

Auditors working with Westward

Report on plain English check on Income Services standard letters

Background Information

The Resident Auditor team was requested to undertake a plain English check on all Income Services standard letter by Team Leader, Paul Hansford.

The team undertook training to enable them to identify common errors and to make recommendations for improvements. The auditors then read through each letter, discussed any areas of concern and agreed recommendations for change.

The auditors accept that due to the legal nature of some of the work of the Income Services team the content of some of the letters cannot be altered. They also understood that other methods of communication were used by the team in the time between each standard letter being sent which would have an effect of how letters were received by residents.

Strengths

- Overall however the team were pleased to report that the general tone of all the letters was appropriate and professional.
- Letters were short and generally clear in the information being given.
- Letters referred to the tenant personally rather than to the tenancy.
- Sentences were generally written in the active tense so letters read easily and smoothly. For example; *'I note'* rather than *'It was noted'*
- There was appropriate use of the passive tense when necessary. For example; *'the account has unfortunately still not been cleared'* rather than the more accusatory sounding *'you have still not cleared you account'*.

Areas for Improvement

Use of the word 'advise'

'I am writing to advise..' was a common introduction to letters and phrases such as 'I have been advised' and 'I would advice you' were also found in the body of letters.

Consider using 'tell you' in the first instance and 'been told' or 'would suggest' in the second.

Using bold inappropriately

In a few letters we found words or phrases in bold text to make a point. This is unfriendly, rude and not customer-focussed. If staff need to make a clear point or statement then bullet points or highlighting the text in another way would be better.

Overly long sentences

Auditors identified that there was a tendency to phrase sentences in a more complex way than necessary.

For example, 'The mortgage lender will be contacting you in due course' rather than 'The mortgage lender will contact you soon'. It was felt that this gave the letters a tone of being generated by a computer rather than written by a person and therefore made the Association seem remote and less approachable.

A selection of further examples can be found in the table below:

Example	Suggested replacement
I write further to previous correspondence regarding...	I refer to earlier letters about....
I would therefore ask you to contact me immediately to give your proposals to pay.	Please contact me immediately to discuss payment.
I would ask you to contact me upon receipt of this letter to discuss matters further.	Please contact me immediately to discuss this.
I would advise you that at this time there is a sum of £... due on your account	To let you know that you owe £...
In order that we may finalise the account, I should be pleased if you would arrange to forward payment immediately	So we can end the account please pay now.

Wrapping up difficult information

When letters were giving information which may be difficult or unpleasant it was found that letters tried to wrap the information in too many words. It was felt that it was better to give the information in a clear, concise way which was far easier to residents to understand quickly and easily.

For example,

'I write in connection with your rent account which is currently £.... in arrears as at today's date' could simply be, *'Your account is currently £... in arrears,*

'I can confirm that we have now been informed of the date of the Court Hearing relating to your rent arrears. It is on...' could be, *'We have been informed that a hearing relating to your rent arrears will be held on...'*

Recommendations

Overall the Resident Auditor Team found that the strengths in the Income Services standard letters out weighed the weaknesses. However the weaknesses that were identified occurred throughout all of the letters.

Each letter has been individually marked and returned to the Income Services team for consideration for amendment.

A list of the commonest errors of this kind found in business letters and suggested replacement words can be found in Appendix One. It is recommended that these be taken into consideration when any further standard letters are developed.