Highland Tenants Scrutiny Panel

Review of Complaints Process

June 2018

Contents

Executive Summary

Who we are

The Highland Tenants Scrutiny Panel is a group of tenants who are passionate about our involvement in working with the Highland Council to improve housing services and get the best value for money. There are currently six active members and we volunteer with the Scrutiny Panel for approximately 25 hours per month each.

What we do

We examine a part of our Landlord's housing service from a tenant's perspective and look at ways of improving the service and / or saving money.

The focus of this scrutiny exercise was the Complaints process and we looked in detail at the process from obtaining information on how to make a complaint; what is a complaint; how the complaint is handled and how the Council respond to complaints.

This report details our findings and recommendations.

Our main recommendations are:

Complaints Leaflet

- Use fewer background graphics
- Font should be easy to read and minimum 12 point
- Less content – keep information concise with detailed information on the HC web site
- HC "How to complain" should be on the back page

- Only offer services which are available – information on HC web site with facility to translate may be a cost effective way to meet language availability issues
- Ensure that all customer service staff are aware of formats which are available and how to access them

Methods of making a complaint

- Offer alternative methods of making a complaint e.g. Text, Email, Web Chat, mobile phone app

Accessibility

- Introduce text service to contact the Council
- Introduce Web Chat
- Clearer links to Browse Aloud and BSL (British Sign Language) videos on the HC web site

Service Centre / System

- Put staff training in place to ensure reference numbers are always given to the customer

Staff Interviews

- Improve system for advising customer service staff of leave / absence of managers dealing with complains

- Staff training to improve method of identifying correct person / department to deal with the complaint and show respect to the person making a complaint

Data / Statistics

- Staff training required on fully responding to points raised
- Staff training on letter writing
- Consideration be given to retaining initial reference number when escalating complaint from stage 1 to stage 2 to allow easier tracking
- Availability of reporting split by area / contractor

We would also like to make a general recommendation about staff awareness of Scrutiny and the work / role of the Scrutiny Panel. Although we found the staff we dealt directly with, through this scrutiny exercise, to be more helpful. We felt that there were some misgivings and wariness from other staff members i.e. front line staff. **We would recommend that all frontline staff receive Scrutiny awareness raising training.**

We would also like to raise the issue of access to information for the Scrutiny Panel. Other areas provide Data Protection training for their Scrutiny volunteers which then allows the Panel greater access to information. We would like to be able to undertake this training before we start on our next Scrutiny Project.

Introduction

Introduction to the concept of Scrutiny

Landlords have been involving and consulting with their tenants for years –

Scrutiny is a step further.

Scrutiny is about tenants being able to ask Landlords questions based on clear information and data, such as:

- Why is a service delivered in a particular way
- Why are particular timescales in place
- How much is this costing
- Can costs be reduced while still providing a good level of service
- Could we do this better or differently?

The answers for these and similar questions should lead to recommendations that result in change and improvement.

The Highland Tenants Scrutiny Group

The Highland Tenants Scrutiny Group is drawn from tenant volunteers from across the Highland region. Each of the members have undertaken a three day training course in Scrutiny as part of the Scottish Government / Chartered Institute of Housing "Stepping up to Scrutiny" programme.

There are currently six active members in the group, five from Caithness and one from Mid Ross. The members who have been involved in this review are:

Angela Krueger (Chair), Geraldine McCarthy, Dennise Fitzgerald, Alison Kirk, Jackie Smith, Gay Ellvers, also Grace Hainey (Former Chair), Yvonne Hutchison

L to R: Angela Krueger, Gay Ellvers, Alison Kirk, Dennise Fitzgerald, Geraldine McCarthy – not included in photo Jackie Smith

The group operates within the enclosed Terms of Reference agreed with the Highland Council in September 2016. (Appendix I, page 19)

Why complaints?

For our first review we looked at the data from the Annual Return on the Charter (ARC) and the Customer Report 2014/2015 and compared performance. The percentage of complaints upheld in 2013/2014 customer report was 3.6 % and the percentage upheld in 2014/2015 was 64.9 %. This anomaly seemed worthy of investigation.

What did we look at?

We examined many aspects of the Complaints process, from how the information on *how to make a complaint* is provided, the logging of the complaint, through to how complaints are handled in the areas.

We followed the journey of the complaint to completion and looked at how they were responded to.

We looked at:

Complaints Leaflet

Methods of making a complaint

Accessibility

Service Centre

Staff Interviews

Data / Statistics

Complaints Leaflet

We looked at the Complaints leaflet to see if it is fit for purpose.

Conclusions

Design:

We felt that the leaflet was difficult to read. The background graphics were too dark and the lack of contrast between the background and the text, and the varying font, made the leaflet difficult to read.

Content:

There is too much content and it was felt that the majority of tenants would not want to read so much. The back page was about the Scottish Ombudsman (SPSO) and could easily confuse the reader as to where to lodge a complaint.

Availability:

The leaflet was not prominently displayed. The leaflet advertised that it was available in a range of alternative formats – when our members requested these via Service Point and Service Centre it proved problematic. Large print versions were not available and staff were unaware of how to request CD, audio tape or other language versions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Leaflets should be prominently displayed, tidy and up to date
- Use fewer background graphics
- Font should be easy to read and a minimum 12 point
- Less content – keep information concise with detailed information on the HC web site
- HC "How do I complain" should be on the back page
- Only offer services which are available – information on the web site with facility to translate may be more cost effective way to meet language availability issues
- Ensure that all customers service staff are aware of formats which are available and how to access them

Methods of making a complaint

We looked at the methods of making a complaint and how relevant they are at this time.

Conclusions

The methods of making a complaint, as advertised on the Complaints Leaflet, are :

Online (HC web site)

By phone

By post

In person at Service Point

By Type Phone

RECOMMENDATIONS

Offer alternative methods of making a complaint e.g.

Text Message

Web Chat

Mobile phone App

Accessibility

We looked at the methods of making a complaint and how accessible they are for people with a disability. We specifically looked at services for those registered blind and the profoundly deaf.

Conclusions

One of the early members of the panel is registered blind and we were eventually able to obtain a copy of the "Complaints Leaflet" in Braille for her. The Council web site also offers "Browse aloud", which is a service that reads aloud the web pages.

One of the existing members of the panel is profoundly deaf and she looked at how easy it was for her to make a complaint. The service offered by the HC is Type Phone – this service requires the user to have a text phone and the call is relayed through a third party. This is not a service our member would use as it can be costly and you would have to have the necessary equipment. Many deaf people are now using mobile phones and texts but at present it is not possible to text to the Council.

Web Chat is also a very useful tool for deaf people. Deaf people who use British Sign Language (BSL) can find English difficult to understand – although there are BSL videos in the HC web site, but it is not easy to find them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Introduce text service to contact the Council
- Introduce Web Chat
- Clearer links to Browse Aloud and BSL videos on the HC web site

Service Centre / System

We visited the Service Centre in Alness and were given a demonstration by staff of the software system used to manage complaints; this gave us a better understanding of how complaints are handled at the point of first contact.

Conclusions

We were impressed with the staff efforts to resolve an issue at first contact and gained an insight into how difficult it is to establish whether a complaint is a   justifiable complaint or a request for a service. It does not appear however that customers are routinely given the reference number for their complaint.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Put staff training in place to ensure the reference number is always given to the customer

Staff Interviews

We interviewed staff members from Caithness, Inverness and Ross-Shire who have responsibilities to manage stage 1 complaints and investigate stage 2 complaints. We asked each of them standard questions and compared responses.

Conclusions

Each of the staff members interviewed followed very similar procedures in managing complaints within their areas. Overall we were impressed with the manner of handling and investigating complaints and felt that staff took complaints very seriously and would resolve matters to the very best of their ability. When asked how the service could be improved they all agreed that there could be issues when they were on leave or out of the office – complaints could be received when they are absent and a delay in responding could occur. There also seemed to be issues at times when a complaint was initially misdirected and allocated to the wrong person / department.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improved system for advising customer service staff of leave / absence of managers dealing with complaints
- Staff training to improve method of identifying correct person / department to deal with the complaint

Data / Statistics

We met Noel McLaughlin on two occasions and he gave us an overview of the complaints system and the statistics covering the past two years. We were provided with extracted data for stage 1 and stage 2 complaints and complaints which had been escalated to the SPSO.

Conclusions

When we examined the data provided we scored the handling of each complaint on the following:

- ➢ Timescales
- ➢ Action
- ➢ Quality of response

Of the initial complaints that we looked at 42 % failed to be responded to within the timescale, although this improved when complaints were escalated to stage 2 with 16 % failing to meet the timescale. We feel that this links in to the issues raised in the staff interviews and our recommendations there apply. (see Appendix 2 on page 24)

We assessed the actions taken and quality of response on whether all points in the complain had been responded to and manner of response. In many cases we felt that the complaints had only been partly responded to and some written responses contained even spelling and grammatical errors. Where responses had been made by telephone adequate notes had not been entered onto the system.

We also tried to follow stage1 complaints which had escalated to stage 2, this proved extremely difficult as when a complaint is escalated it is given a new

reference number. We also asked for report of complaints by area but this information was not available. At this time the system could not separate complaints by area. We feel that this information would have given a clearer picture of services in the different areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Staff training required on importance of fully responding to points raised
- Staff training on letter writing
- Consideration be given to retaining initial reference number when escalating complaint from stage1 to stage 2 to allow easier tracking
- Availability of reporting split by area / contractors

Source of Evidence

Interviews and Meetings

- Housing Managers
    - From Caithness   * Margaret Ross
    - From Inverness   * Lewis Hannah
    - From Ross-Shire   * Donna McKenzie

- Complaints

    Noel McLaughlin

Key Document Received

- Scottish Social Housing Charter
- Housing Matters
- Annual Customer Reports

    2014/2015 , 2015/2016 , 2016/2017

- Complaints Leaflet
- Statistics / Data (case studies)

Appendix 1

Highland Council Service User Scrutiny Panel

Terms of Reference

These terms of reference set out the aims and objectives and rights and responsibilities of the Highland Council Service User Scrutiny Panel.

Vision Statement: Challenge, Improve and Gain Knowledge.

Aims and Objectives:

- To operate on behalf of tenants and other service users and to work in partnership with the Highland Council to help to ensure it provides service user centred services of the highest standard.
- To develop greater service user influence in decision making on services.

The role of the Service User Scrutiny Panel.

- To collectively undertake Service User scrutiny activities within the Housing Service.
- To review independently the overall performance of Highland Council's Housing Services.
- To assess Highland Council's performance against agreed service standards and the regulatory requirements of the Scottish Social Housing Charter.
- To select areas of the Housing Service which it deems to be in need of review..
- To act as a critical friend of Highland Council.
- To propose priorities for service improvements.
- To highlight to Head of Housing where performance falls below agreed standards and where performance meets or exceeds customer expectations.

Programme of Work.

- The Scrutiny Panel may review and scrutinise the Landlord Report from the Scottish Housing Regulator
- The Scrutiny Panel will set its own work programme, but will consider requests and advice from the Head of Housing Services.
- The areas for review will be decided using feedback from all available information including, but not limited to:
  - Key Performance Indicators
  - Reports from Customer Focus Groups
  - Registered Tenant Groups
  - Satisfaction Surveys
  - Complaints, compliments and suggestions.
  - The Scrutiny Panel may also request information from individual service users

Accountabilities to Service Users.

- The Scrutiny Panel will receive a copy of the Annual Report from the Regulator which will report on how Highland Council is performing against the requirements of the Scottish Social Housing Charter. The Panel may request that its views be included in the response to this report. This will not be unreasonably withheld.
- The Scrutiny Panel may refer to a wide range of formal and informal sources of information to inform its work programme and priorities.
- An email address for the Scrutiny Panel will be set up which will be monitored by the Chair and Vice-Chair. (hcscrutinypanel@gmail.com)
- The Scrutiny Panel will feed back to customers and staff on its work various channels

Accountability to and from the Housing Service.

- The Head of Housing Service will be the executive lead for all matters relating to the Panel.
- No individual member of the panel should attempt to liaise with any Officer or Member of Highland Council without the authority of the panel.
- The Scrutiny Panel may, as it deems fit, choose to scrutinise any aspect of the Housing Service across the Highland area.
- The Head of Housing will consider all reports from the Scrutiny Panel.
- Where the Panel has concerns regarding the performance or service standards they can make a formal request for a response to its recommendations.
- Where required the Head of Housing will review any submitted reports at the next scheduled meeting, (subject to being given 14 days notice in advance of the meeting). The Head of Housing will, where possible, provide a response within 28 days.

- Where required a member / members of the Scrutiny Panel will present their findings to Head of Housing, and if it is felt necessary by either party, present their findings to Community Services / Area Committees in order to be able to fully clarify the recommendations being made.
- In the event of the Scrutiny Panel being dissatisfied with the response received, the Scrutiny Panel may serve a Notice of Concern to the Head of Housing setting out their concerns. The Head of Housing will take account of the Notice of Concern and arrange to meet with the Scrutiny Panel within a 28 day period.

Access to Information.

- The Scrutiny Panel may request reports and information from the Highland Council to carry out its activities. Where information is not readily available, the panel may commission reports (appropriate in scale to the scrutiny being undertaken and subject to available budget) and/or invite officers and managers to meet with the Scrutiny Panel to provide information and advice.
- All requests for information and advice must be made via the Tenant and Customer Engagement Officer or appointed person within 28 days
- Any information requested will not be unreasonably withheld. Where this information is withheld for any reason, the Panel will be informed, in writing, of the reasons for withholding the information. This written confirmation maybe in the form of an email to the appropriate email address.

Resources.

- Highland Council will consult with the panel and negotiate a budget to support the Scrutiny Panel and enable it to operate effectively.
- The Highland Council will be responsible for ensuring the budget expenditure is recorded and budget reports made available to the Scrutiny Panel.

Expenses.

- All reasonable expenses will be paid. This will include:
    - Mileage and other travelling costs.
    - Accommodation
    - Carer costs
    - Hire of Venues – where possible council accommodation will be used subject to availability.
    - Refreshments
    - Internet, phone, printing, copying, postage and other stationary.
- All expenses claims must be in accordance with the Highland Council Volunteer Expenses Policy.

Membership.

- Membership will be up to 12 places.
- All Housing Service Users are eligible to apply, applications will be considered by the Scrutiny Panel
- The normal term of office will be 2 years.
- Members who step down at the end of their term of office may be re-elected but will be considered alongside other suitable applicants.
- The Scrutiny Panel may co-opt members with specific skills considered appropriate to assist the Panel in its duties with specific time limited work programmes.
- The Scrutiny Panel will adopt the Highland Council's Code of Conduct, which may be amended as required, but must not breach the said code of conduct.

Frequency of Scrutiny Panel Meetings / Work Groups.

- The Scrutiny Panel will meet a minimum of four times per year.
- The Panel may establish sub groups to carry out specific tasks as required.
- All such groups must report to the panel at agreed frequency.
- The quorum will be more than 50% of members, e.g. if membership is 12, a quorum will be 7.

Administrative Support.

- The Highland Council will have responsibility to ensure the provision of administrative support.
- Highland Council may provide the panel with training to take over the responsibility of administrative activities to enable the Panel to become independent.

Meetings.

The Scrutiny Panel may in the future, adopt a constitution.

The Scrutiny Panel will invite Head of Housing and Director of Community Services to meetings on an at least six monthly basis.

Training & Development.

- All new members will undertake an induction programme and Scrutiny training. Capacity building requirements will be assessed to enable the panel to become effective.
- A training programme will be developed as required, delivered and regularly reviewed.
- Members of the Panel will be encouraged to attain the Chartered Institute of Housing Level 3 Award in Resident Scrutiny.

Evaluation of the Scrutiny Panel Activities.

- The work of the Scrutiny Panel will be subject to a monitoring and evaluation programme, led by the Head of Housing. The programme will include the collection of feedback from Panel members, Highland Council Elected Members, managers, officers and other staff, Resident Groups and individual tenants who wish to comment. Outcomes of the evaluations will be reported to the Scrutiny Panel, the Head of Housing and Members.
- If, as a result of a process including a monitoring and evaluation programme, the Scrutiny Panel is not providing a meaningful benefit to Highland Council and its customers, the Council may choose to withdraw support from the panel. In this event the decision must be ratified by Elected Members and it will be the responsibility of the Head of Housing to notify the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Recruitment and Selection.

- All applicants will be required to complete an application form.
- The selection of applicants will be carried out by the Scrutiny Panel.
- Successful applicants will be selected from those considered to best meet the role profile following informal discussions with the selection panel.
- The selection process will encourage self-assessment where individuals will consider whether they are suited to the role and whether the role suits them. The assessment process will be open and transparent, assessing people's interest and suitability and taking into account Highland Council's commitment to equality and diversity.
- The decision of the Scrutiny Panel will be final

Equality and Diversity.

- The Scrutiny Panel supports the principles of equal opportunity and does not discriminate against anyone from membership or representation on the basis of gender, age, disability, race, sexual orientation, religion or political opinion.
- The Scrutiny Panel will consider the impact of equality and diversity in all aspects of its work.

Appendix 2

Analysis of Statistics / Data

Scrutiny Panel - review of complaints data

Complaint ref	Stage	Source	Timescales	Responses	Action	Quality of Response	Resolution Status	Comments
SP1	1	Service Centre	Pass	Telephone	Pass	not known	Partially upheld	
SP2	1	Service Centre	Fail	Letter	Pass	Pass	Not upheld	
SP3	1	Online	Fail	Telephone	Fail	Fail	Partially upheld	Should be more information
SP4	1	Service Centre	Pass	Telephone	Fail	Fail	Partially upheld	Did not meet expected outcome i.e. face to face meeting
SP5	1	Online	Fail	Telephone	Pass	not known	Upheld	not enough information on outcome to assess quality of response
SP6	1	Service Centre	Fail	Letter sent	Fail	Fail	Not upheld	no explanation given for long timescale to attend to issues - spelling mistakes in letter
SP7	1	Online	Pass	Telephone	Pass	Fail	Not upheld	not enough information
SP8	1	Online	Fail	Telephone	Pass	not known	Not upheld	not very clear whether permanent solution being sought
SP9	1	Online	Fail	Email	Pass	Pass	Not upheld	Correctly assessed as not complaint
SP10	1	Face to Face	Pass	Telephone	Pass	Fail	Not upheld	
SP11	1	Face to Face	Pass	Telephone	Fail	Fail	Partially upheld	HC failed to explain or apologise for length of time to effect repair - valid complaint
SP12	1	Online	Fail	Telephone	Fail	Pass	Not upheld	Lack of response and communication breakdown on part of Landlord
SP13	2	Service Centre	Fail	Letter	Pass	Pass	Not upheld	better to respond in writing - Action :See notes (No notes on system) ??
SP14	2	Service Centre	Pass	Letter	Fail	Fail	Upheld	Correctly handled. Although apology given the council did not address lack of communication nor did they respond to tenants suggestions for service improvement.
Matched Complaints								
1	1	unclear	Pass	Phone	Pass	Pass	Upheld	Due to nature of complaint faster response would have been expected
2 (1)	1	unclear	Pass	Letter	Pass	Pass	Upheld	Escalated to Stage 2 immediately
2 (2)	2	Letter	Pass	Letter	Pass	Fail	Upheld	Correctly handled
3 (1)	1	email	Fail	Letter / Email	Pass	Pass	Not upheld	Escalated to Stage 2
3 (2)	2	Letter	Pass	Letter	Pass	Pass	Not upheld	
4	2	Service Centre	Pass	Letter	Pass	Pass	Upheld	