

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Neighbourhood and
Community Services
Scrutiny Panel

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HOUSING SERVICE CUSTOMER SENATE – REVIEW OF ESTATE SERVICES

1 Purpose of Report

This report advises members of the recent review of Estate Services which was undertaken by the Housing Service 'Customer Senate'. The report contains full information about how the review was conducted and a number of recommendations for consideration and action.

2 Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action

The Panel is requested to note the report and to consider the recommendations for implementation.

3 Supporting Information

See attached report

Estate Services Review Slough Customer Senate (SCS) Nov 2011

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Background

Slough Customer Senate (SCS) was formed in early June to scrutinise Slough Borough Councils (SBC) housing service performance and delivery of services to its Tenants & Leaseholders.

The Senate, after an initial training period was asked to undertake its first service review to introduce us to the concept of scrutiny. This review was given to us at our July meeting to look closely at the Estate Services formerly known as Caretaking. SBC wanted this review undertaken off the back of resident dissatisfaction and ~~else~~ in line with its on-going restructure of the housing service.

1. The Review

1.1 It took the SCS a couple of meetings to get to grips with the direction of the review because of competing factors such as the Chartered Institute of Housing training and assignments; a new committee trying to get to know each other and the fact that the SCS felt not ready to undertake such a task at that time. Never the less with the determination of the SCS members to make things work the SCS members ploughed on regardless.

1.2 The SCS decides to use similar methodology used by the Audit- Commission to build up a picture of the service as well as other methods such as benchmarking visits to help us with the review.

Methods used:

- 1-1 surveys with customers
- Telephone surveys
- Internet surveys
- Staff Shadowing
- Site walkabouts
- Desk top review of Job Descriptions (JD's), Complaints, Financial information and how the service relates to the local standards framework.

1.3 SCS members found front line staff very accepting of the review proffering ideas and being generally helpful. However we found that when the SCS requested information Senior Management were slow in responding. i.e. Financial information twice supplied by Ken Hopkins didn't have sufficient detailed breakdown of agency costs.

1.4 **Surveys-** the SCS compiled a short survey for telephone, 1-1 and internet use. The survey was set up so that the responses fitted in the SCS's traffic light system for the local standards. The surveys total responses gave an almost 33% split across each traffic light area meaning that almost 66% of respondents fit in red to amber categories which is a concern.

1.5 **Staff Shadowing-** a member of the Senate shadowed several of the Estate Service Officers (ESO) over a period of time as well as conducting informal chats with Neighbourhood Officers and Managers.

1.5.1 The SCS member found that the ESO's were hard working with moral generally seeming good.

1.5.2 After benchmarking visits, by SCS members, to other landlords it is evident that there seems to be a lack of investment in the correct chemicals and equipment for ESO's to work in an efficient manner.

1.5.3 When asked how they would improve the service and their working environment the ESO's suggested that they had proper NVQ training so that they can use specialised equipment and use steps as well as specialist chemicals; give all flatted communal areas a deep clean once a year; give them a detailed standard to work to at the moment they have a tick list which they felt inadequate.

1.5.4 The ESO's also felt the need for a better way to be managed as communication from the area managers was not good. They have suggested an ESO foreman or manager to manage their schedules and co-ordinate their daily activities.

1.5.5 The ESO's also suggested that they had a specialist team to deal with items they are not allowed to touch at present such as light bulbs, entry door timers, small shrub removal, specialist cleaning etc and help with bulk removal.

1.5.6 The SCS Member talked to Housing Officers & Managers and found that there is a lag gap of getting repairs and work actioned by both of SBC's partnering contractors, Interserve & Enterprise. This is hampering the ESO's having a positive effect on service delivery. The Housing Officers will communicate the repair yet won't receive a job number or completion date from contractors and it seems there is no dedicated contact at Interserve or Enterprise to deal with Estate Services Requests.

1.6 **Site Walk-abouts.** Several Senate members undertook site Walk-Abouts either in pairs or with ESO's to get a visual check on the condition of internal communal areas and how they are cleaned, serviced and managed.

1.6.1 The Senate members found that the condition of the communal areas varied and on the whole felt that they were in a below average condition. Again this was confirmed after visiting other landlords providing Estate Services to very similar stock.

They found that:

- Notice Boards were not fit for purpose and too small.
- Door locks and entry systems had not been repaired leaving the blocks open to ASB issues.
- Walls were in poor decorative order and therefore harder to clean.
- Flooring in general was poor with patching repairs not done in the same colour as the current floor. No thought to "making good" after repairs. Flooring in general was worn and needed replacing in a majority of the blocks.
- There was no site lock up for ESO's at each block as promised
- No cleaning schedule in each block so residents had no expectation of their service or standards.
- Problems with residents personalising communal areas
- Some Residents cleaned their own blocks so residents unable to see the benefit from the ESO's
- General rubbish left outside flats
- Tenants not taking pride in where they live
- Tenancy issues not being enforced by housing management e.g. communal areas being blocked, fire hazards, dog fouling. Housing management thought to be "weak" in this area.
- Sub-letting issues from leaseholders causing problems, as SBC have little control of the Leaseholders tenants.
- No Scheduling for ground maintenance are kept in blocks
- No allocation of external communal areas for leaseholders or enforcement of standards within those who have defined gardens.

1.7 **Desk top review** - This was done by 2 Senate members, looking at Financial JD's, Local Standards framework, complaints, any previous survey results and user involvement.

1.7.1 The Senate member looking at financial information given showed concern over the level of detail submitted and asked for any other financial information held on the service apart from that which was supplied by Ken Hopkins we have had no other financial information which means we cannot scrutinise the service down to the last penny to see where we could make recommendations for change. However from the headline information given we have concerns over:

- £10K parking charges at the Centre
- Agency costs against taking on permanent staff...is this VFM?
- No HRA capital expenditure costs on communal areas for the last 12 months.

1.7.2 The survey previously undertaken by people 1st to test satisfaction in this area is statistically wrong and therefore invalid, as it gives a percentage satisfaction against the whole stock profile and not the profile of the residents who get Estate Services. This should have been picked up by people 1st Board and also SBC's Client Side Officer. It is not surprising that this information is wrong, as we have asked for a full profile of the numbers using the service and apart from the 680 leaseholders; SBC Housing Service is unable to supply this information at this time. This is of real concern

to the senate because we question how Leaseholders can get accurate service charge bills associated to their block/group, if SBC does not know who is getting the service.

1.8 **Complaints-** having looked at the complaints taken from the “resolve” system it seems that they seem to be “general service failure complaints” that should have been resolved at stage one in the process. The information supplied in “Resolve” did not show at which stage each complaint was resolved and what the resolution was. The standard of letters sent in reply to complaints seemed very uncaring using phrases like “I would like to point out” & “we must remind you”. It can also be noted that a lot of the officers responding take the word of another officer over that of the customer. The customer is always right, unless you can prove without doubt otherwise, and just because it says it on a diary sheet doesn’t mean it happened. There needs to be more onsite investigation of complaints by Housing Management rather than relying on systems in the office before responding to complaints.

1.8.1 At the recent Tenant Leaseholder conference Neil Aves stated complaints had fallen since the service had returned in house. This may not be something to boast about, as typically in social housing, where you get low levels of complaints you get low levels of Resident expectations of what an excellent services should look like. SBC should be encouraging more complaints.

1.9 **Job Descriptions and person specification** The SCS found this area very basic with no requirement to have an understanding or previous experience of COSHH regulations or RIDDOR which are key safety elements of this post. This is not only a risk to staff but tenants. We also found:

- There is no link to the Local standards in the JD's.
- There are no customer service requirements in the JD's linking to the person specification
- There are no references to meeting service targets, sharing vision, helping achieve or providing suggestions for good value for money outcomes.
- No references to keeping abreast with new developments in Estate Services on a local, regional or national level.

We feel that the post is undervalued and that it shows within the JD & Person Specification.

1.9.1 **Local standards framework for Estate Services-** The perception of officers is that the service is amber going green in most areas. However there is no evidence to back this up and the statements on the framework document are just that , statements. There needs extensive tenant and leasehold testing of satisfaction in each area to substantiate the housing managements statements and justification of their traffic light. We also find that each standard is too broad to give a true picture of how, of how the ESO service is running, individual duties within the standards

should have its own traffic light; from mopping the floor to repairs in communal arrears.

1.9.2 Not all the Notice boards have been put up in the block. Those that have been put up are not fit for purpose and are very small. There isn't enough room for relevant information. The SCS are not happy that the management are delaying such a simple improvement off the back of our report.

1.9.3 **Benchmarking visits** – Senate members made two visits to other landlords. One to Hillingdon Housing Services, like Slough, a recently returned service from an ALMO and SBC's partner in sharing the legal costs in returning both services. The other landlord visited was Radian Housing Association at Longford Park – Formerly Common Road, taken out of SBC council control under a TMO some 12 years ago and an award winner nationally for the services it gives to its tenants. See appendix 5 for full details of the visits and information given by the landlords concerned.

1.9.4 Both landlords were impressive in their own way and the cost of the services charged out to tenants & Leaseholders were higher than those at SBC which is why the service is not excellent at Slough as it is cut very close to the bone in certain areas. Hillingdon who had the closest stock profile had invested a significant amount of capital in the past to bring communal areas up to a equalised standard thereby making the cleaning more efficient, effective and noticeable to their tenants. Radian gave lots of control to their tenants in scrutinising the service at a local level and setting the standards. The visits highlighted the lack in capital investment in the communal areas and the need to bring SBC's stock up to an equalised standard.

2. Service Strengths

2.0 **Estate Service as a whole-** During its review the Senate has found the following positive aspects of the service;

- ESO's are in general
 - Polite
 - Clean, Tidy & Presentable
 - They care about the service they provide
 - Committed but frustrated
 - Have good moral
 - Work hard in a pressurised environment
 - Willing to take on additional duties after appropriate training and given the correct resources and equipment.

3. Service Weaknesses

3.0 **Estate Services as a whole-** During its review that Senate had found the following weaknesses in the service or contributing factors.

- Partnering contractors not actioning repair requests from Housing Officers or generating repair timescales. There is no contractor side contact for Estate Service repair resolution. This is creating frustration with the ESO's making an impact to the standards.

- Housing Management is weak, not taking positive action against tenancy management issues quickly. A zero tolerance approach is needed.
- Area managers are not communicating effectively with ESO's and this is creating problems with workload management. There also seems to be a lack of co-ordination of the ESO team as a service.
- The local standards are very basic and do not represent the vision for an excellent service standard.
- Communication with Estate Service users does not happen, and a catch all approach by the housing service in "streets ahead" is not good enough.
- There is a lack of resident Involvement in this service area.
- Internal communal fabrications and decoration are substandard in many of the blocks and needs capital investment for ESO's to be effective in their role.

4. Recommendations

4.0 The senate recommends- The Senate resolves that the following recommendations are taken into account when the housing service progresses development of this review through Scrutiny & Cabinet. However we are insistent that any changes to the service; recommendations that the Senate make; ~~or anything else~~ that effects the delivery of Estates Services to the customers is put through a rigorous transparent and meaningful engagement process with the direct service users, so they can influence the quality, cost and level of service they receive and the consequences of services being out-sourced, kept in house or given to existing contractors.

The Senate recommends that:

- all the individual block communal areas are put through a condition survey similar to that needed for the development of the Slough Decent Homes standard.
- A Slough standard for communal areas, similar to the decent homes standard is developed from the condition survey with service users.
- A caretaking manager/foreman is appointed to manage the daily schedules, workloads, training, 1-1's, sickness absence and holidays.
- In every housing area that 1 or 2 of the Housing Officers are dedicated to nothing but looking after blocks of flats, the tenancy issues that arise in them, enforcement needed and progressing/chasing communal repairs in conjunction with the Caretaking Manager/Foreman. We see this as a specialist Housing Officer role.
- A dedicated point of contact is created with partnering contractors to progress outstanding repairs or grounds maintenance issues.
- All repairs raised between officers and Interserve are given repair timescales in line with those tenants would receive if they were reporting the communal repair.
- A specialist multi-tasking team of ESO's is created and trained to deal with specialist cleaning needs, help with bulk removals, certain minor adjustments and repairs and act as a relief during absences and holidays.
- ESO's are all offered NVQ training (appendix 8) to feel valued, to add value to their role and help with retention issues.
- The housing service uses a more synergistic approach to using the best quality tools, equipment and chemicals to provide an excellent service.
- A borough wide Estate Services user group is started without delay to develop a set of excellent service standards and monitor them.

- A resident block rep scheme with incentives is created to monitor groups of blocks to ensure service standards are kept and monitored from a resident's perspective.
- Look at increasing the service charge costs in line with local landlords over a 3 year period to enable an excellent service, but the SFHRA subsidising the increase by 50% in the first year and 25% the following year and 12.5% in the last to soften the blow to tenants and leaseholders in these hard financial times.

Summary

The Senate would like to thank the ESO's and officers concerned for their contributions to this report. At the end of the day they are all hard working people working in sometimes very difficult situations which cause a lot of pressure and for this we thank them.

The Senate believes that before SBC Housing Service thinks about putting the Estates Service out to tender it should first bring the service, the communal fabric and decorative state of the block up to an acceptable standard. We think this is the best way forward as an out-sourced contractor will quote for the stock to brought up to a standard which is cost prohibitive, they will also use the stocks condition as an excuse for not supplying a service to specification. SBC could end up with a blank cheque to sign.

We are not comfortable with the senate making the decision on this service this is why we are insistent on full engagement with the residents receiving Estate Services. It should be up to them to decide the direction, cost and quality of the service they receive. It may be seen divisive if just 7 people take the decision on such an important service provided to nearly a third of the housing services client base. Wider consultation must be sought before managers or members make any further decisions.

There are lessons to be learnt from this review and the Senate will be in close communication with the Senior Management Team & Kevin Young as to how we can learn from them to make all further reviews beneficial on all sides.

Proposed_____

Seconded_____

Signed_____ The Chairperson- for and behalf the SCS

This report was approved on_____ & Submitted to SBC_____