



Complaints handling at Westcountry

Introduction

The Resident Auditor Team reviewed and assessed the impact of the improved complaints system at Westcountry Housing using the following methodology:

Desktop review

- Comparison of the structure, policy and procedure against Housing Corporation, Audit Commission requirements and sector best practice
- Analysis of the current data available on complaints over the last 12 months
- Checking the quality and effectiveness of case management and correspondence
- Assessing the quality and effectiveness of literature
- Assessing the effectiveness of current monitoring and performance to published standards

Interviews and surveys

- Interview with the Policy and Performance Manager
- A survey of 80 residents to find out what they understand about making complaints and their confidence in the system

Strengths

There is a published policy and procedure for Westcountry that include

- Definition of what is and what is not a complaint
- Who can make a complaint and the role of advocates and other organisations
- A staged approach to complaints
- Published timescales
- Information on how to work with vexatious complainants
- Spreadsheet monitoring instrument which is set up to be able to view complaints performance by team
- Sample sections for correspondence
- A case closure process
- Monitoring of disability and ethnicity of complainants

Quarterly review group is set up to monitor complaints handling and provide information to the Board

Briefing for staff on how the procedure is to be applied and how to post information on the spreadsheet when the new procedure was launched.

The complaints system had been published in the residents' newsletter. There is a leaflet for residents

Final Report

88% of residents in our survey (of 80) knew how to make a complaint and about half of these found out through the handbook or from staff either at signup or later

Basic performance on case type and numbers is collected

Some very good quality written responses notably from the Asset Management Team and Home Ownership Team

74% of the residents we spoke to were happy with the housing and repairs service in the last 12 months and therefore had no need to complain

Staff were on the whole polite when dealing with complainants in the first instance 13 out of the 20 complainants rated politeness as good or excellent

Individual staff members were mentioned as really helpful

Areas for improvement

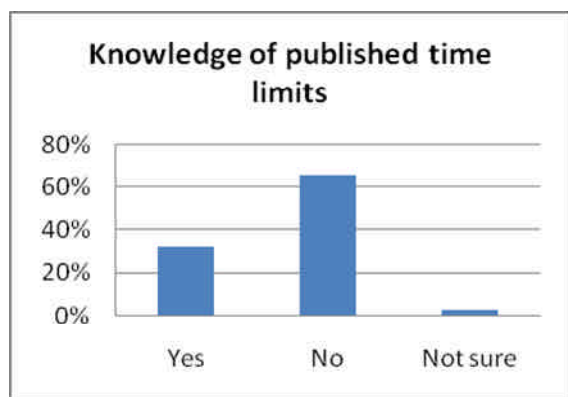
Documentation

- Although comprehensive the readers got lost in the text which was unclear and overly wordy in some areas.
- There is no reference in the procedure directing staff to approaches they can use to be responsive to residents who have a disability or for whom English is not their first language. Diversity was only mentioned in the Westcountry procedure in relation to the monitoring form.
- The procedure does not direct staff to the IT system to enable them to establish what format information should be sent in (customers' preferred form of communication). For instance if a person does not read then all correspondence should be followed up with a phone call. The procedure was not created with the profile in mind.
- Not all profiling information has been collected therefore cumbersome monitoring forms are still being used.

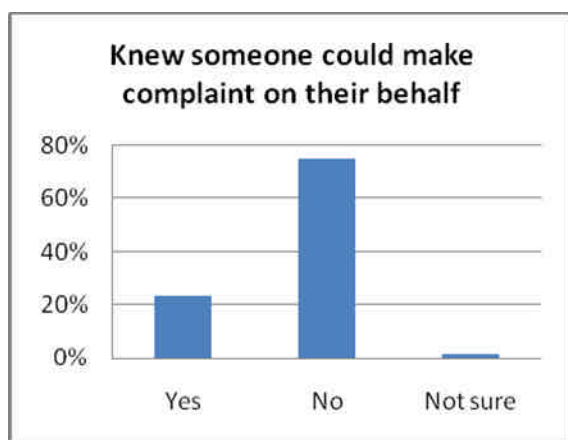
Access

- Although a large number of residents we spoke to on our survey knew how to complain they did not know what the services standards were in terms of how soon they should expect a response from Westcountry when they made a complaint
- A small minority of 2 residents unhappy with the service did not complain as they felt it was not worth the effort

- The team had mixed views about the leaflet as it was felt to be inappropriate in design and style although some of the text was good. The stages are not clearly laid out with time scales next to them and residents were not involved in the design of this key leaflet
- In response to a question about information in the newsletter Coast to Coast some residents commented that they do not read it and it should be made more eye catching and meet the needs of other groups such as shared owners as they feel they are ignored



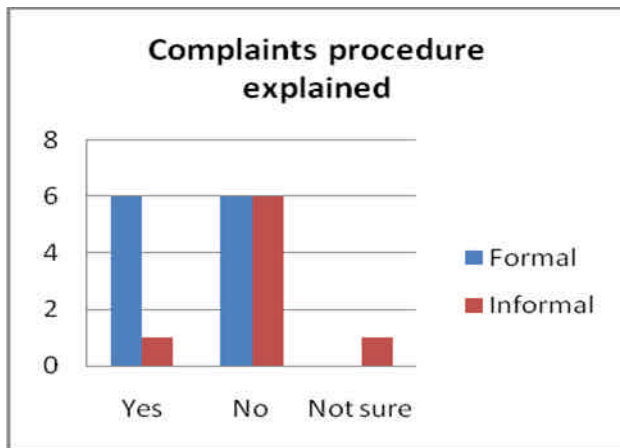
75% of residents did not know that they could use an advocate to support them through the complaints process and those we spoke were appreciative of the opportunity to have support should they need it.



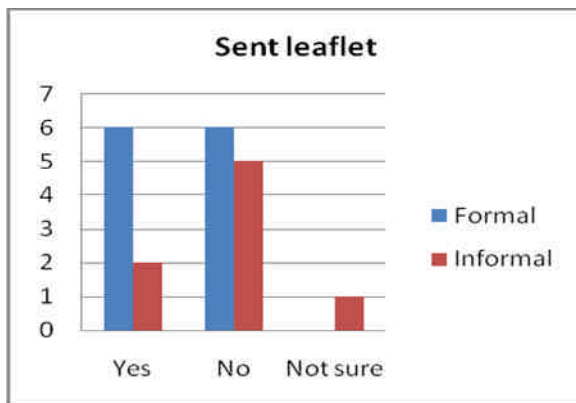
Case management and complaints handling

Of the total sample 20 residents 24% had made a complaint in the last 12 months and two people had been unhappy but not complained. 5% had complained more than once. The following outlines their experience of the most recent complaint they had made

Of the 20 complaints made, 12 were formal and 8 were deemed to be informal. Of this group 7 had the procedure explained and 13 did not and a number of those were formal complaints where you would expect it to be explained



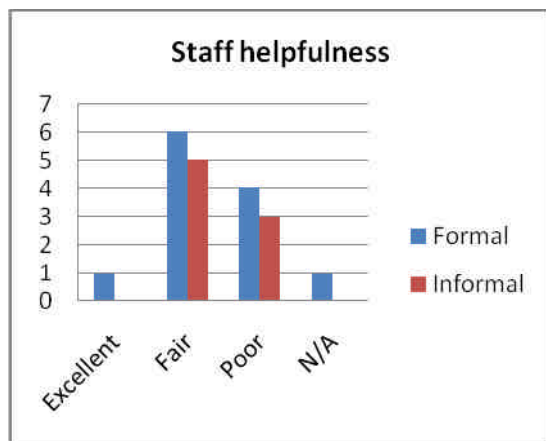
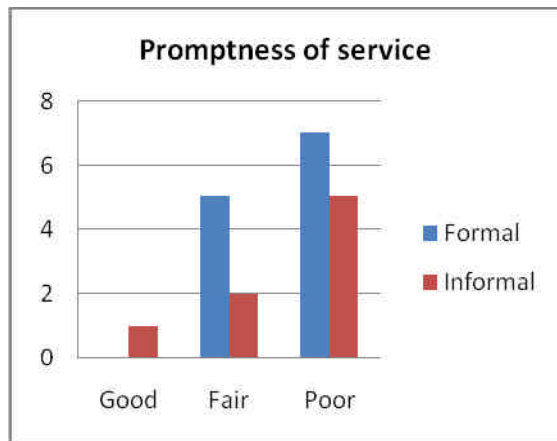
Asked whether the leaflet was sent, respondents had a mixed view



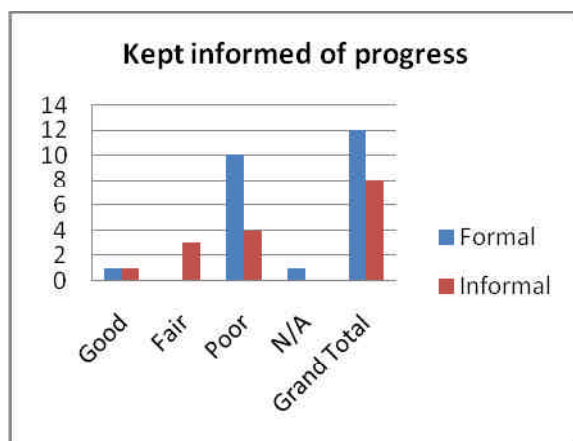
Asked whether they were written to about the complaint again a number of those who felt they had made a formal complaint did not receive any correspondence



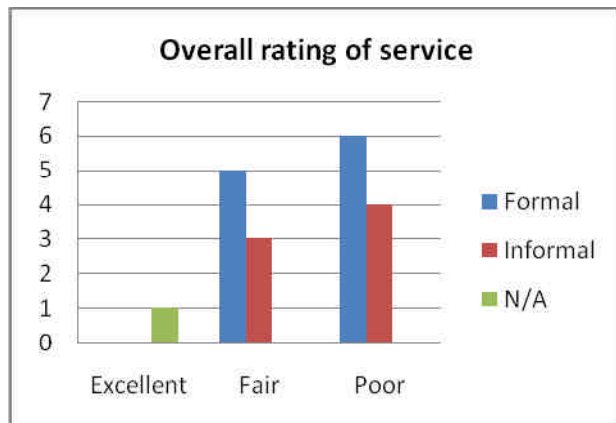
On the whole staff were seen as polite when talking to complainants 13 out of the 20 complaints. However promptness was rated as a considerable weakness as was the helpfulness of staff



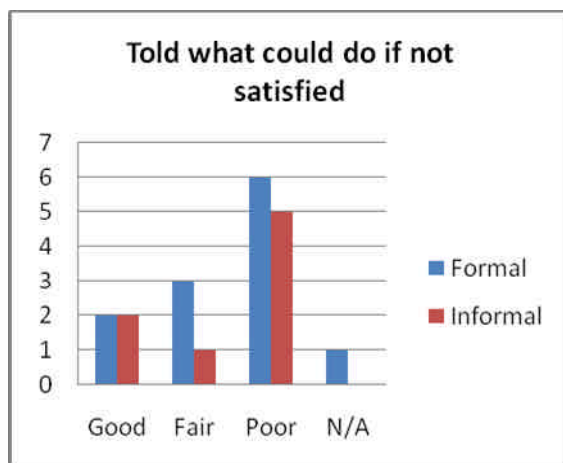
Asked to rate how well the staff kept them informed complainants rated the service as either fair or poor. There were a number of comments about lack of feedback and poor communication. Residents were also not sure whether they could trust what the staff were saying or felt staff were complacent and or unwilling to tell a resident that an issue cannot be resolved and why.



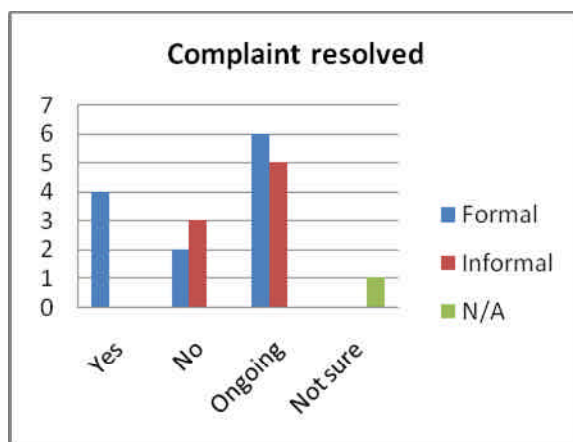
The overall rating of the service was either **fair or poor** out of the possible four options which is cause for concern. As Westcountry does not routinely assess the quality and customer satisfaction with complaints it is possible that the service could be quite poor and the organisation unaware of the impact of the revised procedure. Residents commented that they had to do too much chasing to get things sorted.



Complainants rated the question about whether they were told what they could do if they were still not happy as either poor or fair and although the number are fairly low it would explain why complainants are unaware that they can escalate the complaint themselves



Four of the total recent complaints were deemed as resolved however a high number were still ongoing or not resolved from the complainants' point of view



Case management was inconsistent in the following areas:

- Correspondence mixed with both poor and excellent responses both in terms of grammar and tone. Not all staff use the sample sections that are available which would improve the quality of their response
- Some correspondence did not outline what the resident could do if they were still not satisfied
- Poor response to published timescales especially after the first acknowledgment
- In some cases there was no further correspondence after the initial acknowledgement
- Very poor case closure – it was difficult to tell if case was closed by looking at the case and on the log
- Complaints information not being kept in a separate file but rather in the house files in one team
- No summary sheets for stage 2 and above
- Housing and Asset Management did not use the spreadsheet effectively
- The numbers of complaints for this size organisation is very low
- The complaint log is not kept up to date therefore it is impossible to monitor performance to published timescales and what cases are ongoing at what level and which ones are closed. Some departments and individuals were better at logging their activities on the system than other however in the main this was the weakest area of the system.

Performance monitoring

- Managers are not monitoring complaints using the spreadsheet and if they did they would see that it has not been updated and therefore performance to published timescales cannot be monitored. There are no targets set for staff on the percentage to be responded to within published timescales.
- There is no 'satisfaction with process' information collected to enable the organisation to monitor the effectiveness of the system from the resident's point of view.
- Performance to published timescales monitoring is not routinely undertaken even though there has been a promise to do this in the resident's newsletters. Using the actual cases performance to timescales is mixed.
- There is no evidence of the Board monitoring complaints directly or through a Board subcommittee. There is no evidence of discussions about complaints performance at the Board over the last 18 months and the monitoring group has not sent a report to Board nor met in the last 10 months
- There is no information on learning from complaints, satisfaction or performance to service standards published to residents. It is not clear how complaints formally link with continuous improvement activities such as reviews etc.
- The review group that looks at complaints quarterly (however they have not met for some time) is not monitoring the published standards and does appear not effective in establishing robust controls to address significant underperformance. There has been no resident involvement in the review group to date, although a resident board member has now been recruited to sit on the group, however the recent review undertaken involved sending the basic new procedure and timescales information to Centipede for comments

- Asked whether they had seen information in the newsletter on complaints performance 41% has seen information and 59% had not or were not sure.

Risks associated with the current system

If a case was to be escalated to the Ombudsman it would be likely that maladministration would be found as the organisation is not complying with the basics of its own policies and procedures. The Board need comfort that effective controls are in place to ensure they have the right information and monitoring systems to judge the health of the organisation. In terms of Audit Commission KLOE standards the complaints element of the service would only score 0-1 stars with uncertain prospects.

There are a range of judgment two elements pertaining to track record, managing performance and capacity of staff that need attention.

Recommendations

Documentation

- Simplify the procedure to make it accessible to staff by tabulating some of the information and ensuring it is in plain English
- Ensure the procedure spells out to staff how to respond to the full range of residents that live in the associations properties. Use the profiling information to assess what needs to be added.
- In the procedure direct staff to the IT system to check what the complainants preferred method of communication is and what format they want information to be sent to them in as well as any vulnerabilities they may have that will affect the way the complaint can be dealt with
- Review the leaflet with residents to ensure that it outlines the stages and is not patronising

Case management

- Establish a protocol with managers in different departments to ensure that staff fill in the complaints log with the relevant information so performance reports can be generated and ensure that responses are timely and are of good quality
- Establish training and support for those staff who consistently fail to meet timescales, fill in the log and send poor quality responses. Ensure that training is provided for new starters.
- Make sure that cases are formally closed and that resident's satisfaction is monitored in a structured way using a satisfaction with process survey which can be filled on by the complainant or as a telephone survey. It should cover questions like:
 - Were our staff polite and helpful when you contacted us about your complaint?
 - Were you made aware of your right to complain, and our policy, either in writing or verbally?
 - Did we keep you informed and reply to you within the time limits set?
 - Are you receiving a good service now?
 - A question relating to monitoring ethnicity, gender, faith, age and disability which can be dispensed with once profiling information is on the system (ensure an explanation is given to complainants of why the information is being requested)
 - How satisfied were you overall with the way your complaint was handled? (using a satisfaction scale)

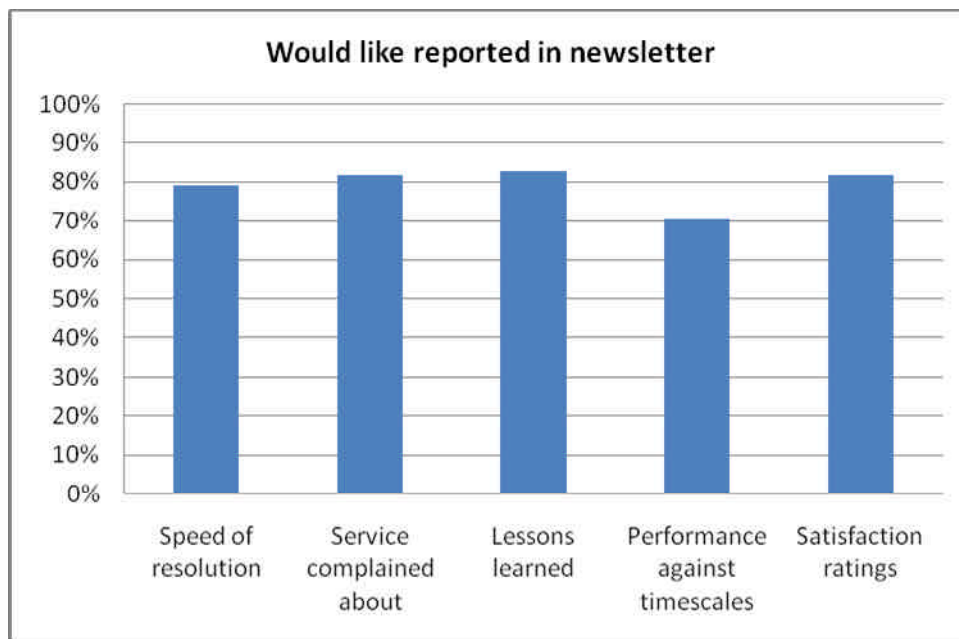
Performance monitoring

- Managers to be encouraged to monitor the performance of staff responding to complaints in their own departments.
- Develop a suite of indicators that residents and the Board can understand and which will show how well the organisation is responding to complaints. For instance:
 - Performance in meeting response time targets.
 - Percentage of complaints resolved on the spot (within one week)
 - The average time a complaint takes to resolve (a target can be set)
 - Aggregated information on complaints by key service areas.
 - Customer satisfaction with complaint handling separating out different groups to establish BMRE satisfaction
 - Customer compliments and suggestions.
 - Evidence of continuous improvement where appropriate.
 - Stage 3, compensation and Ombudsman cases
 - Lessons learnt as a result of complaints
- The Office of Fair Trading 1999 states that complaints resolved in less than 3 weeks result in a net balance of satisfied customers, but dissatisfaction grows steadily when more than 3 weeks pass before resolution. Good practice systems aim to take no more than 8 weeks to resolve a complaint (Housing Corporation, 2002). You may want to consider monitoring the average or mean time it takes to resolve complaints.
- Where complaints have led to changes in policy it is beneficial to keep a record for further evidence of continuous improvement. Good Practice from the British Standards Institute indicates that if procedures are changed as a result of the complaint, then the complainant should be informed and thanked for helping the organisation improve
- Develop a regular report for Board so it can be assured that effective controls are in place to manage residents' complaints and mitigate the risk of a negative Ombudsman determination or regulatory failure. This can come from the Complaints Review group however this group needs to monitor the right elements of the service and be able to hold staff and managers to account for poor performance. It should also meet on a regular basis
- Develop system of reporting performance to residents and involving them in monitoring performance possibly through a Scrutiny group of some sort
- Consider developing a simple approach to monitoring low level service failure, call backs or chase up calls so that the constant small failings are monitored strategically
- Periodically mystery shop the quality of written responses and scenario mystery shop staff from time to time to ensure they are giving customers the right information.

Improving access to and awareness of the complaints system

- Encourage staff to explain the system of stages to residents when they complain and make sure that any correspondence outlines what a complainant can do next if they are still unhappy and how soon they should expect a reply for interim correspondence

- Consider including information on the various stages in the leaflet and actively involve residents in the revisions and design
- Publicising learning from complaints and performance highlights complaints as a vehicle for getting things improved. The following represents what the residents we spoke to would like to see published in the newsletter



Suggestions the residents we surveyed made for improving the service

Residents felt that once a complaint has been made contact is minimal. It is important that the complaint is acknowledged then actions are recorded from the start and made available on the system at the point of contact so any member of staff could update the resident and that: Complaints and compliment reports should be regularly available; other comments include:

- Information on how to complain should be easily accessible
- If rents are overdue there is very quick contact – the same cannot be said if the resident contacts the organisation with an issue
- Better and more regular monitoring of contractors standard of work by Westcountry themselves
- Complaints need to be dealt with promptly

Further reading

- The Housing Corporation Good Practice Guide, 'Are You Being Served' See: www.housingcorporlibrary.org.uk

Final Report

- Good Practice Briefing Issue 19 (2000) Quality and Customer Focus: Inspection Uncovered - Customer Services. HQN and Housing Corporation (2003).
- Housing Corporation Good Practice Note 4 and 8 outlining the requirements (managers and Boards) to monitor the satisfaction of residents from BME backgrounds across a range of services including complaints