

Report from Leeds Tenants Federation's first cross-tenure Mystery Shopping Project

1.0 Background

Leeds Tenants Federation has developed and trained a team of residents from across tenures and social landlords to carry out Mystery Shopping inspections of housing services.

The unique aspect of this Mystery Shopping team is that it gives residents from different landlords the opportunity to inspect each other's service. It aims to challenge the expectations and perceptions of tenants, to raise the horizon on service standards and to disseminate good practice among housing providers.

2.0 Mystery Shopping Programme July – August 2006

Connect Housing, Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing and Leeds East Homes agreed to take part in the first cross-tenure mystery shopping project examining customer service at point of contact and reception area standards. Each housing organisation taking part in the mystery shopping process undertook to consider the results of the process as part of its service improvement strategy. The housing organisations were given advance notice of the approximate time period in which the mystery shopping is to take place but did not have a detailed timetable.

3.0 Methodology

Mystery Shoppers were recruited from residents of Leeds East Homes, Yorkshire Housing and Connect. They visited the Leeds reception points of each organisation and contacted the main customer telephone number. In both cases they requested information on renting a property. Mystery Shoppers from Leeds East Homes inspected Connect Housing, those from Connect inspected Yorkshire Metropolitan while Mystery Shoppers from Yorkshire Housing inspected Leeds East Homes.

4.0 Executive Summary of Results

General Points

Staff were not wearing name badges at the reception areas of all three housing organisations (except Leeds City Council One Stop Centres). Knowing which member of staff they have spoken to is rated as a very important factor by tenants. This is an issue that all three organisations should act upon.

Connect Housing

Connect was regarded as providing an excellent service with an attractive reception area, friendly and helpful staff and an efficient phone service. The only negative point was that staff at the reception area were not wearing name badges.

Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing

The reception area of Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing was criticised for its size, access and facilities. Staff were not wearing name badges and did not give their name on the phone. The service was inspected twice to check these results and on the positive side, staff were found to be polite and helpful in most cases.

Leeds East Homes

Two neighbourhood housing offices and two Leeds City Council one stop centres used by Leeds East Homes were inspected and four telephone calls were made to the Leeds City Council contact centre used by Leeds East Homes. The facilities and service at the one stop centres and the service at the telephone contact centre was rated as excellent in all checks. There were criticisms of the facilities at the two area offices where the same standards were not met, although staff were polite and helpful.

5.0 Future Mystery Shopping Projects

Leeds Tenants Federation will now be seeking to carry out further Mystery Shopping projects and would be interested to explore with social landlords which areas of service they feel would benefit from quality checks.

6.0 Details of Mystery Shopping responses

Connect Housing

Reception Service

Leeds office visited on 27 July 2006 at 1.00pm

- The reception was staffed on arrival
- The Mystery Shopper was seen immediately
- The member of staff was not wearing a name badge
- Staff were polite
- Staff were helpful
- Comment "The receptionist helped me fill in the forms but either she was new or the forms were because she did not know them very well"
- Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆☆☆ 5 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "The reception area was very clean, tidy and fresh with new flowers"

Telephone Handling

Phone on 18 July 2006 at 11.55am

- The Mystery Shopper got through first time
- The phone was answered promptly within 5 rings
- The member of staff gave their name and the name of the organisation
- Staff were polite
- Staff were helpful
- Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆☆☆ 5 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "I asked him to repeat his name because I didn't quite catch what he said and I repeated what he had told me to make sure I understood it."

Yorkshire Metropolitan

Reception Service

Leeds Office visited on 19 July 2006 at 10.00am

- The reception was staffed on arrival
- The Mystery Shopper was seen within 2 minutes
- The member of staff was not wearing a name badge
- Staff were polite
- Staff were helpful
- Comment "Dealt with the enquiry straight away"
- Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆ 2 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "There were no leaflet racks, no signs of translations, no name badges, no name offered. Very small area to sit in when waiting, there was no automatic door opener so probably difficult access for people with disabilities but staff were polite and helpful."

Leeds Office visited again on 20 July 2006 – time unrecorded.

- The reception was staffed on arrival
- The Mystery Shopper was seen immediately
- The member of staff was not wearing a name badge
- Staff were polite
- Staff were helpful
- Comment "Advised if I was on the council list, it was the same list – they seem obsessed with the council"
- Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆ 3 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "No visible toilet in vicinity, no leaflets, cramped, doubt whether person in a wheelchair could get in"

Yorkshire Metropolitan

Telephone Handling

Phoned on 17 July 2006 at 9.10am

- The Mystery Shopper got through first time
- The phone rang for "two minutes" before being answered
- The member of staff gave their name and the name of the organisation
- Staff were polite
- Staff were "not helpful"
- Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆ 3 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "I asked about applying for a house and was told that the form was the same as the council's therefore I would not need one. I told them I was not registered so could they please send me one – not very helpful really"

Telephone Handling

Phoned again on 18 July 2006 at 12.15pm

- The Mystery Shopper got through first time
- The phone was answered promptly within 5 rings
- The member of staff did not gave their name and the name of the organisation
- Staff were polite
- Staff were helpful
- Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆☆ 4 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "Very good service, courteous and helpful, but I had to ask their name."

Leeds East Homes

Reception Service

Gipton Housing Office visited on 27 July 2006 at 14.05pm

- The reception was staffed on arrival
- The Mystery Shopper waited "10 minutes" to be seen while the receptionist deal with another enquiry
- The member of staff was not wearing a name badge
- Staff were polite
- Staff were helpful
- Comment** "She was very polite and efficient. Fully explained the application form and how long to wait; very informative"
- Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆ 3 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "Very dismal office, an awful place. Didn't look clean but staff doing very well to work in those circumstances. Lots of information on walls and racks. Maybe a little too much in your face"

South Seacroft One Stop Center visited on 8 August 2006 at 9.30am

- The reception was staffed on arrival
- The Mystery Shopper was seen immediately
- Comment "Ticket system in operation. See immediately, although this was a quiet time of day"
- The member of staff was wearing a name badge
- Staff were polite
- Staff were helpful
- Comment "Very helpful, explained how housing list works and checked my details on computer. Form given and suggested I take the weekly paper. Explained council priorities and that it can be a few weeks to get onto the register fully."

Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆☆☆ 5 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "Newly decorated and carpeted. Spotless. All leaflets neatly displayed. Separate kiddies corner with toys provided. Toilets.. Baby changing etc. All areas were inviting particularly the partitioned desks offering some privacy, rather than a counter. Well done Seacroft South!"

North Seacroft One Stop Center visited on 9 August 2006 at 12.45pm

The reception was staffed on arrival

The Mystery Shopper was seen immediately

Comment "Good dress sense, very polite and anxious to help"

The member of staff was wearing a name badge

Staff were polite

Staff were helpful

Comment "Very pleasant, very helpful and cross-referenced with another member of staff."

Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆☆☆ 5 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "Well laid out posters and information, books for children, good disabled access, well signposted, on the whole excellent location, shopping centre next door for parking, good bus route. Excellent spot"

Burmantofts Housing Office visited on 24 July 2006 at 11.00 pm

The reception was staffed on arrival

The Mystery Shopper was seen in less than one minute

The member of staff was not wearing a name badge

Staff were polite

Staff were helpful

Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆ 3 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "Very dark and dismal office"

Telephone Handling

Leeds East Homes number phoned on 20 July 2006 at 11.40am

- The Mystery Shopper got through first time
- The Mystery Shopper was kept on hold for less than 1 minute
- The phone was answered "directly"
- The member of staff gave their name and the name of the organisation
- Staff were polite
- Staff were helpful
- Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆☆☆ 5 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "I found the answers given to my question helpful and reassuring."

Telephone Handling

Leeds East Homes number phoned on 3 August 2006 at 3.30pm

- The Mystery Shopper got through first time
- The Mystery Shopper was kept on hold for less than 1 minute
- The phone was answered promptly
- The member of staff gave their name and the name of the housing organisation
- Staff were polite
- Staff were helpful
- Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆☆☆ 5 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "Very good and helpful. Asked if there was anything else she could help me with."

Telephone Handling

Leeds East Homes number phoned on 7 August 2006 at 8.30am

- The Mystery Shopper got through first time
- The Mystery Shopper was kept on hold for less than 1 minute
- The phone was answered promptly

Comment "Phone rang once then tripped onto the recorded welcome message. Thereafter my call was answered personally after 2 rings"

- The member of staff gave their name and the name of the housing organisation
- Staff were polite
- Staff were helpful
- Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆☆☆ 5 Stars (out of 5)

Comment "There was no 'Monday morning' about the person who answered my call. Well spoken, he told me exactly how to apply and how long, approx. to be put onto the list, how applications are processed etc. I enquired about housing associations to which he explained. Altogether a first class reply."

Telephone Handling

Leeds East Homes number phoned on 8 August 2006 at 10.15am

- The Mystery Shopper got through first time
- The Mystery Shopper was kept on hold for less than 5 minutes
- The phone was answered promptly
- The member of staff gave their name and the name of the organisation
- Staff were polite
- Staff were helpful
- Staff were able to deal with the enquiry

Rated or slated

☆☆☆☆☆ 5 Stars (out of 5)

Comment “The gentleman who answered the phone was very helpful and explained how the system works and gave me a web site name to look at. Very good manner and helpful.”

8. Response to the Findings from Housing Organisations

Leeds East Homes – Jill Wildman, Head of Housing Management

On a defensive note: Extremely unhappy concerning the phrase rated or '**slated**'. Staff felt as we work in a blameless culture maybe this word could be amended to 'areas of weakness' or areas for improvement'

Staff felt comparing One Stop shops to Area based Offices ie Gipton/Burmantofts was an unfair comparison given that One Stops were purpose built by the Council and had thousands of pounds spent on the buildings and enhancing staffing levels ie Seacroft South.

Staff were surprised by comment about Burmantofts being dark and dismal in view of the recent redecorations and new carpets and that tenants/staff had been included choosing the colour schemes. However as an action note we will be checking if the lighting is adequate.

Comments in relation to Gipton and too many posters on the wall - LEH's was criticised on our first Best Value Inspection for not having enough information on the walls - therefore we actioned and following the second Best Value inspection this was noted as a positive improvement?

In respect of staff not wearing ID badges - surprised and disappointed - this issue has been raised with the relevant Managers about the importance of wearing visible ID badges.

On a positive note: Good comments about the staff and glad LEH took part.

For more information on this report contact:

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