

Case Study:

Involving residents in setting standards, Cottsway Housing

1 CONTEXT



Cottsway Housing is the largest Registered Social Landlord within the West Oxfordshire District. They own and manage over 3,600 homes and provide services to 135 leaseholders and 17 part-owners under their shared ownership schemes.

A customer service charter is a term used for a document which details landlord's service commitments. It outlines promises made and the service every customer can expect from their landlord. Setting service standards is a process which needs careful thought. To create a customer service charter which is effective, involving residents in setting and developing service standards is crucial.

In 2008 Cottsway Housing had internal service standards for staff to work to but wanted to make sure these were what tenants wanted. They went through a detailed consultation process and with the help of 200 residents produced a service standards booklet, "Your Standards Our Commitments."

2 WHAT HAPPENED?

Cottsway Housing had already carried out a census to identify which of their residents may be interested in getting involved in completing surveys/questionnaires or being part of a focus group.

The Tenants' Forum and staff consulted on what service standards the organisation was working to in each individual area of the business. They chose a random selection of interested tenants and invited them to review the service standards in a specific business area, together with any residents who were already involved in that particular area, for example the repairs group helped Cottsway review standards in repairs.



Residents were given several weeks to feed back on what they thought, they were asked to comment on whether they thought the service standards were right. Were the timescales and turnaround times too long? Was there anything they thought Cottsway Housing should change?

Consultation then took place between management at Cottsway Housing and the Tenants' Forum to discuss and agree if any of the standards should be changed as a result of the comments from residents. A working group of six forum members and a manager was formed with the task of putting the service standards booklet together.

'Your standards our commitments' covers the following key areas; customer care, being consulted, your community, your home, rent and money advice, moving home, new homes, leaseholders and shared owners, and living independently.

The booklet differentiates between 'service standards' and 'commitments'. Cottsway Housing monitor and report back on their service standard targets to the Tenants' Forum and Board of Management. They always aim to achieve their 'commitments' but do not measure them. The working group decided on sixteen standards which could realistically be monitored and become service standards, for example in the customer care section of the booklet:-

"If you write to or e-mail us we will respond to you within five working days" is a service standard. "We will write to you in plain language, clearly and informatively" is a commitment.



The working group also decided what were high, medium and low level commitments, how and whether they should be marked as such and which ones should go into the booklet. Several drafts of the booklet were made before it was finalised.

3 DEVELOPING THE WORK

Each manager is responsible for recording if the measurable service standards have been met, this information is then put together in a company Key Performance Indicator (KPI) report which goes to the Board, Staff and the Tenants Forum. A simple breakdown of the figures is put in the 'Home Page,' the newsletter which goes out to all tenants. By measuring service standards in this way Cottsway Housing are able to celebrate where improvements have been achieved in the service they give to their residents. They are also able to identify areas of weakness to work on to improve.



Cottsway Tenants' Forum

Cottsway Housing together with the Tenants' Forum are currently undertaking a review of the service standards booklet and intend to repeat this at regular intervals. This gives the Tenants' Forum the opportunity to discuss any performance issues with Cottsway Housing and to decide if the service standards remain relevant or if changes should be made based on the KPI reports.

4

KEY CHALLENGES AND THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Cottsway Housing and the working group deliberated over whether the service standards booklet should go out to all 4,000 residents or should be available on request. A decision was made from a value for money point of view to produce 2,000 booklets. All residents were made aware in the tenants' newsletter that the booklet was available on request, all new and transferring residents and all who were involved in completing the surveys and the end project received a copy. All staff also received a copy.

They are keen to make the booklet widely available. It can be downloaded from their website - http://www.cottsway.co.uk/page_view.asp?infoid=12 They are also considering making the booklet available on CD/DVD once the review of the booklet has been completed.

A key part of the Audit Commission's Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs) covering Resident Involvement is to look at access, customer care and user focus. The Audit Commission looks at how clear and comprehensive service standards are from a service user's perspective. When the Audit Commission last inspected Cottsway Housing in 2007 they were looking at the opportunities for tenant involvement in the shaping of services - were service standards and performance measurement consistent and could Cottsway Housing demonstrate if standards are being met?

Cottsway Housing have found that publishing the booklet has been a worthwhile exercise, residents are involved in setting the standards they work to and this helps to drive continuous improvement. It has also strengthened Cottsway's ability to demonstrate that services are meeting standards and tenants will now always know what to expect as is required by the Key Lines of Enquiry.

The Tenant Services Authority will be reviewing the existing Key Lines of Enquiry and will be ensuring they reflect the standards framework they are currently developing. Challenging service standards such as those set out in 'Your standards Our commitments' which are tailored to meet local need could help to inform the new TSA standards.

For more information on Cottsway Housing or if you have a good practice example to share please contact the TPAS information and research team on 0161 868 3500 or email info@tpas.org.uk

