

Gloucester City Homes



Mystery Shopping Evaluation

Neighbourhood Services

September 2008

Introduction

Gloucester City Homes currently gains feedback from customers in various ways such as satisfaction surveys, focus groups, resident groups, block and street representatives, compliments, comments and complaints. Mystery shopping enables us to identify where our service standards and procedures need to be developed.

On this occasion, we evaluated our Neighbourhood Services with our customers. We did this by testing tenancy advice provided by staff over the telephone and customer service in regards to a home visit.

Timing of Exercise

The mystery shop was conducted between 2nd September 2008 and 17th September 2008.

Executive Summary

Six trained tenant mystery shoppers carried out the exercise.

There were four scenarios:

- **Scenario 1 – Request of tenancy advice: lodgers**
- **Scenario 2 – Request of tenancy advice: transfer request**
- **Scenario 3 – Request of tenancy advice: compensation for improvements**
- **Scenario 4 – Request of a home visit by a Neighbourhood Management Officer**

Footnote: Two tenants completed scenario 1
Two tenants completed scenario 2
Two tenants completed scenario 3
All six tenants completed scenario 4

In summary, customer service was once again identified as a strength in Gloucester City Homes: telephones were generally answered in the manner prescribed by the service standards, staff were perceived as helpful, polite and friendly, and there was an example of an officer 'going the extra mile' by ringing the tenant back with further information. There were two occasions where customer service could be improved, in particular, when both the CSO and NMO refused to make a home appointment due to the reason for the visit not being given. Regarding advice given for the three different scenarios, the response given by staff was excellent for Scenario 1 with no weaknesses identified. This is particularly important due to the potential legal repercussions of overcrowding. Scenario 2 was also dealt with very well apart from one disappointing response from the NMO regarding obtaining help with the transfer application form. Scenario 3 was answered proficiently although two more pieces of information could have been supplied regarding how compensation is calculated.

Finally, the home visit by an NMO found a mixed response. On the positive side, the NMOs who did attend the appointments were punctual or early and three of the four did remember to show their identity card to the customer. On the negative side, one home appointment was not attended by the NMO without any notice given to the customer.

Please refer to the corresponding Reaction Report to view remedial actions taken as a result of this report's findings.

Results

Scenarios 1 - 3 Telephone answering technique

Scenarios 1-3 involved the mystery shoppers contacting the Neighbourhood Services Team to ask advice on various tenancy issues. The mystery shoppers were given the direct telephone numbers for the relevant Neighbourhood Services Duty Officer for the day they were to make the call. The results of how the calls were answered are as follows:

Results of enquiry

How quickly was the call answered?	After 1 ring	1		
	After 2 rings	3		
	After 3 rings	1		
	After 4 rings	1		
Did the staff member confirm you have got through to Gloucester City Homes?	Yes	6	No	0
Did the staff member give you their name?	Yes	6	No	0
Did the staff member ask if they can help you?	Yes	6	No	0
Was the staff member courteous?	Yes	6	No	0
General comments				
a) Staff member was eager to help.				
b) The staff were so friendly and helpful.				

Scenario 1 - Request of tenancy advice: lodgers

The mystery shopper explained they have a friend/relative who is a Gloucester City Homes customer and is considering sub-letting one of their rooms in their three bedroom house to a lodger. The following questions were then asked:

Results of enquiry

Question	Staff response
Does the friend/relative need to ask Gloucester City Homes for permission to sub-let their home?	Yes 2 No 0
The friend/relative has children living in the property: a boy aged 10 and a girl aged 12, currently in separate rooms. They will be moving into the same room if the lodger moves in. Is this allowed?	Yes 0 No 2 Other: a) This would be classed as overcrowding
If over-crowding is identified by the staff member as a problem, ask what the consequences of this might be if the friend/relative still goes ahead.	Prosecution 2
Does the friend/relative need to tell anyone else about the lodger?	Housing benefit 2
At the end of the conversation, did the staff member ask if there was anything else they could help with?	Yes 2 No 0
General comments a) Staff very helpful.	

Scenario 2 - Request of tenancy advice: transfer request

The mystery shopper explained they have a friend/relative who is a Gloucester City Homes customer and is considering transferring from one area of Gloucester to another to be closer to family. The following questions were then asked:

Results of enquiry

Question	Staff response
How does the friend/relative get a transfer?	Complete application form 2
If the NMO advises the friend/relative to complete a transfer application form, ask if he/she can get help with this.	Yes 1 (see a) No 1 (see b) Other: a) Help available at the office or by home visit. b) NMO said, "you can help her".
What happens after the application form is completed?	Visit within 28 days to identify needs/provide further advice 2
What type of property would the friend/relative be entitled to?	The NMO will request information about their household and will advise on entitlement 2
How often do properties become available in the area requested?	a) Around 6 per month b) Not often
Is there anything that might prevent the friend/relative from moving?	Rent arrears 2 Other tenancy breach 2 Other: a) History of anti-social behaviour e.g. ASBO
How long might a transfer take?	Depends on: Number of points 2 How much demand there is for the area 2
At the end of the conversation, did the NMO ask if there was anything else they could help with?	Yes 1 No 1
General comments	
a) The Neighbourhood Management Officer spoke very quickly – I had to ask her to slow down.	

Scenario 3 - Request of tenancy advice: compensation for improvements

The mystery shopper explained they have a friend/relative who is a Gloucester City Homes customer who had a new bathroom fitted at their expense two years ago and they are now thinking of ending their tenancy. The following questions were then asked:

Results of enquiry

Question	Staff response
Will the friend/relative be eligible for compensation for the fitted bathroom?	Yes 2 No 0
Explain that the friend/relative did not obtain permission before the work was carried out. Ask if this will prevent compensation.	No compensation 0 Customer will need to gain permission in writing before decision 2
When can the friend/relative apply for compensation?	When the tenant informs GCH of their intent to leave 1 Within 14 days of end of tenancy 2 Other: a) NMO rang back 20min later to add about the 14 days clause.
What information will the friend/relative need to supply in the application?	Details of improvements 2 Cost of improvements 2 Date of works 2 Invoices/receipts 2
How will the compensation be worked out?	The value of any grant given towards the cost of the improvements will be taken off 0 Relative to how old the improvement is (depreciation) 2 Less compensation if the cost of the improvement was too much or the quality is higher than it would have been if GCH/Council had done it themselves. 2 Relative to the current condition of the improvement. 2 Arrears or other money owed to GCH will be subtracted from compensation value 0

What is the maximum amount of compensation?	£3000	2
Can compensation also be claimed for labour?	Yes 1 (see a)	No 0
	Other: a) Only if work completed by professionals	1
At the end of the conversation, did the NMO ask if there was anything else they could help with?	Yes 2	No 0

General comments

- a) NMO was great she made me feel at ease. When she didn't know an answer she looked it up – she even rang me back with more info. I'd ring her every time I have a problem.
- b) She said she could also send leaflets on the issue and information could be found on the website and in the handbook. I felt very confident in the answers given.

Scenario 4 - Request of a home visit by a Neighbourhood Management Officer

The mystery shoppers contacted Gloucester City Homes via the free phone number and requested a home visit from a Neighbourhood Management Officer (NMO). If asked for a reason, they were to explain they have a few issues they would like to discuss face to face. The results of how the calls were answered are as follows:

Results of enquiry

How quickly was the call answered?	After 1 ring	1
	After 2 rings	1
	After 3 rings	2
	After 4 rings	0
	After 5 rings	2
Did the staff member confirm you have got through to Gloucester City Homes?	Yes 6	No 0
Did the staff member give you their name?	Yes 5	No 1
Did the staff member ask if they can help you?	Yes 6	No 0
Was the staff member courteous?	Yes 6	No 0

General comments

- a) The Customer Service Officer (CSO) refused to make an appointment – they took my phone number for the NMO to call me. When the NMO called, they refused to come out without a specific reason.
- b) CSO asked if my query was about rent or anti-social behaviour as a specific officer would need to be sent.
- c) The staff member was very helpful.
- d) The CSO wanted more details to ascertain if I needed a visit by a NMO or ASB officer; they took my contact number in case of any problems.

Scenario 4 results continued over page.

When the NMO attended the home visit, the mystery shopper thanked them for attending but said there were no longer any problems in order to protect their mystery shopper identity.

Results of enquiry

Did the NMO arrive on the correct day?	Yes	3	No	3 (see comment a) & b)
If no were you advised beforehand and the meeting rearranged?	Yes	1	No	1
Did the NMO arrive at the correct time?	Yes	3	No	1 (see comment c)
If no were you advised beforehand?	Yes	0	No	1
Did the NMO show you their identity card?	Yes	3	No	1
At the end of the conversation, did the NMO ask if there was anything else they could help with?	Yes	3	No	1
Was the NMO courteous and friendly?	Yes	4	No	0
<p>General comments</p> <p>a) Meeting booked 10/9 1pm but no one turned up.</p> <p>b) See General Comment a) on page 8.</p> <p>c) NMO arrived at 1.45pm instead of 2.30pm - no phone call beforehand but she was very pleasant.</p> <p>d) I had to ask who the NMO was as she didn't offer her name.</p> <p>e) Staff friendly at all times.</p>				

Results Analysis

a) Customer service

Strengths

- All calls answered by Neighbourhood Services and Customer Services were within the service standard of five rings and in the manner prescribed by the customer service standards (apart from one exception of a CSO not giving their name).
- Following the phone call or home visit, eight out of ten times the NMOs asked if there was anything else they could help with before the contact ended.
- One NMO rang the mystery shopper back to provide further information about compensation for improvements.
- All the mystery shoppers found staff members to be courteous both over the telephone and in person.
- Customer comments include:
 - “Staff member was eager to help”
 - “The staff were so friendly and helpful.”
 - “Staff friendly at all times.”
 - “NMO was great she made me feel at ease. When she didn’t know an answer she looked it up – she even rang me back with more info. I’d ring her every time I have a problem.”
 - “She said she could also send leaflets on the issue and information could be found on the website and in the handbook. I felt very confident in the answers given.”

Weaknesses

- One Neighbourhood Management Officer spoke “very quickly” on the telephone and the mystery shopper had to ask the person to slow down.
- When one mystery shopper contact GCH for a home visit, the CSO refused to make an appointment and instead took the tenant’s phone number for the NMO to call them. When the NMO called, they refused to come out without a specific reason.

Scenario 1: Request of tenancy advice: lodgers

Strengths

- Correct responses were given in the following:
 - The tenant would need to ask permission from GCH to sub-let their home.
 - Permission would not be granted for the two children to move into the same room due to overcrowding (they are over the age limit to live in the same room).
 - Prosecution due to overcrowding could result if the tenant decided to proceed with the sub-let.
 - Housing benefit would need to be informed in addition to GCH.
- One tenant commented, “Staff very helpful.”

Weaknesses

- No weaknesses identified.

Scenario 2: Request of tenancy advice: transfer request

Strengths

- Correct responses were given in the following:
 - Tenants need to complete an application form to apply for a transfer.
 - One NMO correctly advised help with the form could be obtained by the tenant coming in to the office or by a home visit.
 - A staff member would visit the applicant within 28 days to identify housing needs and provide advice.
 - Regarding the type of property the tenant would be entitled to, the NMOs will request information about their household and will advise on entitlement.
 - One NMO was able to give an estimation as to how many properties become available in the area requested (the other NMO was not able to quantify but did give a general indication).
 - Both rent arrears and tenancy breaches, including anti-social behaviour, were given as possible barriers to a transfer.
 - Both NMOs explained the waiting time for a transfer depends on the number of points an applicant has and the demand for an area.

Weaknesses

- An incorrect response was given in the following:
 - When asked about help available to fill in the application form, one NMO responded, “you can help her”. This was not perceived by the tenant as a helpful response.

Scenario 3: Request of tenancy advice: compensation for improvements

Strengths

- Correct responses were given in the following:
 - Potential eligibility of the tenant for compensation.
 - The tenant will need to gain permission in writing before the decision is made.
 - The tenant can apply for compensation when they inform GCH of their intent to leave and within 14 days of the end of their tenancy.
 - Information the tenant would need to provide with the application for compensation.
 - Maximum amount of compensation for any one improvement (£3000).
 - Inclusion of labour in the compensation amount. One NMO also pointed out labour would only be covered if the work was completed by professionals.

Weaknesses

- Further information could have been provided in regards to how the compensation would be calculated, i.e., the value of any grant received for the work and the subtraction of any arrears or other money owed to GCH.

Scenario 4: Request of a home visit by a Neighbourhood Management Officer

Strengths

- On one occasion, the CSO wanted more details to ascertain if the caller needed a visit by a NMO or ASB officer. The staff member took the tenant's contact number in case of any problems.
- Three out of the four NMOs arrived for the home visit at the correct time although one came 45 minutes early without phoning the tenant beforehand.
- Three out of the four NMOs showed their identity card to the tenant.

Weaknesses

- On one occasion, the NMO did not attend the home visit appointment and there was no contact made with the tenant to notify them.
- One NMO did not offer their name when they attended the home visit appointment.

Conclusion

Customer service was once again identified as a strength in Gloucester City Homes: telephones were generally answered in the manner prescribed by the service standards, staff were perceived as helpful, polite and friendly, and there was an example of an officer 'going the extra mile' by ringing the tenant back with further information. There were two occasions where customer service could be improved, in particular, when both the CSO and NMO refused to make a home appointment due to the reason for the visit not being given. Regarding advice given for the three different scenarios, the response given by staff was excellent for Scenario 1 with no weaknesses identified. This is particularly important due to the potential legal repercussions of overcrowding. Scenario 2 was also dealt with very well apart from one disappointing response from the NMO regarding obtaining help with the transfer application form. Scenario 3 was answered proficiently although two more pieces of information could have been supplied regarding how compensation is calculated.

Finally, the home visit by an NMO found a mixed response. On the positive side, the NMOs who did attend the appointments were punctual or early and three of the four did remember to show their identity card to the customer. On the negative side, one home appointment was not attended by the NMO without any notice given to the customer.

Please refer to the corresponding Reaction Report to view remedial actions taken as a result of this report's findings.

End of Report

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24 Sep. 08