



Homes in Sedgemoor

Scrutiny Bootcamp –

Review of Complaints Handling



11th October 2023

Background

On Wednesday 11th October, Claire Tough, the Director of Communities and Customer Service and Rachel Palmer the Customer Focus Manager for Homes in Sedgemoor (HiS) facilitated an all-day Customer Scrutiny Bootcamp to review Homes in Sedgemoor's approach to Complaints Handling.

HIS do not have a dedicated Scrutiny Panel and instead sought customers who were interested in the subject to come forward and inform the process based on their experience as a HIS customer. This approach provides an opportunity for those customers unable to attend meetings on a regular basis opportunity to become involved on a more ad-hoc basis.



This workshop sought to review current practice and using case studies inform their assessment of the complaints handling service. The day was also supported by Sharon Collard and Kaylun Henson (Community Enablers) and John Lench (Property Services Team Leader).

Eleven customers attended and worked together with colleagues to consider regulation and current practice surrounding complaints handling with a view to recommending service improvements to improve customer satisfaction.

Claire introduced the session as a commissioned piece of work by Sedgemoor Tenants Assurance Committee (STAC), a sub-committee of the HIS Board.

This scrutiny was commissioned because recent customer satisfaction responses with complaints handling, highlighted a dip in performance in this area, and they wanted a better understanding of any changes in practice and what potential improvements could be made to improve. Two members of the STAC Committee, Craig Green and Ros Griffiths attended the day to ensure the correct protocols were being followed for scrutiny. They attended the TPAS Scrutiny Conference and were able to bring their learning and experience to the wider group on this subject.

This is the first of two designated scrutiny activities for 2023-24.

Rachel gave a presentation on recent changes in regulation followed by an overview of our complaints handling service. Questions were answered throughout discussion and case study examples were given to inform the process in practice.

The Scrutiny Panel thanked all for their involvement and engagement on the day.

Methodology

The Scrutiny Review was carried out over a facilitated session on Wednesday 11th October 2023 held from 09.30am – 2.30pm at The Canalside, Bridgewater.

The review incorporated training and guidance on customer scrutiny and how it works. We set out four clear objectives for the day. These were

Objective 1 To support better tenant engagement and empowerment through complaints and feedback processes

Objective 2 To ensure effective and efficient governance for complaint handling

Objective 3 To review and challenge performance around complaints handling, identifying options for service improvements and efficiencies

Objective 4 To provide better outcomes and standards for customers and other residents.

A review was carried out of relevant documents issued by Homes in Sedgemoor and the Housing Ombudsman and shared with the participants on the day. These included

- The Customer Complaints and Feedback Policy
- Summary of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code
- Overview of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) performance against Key Performance Indicators for the organisation and specifically Complaints Handling
- A review of the HiS Website illustrating performance reporting
- Case Studies for consideration and review
- Learning from Good Practice elsewhere Housing Ombudsman Service Insight Report Issue 12 highlighting good practice in complaints handling

The Panel also reviewed how effective are our communications with customers around complaints, and how are customers involved in the service and in communications.

Summary of Findings

Positive elements about complaint handling

- The presentation was clear, highlighting changes in regulation current HIS policy and procedure
- Knowledge and experience of the process as explained by staff and very clear to all
- The attitude of colleagues to communication about the service and the “Customers First” approach and can do attitude
- The policy and process for investigating a formal complaint was clear
- The single point of contact for complaint management and early intervention by the Customer Focus Manager supported good monitoring of complaints and early resolution.
- The website shows customer satisfaction for key business areas through Tenant Satisfaction Measures reporting
- The Sedgemoor Tenants Assurance committee as commissioners of scrutiny and promoting service improvement through learning
- The organisations approach to support customers beyond usual day-to-day repairing responsibilities
- Facebook and texting were viewed positively for getting short messages across quickly



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Acknowledging this, participants also found the following:

- There is confusion around a request for service and a formal complaint, particularly around anti-social behaviour management and reporting
- Service Standards must be clear to manage customer expectations – they also enable customers to hold their landlord to account where services do not meet that standard they expect to receive



- Communication plays a large part in complaints management and good communication will stop requests for service falling into a complaint
- Complaints are logged and monitored by the Customer Services Team but outside of the customer service function it seems that requests for service are missed or ignored leaving customers frustrated and left resorting to making a complaint
- Complaints made to other officers are not logged and seem to fall into a “black hole” and do not get responded to, or are forgotten
- The Customers First Strategy is promoted to contractors but mixed messaging by contractors can be confusing and leaves some customers worried about action that will or will not be taken to rectify problems; this leads to complaints of service failure
- Repeated complaints about the same thing results in customers losing faith in the process and service delivery
- Promote better use of technology and “how-to” video guides can support customers to report issues online

Recommendations

	Recommendation	Comments	HIS Response
	The Policy		
1.	HIS has a clear definition of a complaint in their policy however they need to promote this more widely to customers	Ensure there are no barriers to accessing services or making a complaint – CST and front-line officers to be aware of when there has been a service failure and raise an initial complaint	<i>On-going training and reminders to all staff to log any service failures as an initial complaint whilst still doing all they can to resolve</i>
2.	Ensure information is targeted to those who may need additional help to make a complaint or request for service	Include more information within customer newsletters about how ASB reports are dealt with and how we work with Police –	<i>Working with Housing and Comms teams to promote ASB process and ensure all</i>

		distribute ASB leaflet for information for customers	<i>customer facing staff are aware of this</i>
3.	HIS review and publish their Service Standards to provide clarity and transparency about the services they provide	This will help to manage customer expectation and support improved service delivery	<i>Service standards to be reviewed and updated and published in Q4</i>
Provide greater clarity and understanding around Request for Service v Complaint			
	At first contact, HIS Customer Service Team (CST) to clarify with customers whether the customer is requesting a service or making a complaint	To ensure clarity and better understanding of requests being made	<i>All customers expressing dissatisfaction are asked if they would like to log an initial complaint for further investigation and response</i>
	Review where requests for service fall into complaints	ASB & Untidy gardens were of particular concern	<i>Working with Patch teams to review and ensure being followed up in timely manner or will become an initial complaint</i>
	Ensure responsible officers provide timely updates with customers agreement to avoid complaints being made	Poor communication is key area for generating complaints so need to improve on this	<i>Communication is key and will continue to be part of Customers First training to embed this message</i>
	Communication		
	Use customer information (insight) to improve targeted communications	Support customers to use a variety of means that will ensure their issue is recorded	<i>Customers can log a complaint by any means they prefer. Working with Comms team to provide content</i>

			<i>for website and newsletters</i>
	Specify and agree a consistent approach to communications for service requests - Agree these with the customer - confirm timescales with them		<i>Ongoing message to customer facing staff to ensure they are aware of difference between request for service and a service failure/complaint</i>
	Promote a positive culture around complaints reporting to build trust and improve relationships	Ensure all requests from customers are logged by the receiving officer (regardless of how they are asked)	<i>All staff are empowered to log an initial complaint within CRM system and this forms part of the Customers First training</i>
	Increase channels of communication to inform and update customers about their issue	Consider and agree social media and SMS as suitable channels with the customer where appropriate so they know about progress and resolution of their issue – Potential to deliver newsletters to communal rooms so that key messages are being received by customers	<i>HiS will accept a complaint via any communication method and can also respond via SMS and email from CRM system. Webchat and Facebook also options for communications</i>

Appendix A.

Attendees

Scrutiny Panel

Ann Hooper
Bob Elston
Kim Handsford
Ian Cook
Amanda Loynton
Peter Beer
Wendy Beer
Katy Alvis
Lorna Thompson
Craig Green
Ros Griffiths

Officers

Claire Tough	Director of Communities & Customer Service
Rachel Palmer	Customer Focus Manager
John Lench	Property Services Team Leader
Sharon Collard	Community Enabler
Kaylun Henson	Community Enabler
Charlie Harper	Communications and Marketing Co-Ordinator