that 72 compensation claims were received in 2014/15 with 2015/16 showed a significant reduction in that number at 21.
* SMT Report 2015/2016 stated that the categories used to log compensation claims, coupled with the poor recording and management of same, made it difficult to determine whether any claims were received (or payments made) outside of the compensation policy.
* Using the Complaints Learning and Performance report there is no doubt that NWLDC Complaints service, although achieving some improvement, is still not meeting the policy requirements for response times. At its worst AMT response time was in excess of 40 days.
* In 2016/17 NWLDC received 139 Housing complaints vs. 59 compliments. In 2015/16 there were 103 complaints and 41 compliments and 2014/15 saw 175 complaints and 68 compliments. The number of compliments seems to be consistently low, with some fluctuations. There should be more emphasis on making staff aware that any/all compliments they receive – in any form (e.g. emails, cards, calls etc.) – should be included in tracking data and captured on the appropriate electronic system. There is already a corporate system that can capture customer compliments simply by sending an email to [feedback@NWLeicestershire.gov.uk](mailto:feedback@NWLeicestershire.gov.uk). Staff should be reminded of this facility and it would be simple to ensure that the NWLDC website publicises it so that tenants and residents could also post their compliments direct.
* When handling complaints, there is evidence that communications between NWLDC and its tenants is poor and it is imperative that there is improvement in this area. NWLDC should encourage initial complaints to be responded to in less than the ten day target. It would appear that occurrences of complaints responses being left to the last day is common practice, indeed evidence indicates response times are not consistently met resulting in an increase of level 2 complaints. NWLDC must ensure that everyone involved in the complaints processes and procedures complies with the timescales quoted in the Complaints Policy and where possible performs better than the agreed timescales.
* The TSP is aware that NWLDC has piloted a programme designed to capture learning points identified through logging complaints and formulating responses and actions to avoid recurrence in the future. The Panel consider this to be good practice and that it should continue.
* NWLDC is not proactive but rather reactive when dealing with complaints, there appears to be a lack of accountability due to not having a dedicated officer to deal with complaints; this is apparent as when there was a dedicated resource the level of outstanding complaints dropped significantly.
* There appears to be no training relevant for staff on dealing with customer feedback.
* It appears the Asset Management Team (AMT) and the Housing Service generally may consider a complaint from a tenant regarding a failed request for service as an additional request for service in order to both satisfy the tenant and resolve the issue. The problem with this is the tenant may believe s/he has in fact made a complaint, but this has not been recorded as a formal complaint with the Business Improvement Team. In the event that the issue continues unresolved and is then raised as a formal complaint the Business Improvement Team will not have been aware of this previously and this can confuse both the tenant and the Business improvement Team.

**9 Recommendations:**

1. NWLDC undertakes a full and in-depth review of the current Complaints and Compensation policies to:
   1. Ensure the policy is clear about what constitutes a complaint – i.e. a request for service (repairs) is not a complaint although it seems clear some tenants understandably believe they are complaining because there is something wrong with their property.
   2. Reconsider the level of genuine compensation pay-outs with an emphasis on each case being looked at on its own merits. The Panel would recommend that if a tenant can evidence a loss of earnings as a results of taking time off work for an appointment and that appointment is missed the evidenced loss of earnings should be compensated.
2. Ensure that any system used to capture information on complaints has a good tracking system so that each complaint is kept on track and up to date and all communications with the complainant are recorded. Also this system should automatically generate the next due date for a response.
3. The focus on learning from complaints should be emphasised and reported on a regular basis through various forms of media (i.e. website, Intouch etc.) This is a prime example of how the housing service can evidence it listens to its tenants and as a result improves its services.
4. The Housing Service should consider the appointment of a complaints officer who will dedicate a high proportion of their time to dealing with complaints, this will provide a named contact for each complainant and ensure accountability and transparency for NWLDC.
5. All staff involved in complaints must ensure that agreed timescales are adhered to in line with NWLDC Feedback Policy, indeed staff should be encouraged to respond to complaints in less than the agreed timescales wherever possible and not wait until the 10th day to respond. This would also mean that some complaints are ‘headed off at the pass’ and don’t become Stage 2. It is unacceptable that so many complaints are not responded to within agreed timescales.
6. Although a number of complaints are resolved following telephone contact by NWLDC, a letter must always be sent to the complainant to finalise/close the complaint; this must be adhered to.
7. The TSP suggests that NWLDC carries out a skills analysis of all employees engaged in handling complaints, identify any gaps in skills levels and arrange relevant training, ensuring it is relevant and effective. Once delivered, assess effectiveness to see if it met the needs of each individual; if this is not the case arrange additional training. Keep individual training records on file with HR and use in conjunction with annual appraisals to keep staff abreast of new developments (e.g. changes to computer systems etc.) and to record personal aspirations.
8. Adopt use of ‘batch jobs’ – allocating operatives to certain postcode areas and repairs to that particular area/date, thereby increasing their efficiency and effectiveness and reducing travel times and costs.
9. The Housing Service and AMT must develop a robust procedure that identifies clearly when a request for service becomes a complaint (The panel believes this should be immediately when the request for service fails the first time) and then follows the corporate complaints route.
10. Learning from complaints should be part of the continuing improvement process.

Janet Higgins, Chair, On behalf of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel

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