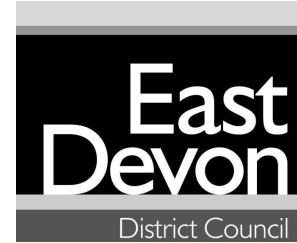


Agenda Item: 11

Joint meeting of the Housing Review Board & Tenant & Leaseholder Customer Panel

21 September 2009

JG/MH



Audit Commission Short Notice Inspections

Summary

This report gives a number of pointers to the areas of housing activity likely to come under scrutiny during an Audit Commission Short Notice Inspection. The content of this report has been taken from an Inside Housing article and has been presented because the content provides a useful insight into the important themes from the inspection carried out in the housing association sector.

Recommendation

To note the advice in the report.

a) Reasons for Recommendation

To raise awareness of the new inspection regime.

b) Alternative Options

Not to follow the advice.

c) Risk Considerations

Ignoring good practice and advice may lead to a poor inspection experience.

d) Policy and Budgetary Considerations

Not applicable to this report.

e) Date for Review of Decision

When further guidance is issued.

1 Introduction

1.1 This report presents information from a recent Inside Housing article on how to prepare for Audit Commission Short Notice Inspections. These are sometime referred to as Snap Inspections and we know they look at themes that cut across housing organisations such as access to services, diversity and value for money. The new inspection regime has been in place for housing associations for nine months only, but some useful lessons can be learnt from the early experiences.

1.2 The article provides advice under four headings:

- Know your customers;
- Sort your service standards out;
- The power of influence;
- And finally.

2. Know your customers

- 1.1 If we assume we know the basics about our customers, information such as their ethnicity, age and any disabilities. Reports from early short notice inspections suggest we probably need to know a bit more and, more importantly, we need to be doing something with the information.
- 1.2 A good customer profile will include where the customer goes for information, how they want to receive communication, their family's make-up and to what extent they want to be involved in making decisions about the services they receive from their landlord.
- 1.3 With this information, the value of a profile becomes much broader. Letters cost something like four times as much to send as text messages, and are slower. Knowing which customers prefer contact by text can save thousands of pounds and shows that we are listening to customers.

For starters:

- Assess how our customer profile helps us to plan;
 - Check what we have done and reported with the information we have collected.
- 1.4 We can either build the collection of data into our day-to-day work, or we can commission telephone surveys from a recognised provider. Whatever we chose, building a profile does not have to be expensive, view the number of times our colleagues speak to customers as opportunities to gather information.

2. Sort your Service Standards out

- 2.1 Time and again inspectors comment on landlords' lack of clear, usable and, crucially, used service standards. Standards needn't be complicated. A good set will be relevant to customers, up-to-date and deliverable, having unachievable standards just piles on the pressure when we fail to deliver what residents were promised
- 2.2 In most cases, the standards need to answer just four questions:
 - What is going to happen?
 - When is it going to happen?
 - How is it going to happen?
 - How long will it take?
- 2.3 When drawing up our standards it is important to avoid 'get out of jail cards', words such as 'endeavouring' and 'subject to' in our standards do not really enter into the true spirit of customer involvement. Nobody will thank us for hiding behind impenetrable language. Our customers will be happy just because our back is covered.

3. The power of influence

- 3.1 Surprisingly, early snap inspections have found a lack of evidence about how customers really influence services.
- 3.2 The Tenant Services Authority has made its expectations clear; there must be more customer influence over services. Customers want to have their say, particularly on the services that matter most to them.
- 3.3 We already know a lot about what your customers want from surveys, walkabouts or focus groups. The key questions are:

- How do we use that data to scope and change services?
- How do we share the information and use it to further engage people.

4. And finally

- 4.1 The short notice inspections reports and TSA findings are clear and comprehensive. Know your customers, make it clear what you are doing for them and let them have a real say in what you do. By keeping customers engaged and informed you can make a big difference to their lives.
- 4.2 This is good advice for the operation of the Service and in any preparations for a future inspection. We learnt a considerable amount from the last inspection experience and have used the process to make service improvements. We should ensure a state of readiness for a further inspection and ensure that we are following the learning from the new inspection regime whilst continuing to self-assess against Key Lines of Enquiry and good practice in the sector.

Legal Implications

There are no legal implications requiring comment.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications.

Consultation on Reports to the Executive

None.

Background Papers

- Inside Housing article 24 July 2009.
- Audit Commission consultation on Short Notice Inspections for local authorities.
- Housing Customer Charter.

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