

Development feedback to residents and staff

Introduction

The Resident Auditor Team were asked to review the process of obtaining feedback from residents moving into new build properties and to make recommendations for improvements.

They were also asked to make recommendations and develop a draft survey to enable the Investment and Procurement Department to obtain feedback from their internal customer.

Desktop review

The Resident Auditor team looked at the resident survey currently used by the Investment and Procurement Department and were given the proposed agenda for the new feedback meetings.

Interviews and surveys

The Auditor team spoke to six members of staff who receive a service from the Investment and Procurement Department from a variety of teams about the quality of the service they receive and how they felt the service could be improved.

We also contacted residents who have moved into new build properties approximately six months ago and who had recently completed the resident survey currently in use. We asked them whether it covered areas that were important to them and what they would have liked the opportunity to feedback. We also asked about the quality of the service they had received so far and whether they were prepared to be more involved in improving the service.

Strengths

There is much anecdotal evidence of staff from the Investment and Procurement Department and the Housing Department working well together. Housing staff have a good understanding of the limitations and difficulties faced by their colleagues.

Staff felt that on the whole, when dealing with new properties where Westward staff have been involved throughout construction the handover process works smoothly.

Currently the Investment and Procurement department send out a survey to residents after six months to gain feedback about the residents views of the property. Residents we spoke to appreciated being sent this survey and felt that on the whole it covered the areas they wished to feedback on.

The Investment and Procurement Department have an awareness of the areas needing improvement and have set up a new group, the Development Appraisal Group to address these.

Areas for Improvement

There seems to be considerable difficulty when handing over properties bought 'off the shelf' usually caused by external issues over which Westward staff have little or no control. Housing staff demonstrated a good understanding of the fact that their colleagues cannot control these factors but expressed considerable concerns about the lack of communication of these delays by Investment and Procurement staff meaning that they cannot plan their own work and provide an excellent service to prospective residents.

There is no set procedure for staff to follow in the lead up to and during the handover process. This at times leads to staff not having confidence that they will have information within an appropriate timescale to enable them to do their job effectively.

Occasionally rent levels for a property change from what Income Services staff are initially told, we were told that on one occasion this was passed on to the tenant causing the Association to look unprofessional. This seems to be caused by the need for additional unforeseen services charges which could well have been avoided by involvement of the Housing Management department at the planning stage.

Currently there is no formal feedback from the internal customer to the Investment and Procurement Department and this combined with anecdotal instances of failures in communication appears to have led to a degree of a sense of 'them and us' within the organisation.

The process of obtaining resident feedback is not tenant focused and there is no evidence of resident involvement improving services. 100% of the residents we spoke to would have liked the opportunity to feedback their views on the level of customer service offered to them by the Investment and Procurement Department.

Satisfaction information currently gathered in the resident's survey is not shared with the departments concerned to inform continuous improvement.

Currently no written information regarding the role of the Investment and Procurement Department and how to report a defect is given to residents at the start of their tenancies. The residents we spoke to rated the service they had received as fair to poor.

Although within the staff the skills set is in place from a wide variety of departments to enable early identification of possible cost savings and ways that potential problems can be eradicated by design, these skills are rarely utilized and when they are used this is only on an informal and ad hoc basis.

Risks associated with the current system

Evidence of how resident involvement has improved services will be increasing required by the TSA and the HCA in order for Westward Housing group to be considered a preferred developer.

Staff knowledge and expertise in highlighting potential problems is not currently utilised often leading to greater expenditure at a later date therefore not demonstrating good value for money.

Residents need to be assured that their concerns are taken into consideration for Westcountry Housing and Tarka Housing to both become a landlord of choice.

Recommendations

There needs to be much closer working together of staff from the Investment and Procurement department and Housing department at as early a stage as possible in the planning of new build schemes. This will allow for the experience and skills of Housing staff to input into the planning stage and advise on how consideration of housing management issues can minimise potential service charges and avoid potential areas which may impact on the level of anti-social behaviour. This will create greater value for money as the skills of staff within the organisation are utilised to reduce the necessity for spending later in the life of the scheme and lead to a higher satisfaction level in the resident population.

A clear and written procedure with ideal timescales for handover of properties (both where Westward staff have been involved throughout construction and properties that are bought once completed) would enable staff in Westcountry and Tarka to effectively plan and manage their workload to provide an excellent service to prospective and new tenants. Staff in the Investment and Procurement department should be confident that their colleagues will be understanding of when timescales cannot be kept to so long as there is sufficient communication of delays.

Consideration should be given to setting up a central database of all ongoing developments and purchases with projected timescales for handover. Investment and Procurement staff responsible for each development or purchase should ensure that changes and delays are inputted onto this database and staff from Westcountry and Tarka should have 'read only' access to this database.

It is important that rents and services charges are set at an early a stage as possible to enable the Income Services team to provide an excellent service. Early involvement in planning from Housing staff would help address this and a proposed date for final agreement of the rent should be included on the database.

A spreadsheet listing average costs for common service charge items such as replacement door entry systems etc would enable rents to be calculated more quickly and efficiently.

Departments should more efficiently work together. Housing staff regularly visit new residents and should probationary tenancies be introduced these visits will become even more structured. Consideration should be given to offering residents the opportunity to complete Investment and Procurement satisfaction surveys face to face with their Housing officer rather than relying on a postal survey as this would provide more detailed feedback. Alternatively staff should consider using active residents to complete the survey with tenants.

Staff from other departments should have the opportunity to feedback how the process has worked after handover of each new development. Appendix 1 is a suggested template for a brief survey that could be sent to staff.

Residents should be provided with written information at the point of sign up about the difference between a defect and a repair, how they should report a defect, the role of the Investment and Procurement Department in the first six months and what is covered by the builders guarantee.

The resident's survey should be reviewed to include all the areas that residents wished to have the opportunity to feedback on. Appendix 2 is a suggested template that could be adopted. Satisfaction statistics gathered from these surveys should be shared with the relevant department to inform and shape continuous improvement.

Surveys should be produced through the Communications Manager to ensure that they meet Westward's Accessibility Policy and not produced within the department.

We discussed the proposed feedback meeting with the residents we spoke to. The majority of residents indicated they would like the opportunity to attend a meeting with Investment and Procurement staff six months after moving in. We therefore recommend that a residents meeting be held on site prior to feedback meeting to enable ALL residents to agree what they want to be taken to the main meeting and who will represent them.

A minimum of two residents should be invited to attend the main meeting to enable them to support each other. To ensure that the residents contribute as fully as possible to the meeting the Development Manager should meet with them before the meeting to explain how it will work.

The Development Appraisal Group should consider implementation of these recommendations to assist with the growth and development of the group. It is important that there are residents on this group with recent experience of moving into a new development.