



**Muirhouse Housing Association
Tenant Improvement Group
Scrutiny Report**

Customer Service Standards

May 2018



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Acknowledgements

“The members of the Tenant Improvement Group would like to thank Muirhouse Housing Association Staff who assisted them throughout the Scrutiny Project, through the provision of support, information and for organising and taking part in research activities and meetings”

1.0. Introduction

1.1 Tenant Scrutiny in Context

Tenant scrutiny is about tenants being actively involved in reviewing how housing services are being delivered, and even more importantly, how they can be improved. Since 2013, the concept and emphasis on tenant scrutiny and self-assessment has become embedded in the tenant participation and customer involvement in self - assessment frameworks of the social housing sector in Scotland and represents a very significant opportunity to develop partnership working between tenants and landlords to deliver excellent housing services.

The Scottish Social Housing Charter (SSHC) focuses on outcomes as a basis for assessing landlord performance and requires landlords to involve their customers (tenants, applicants, sharing owners and those who receive a factoring service) in the self-assessment of housing services.

1.2 Muirhouse Housing Association Customer Scrutiny

Muirhouse Housing Association (MHA) has an established relationship with the Tenant Improvement Group (TIG) which was established in 2016.

TIG forms the central point for scrutiny within MHA which empowers customers to:

- Oversee a range of scrutiny activities
- Integrate these activities with the wider self-assessment activities of MHA
- Make recommendations to challenge and improve the activities of senior officers and members of the governing body.

1.3. Independent Tenant Advice and Development Support

In June 2016, MHA commissioned the services of the Tenant Information Service (TIS) to provide Independent Tenant Advice (ITA) and Development Support to the staff and customers involved in the TIG. Lynda Johnstone, Development Director, TIS currently provides this independent tenant support.

TIS Mission Statement:

“The Tenants Information Service is the leading organisation in Scotland promoting and inspiring innovative tenant participation practice. We achieve this by providing independent advice, support and training for tenants and landlords”. Further information on TIS can be found at www.tis.org.uk

2.0. The Muirhouse Housing Association Tenant Improvement Group

2.1 Membership, Role and Remit of the Tenant Improvement Group

The Tenant Improvement Group (TIG) was formed in 2016 and undertook a pilot project to review the Letting Standard in 2017.

During this project, the TIG had a membership of seven tenants. Each TIG member was required to consider and agree to the Code of Conduct for remit and behaviour within the Project.

2.3. Agreeing a Topic for Scrutiny

TIG members heard presentations and received information on performance management and the Annual Return on the Charter. A review of the information provided, as well as consideration of customer experiences led the group to agree a scrutiny project to review **Muirhouse Housing Association Customer Service Standards**.

3.0. Tenant Improvement Group Customer Service Standards Scrutiny Project

3.1. Tenant Improvement Group Meetings

TIG members met from November 2017 to April 2018, a total of four times. Meetings were facilitated by Lynda Johnstone, Development Director, TIS and were also attended by Association staff, Ainan Groat, Housing Services Team Leader and Chris Purnell, Housing Officer

3.2. Workplan

The Customer Service Standards Scrutiny Project followed an agreed detailed work plan. TIG members undertook a robust process to understand Customer Service Standards and the impact on tenants and MHA.

TIG Members:

- **Completed a desk top audit** to understand MHA's:
 - Customer Service Standard and what tenants should expect
 - Complaints Policy and how MHA deals with complaints
 - Approach to effective communications linked to complaint handling
 - Recent logged complaints
 - Investors in People Accreditation
 - Approach to communicating customer service standards and performance
 - Customer Service Standards in comparison to other social landlords*
 - Complaints Policies in comparison to other social landlords*

(* Thenue Housing Association, Port of Leith Housing Association, Caledonia Housing Association)
- **Researched legislative and policy context:**
 - The Regulatory Standards of Governance and Financial Management
 - Considered what is written in the Scottish Social Housing Charter with regards to the Customer/ Landlord Relationship:
 - Equalities
 - Communication
 - Participation
- **Considered Tenants Experiences with respect to:**
 - The customer service they receive and feedback on quality and value for money
 - A small mystery shopping fact finding exercise

4.0. Scrutiny of the Customer Service Standards Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1. What the TIG Liked

- 4.1.1. TIG members have identified that this scrutiny review has helped them to gain a better understanding of the work of MHA in ensuring customer satisfaction and service standards.
- 4.1.2. The Customer Service Standards Policy is satisfactorily detailed and the aim of the policy is clear and TIG acknowledge the commitment of MHA as laid out in the policy. However, suggestions for change are listed in the recommendations section below.
- 4.1.3. MHA has a customer focused approach in all aspects of its work.
- 4.1.4. TIG members noted that generally MHA ensures good quality information and a highly responsive service is available to customers. Specifically, the TIG commended the staff on their customer care and attention to vulnerable and other tenants who were affected by the winter weather conditions. In addition, MHA was praised for support given to tenants whose properties were flooded with sewage.
- 4.1.5. Appointments are available to tenants who wish to see a specific member of staff and this is communicated to the tenant at the sign up and in MHA Newsletter.
- 4.1.6. As a small community based housing association, staff are able to provide quick responses to issues. However, TIG members also considered if this speedy response means that issues are not reported and recorded formally.
- 4.1.7. Ways of communicating with MHA include phone, letter, email and electronically (including text SMS and WhatsApp) in person at office or in person at the customer's home. These provide an acceptable and appropriate way of customer contact.
- 4.1.8. Customers have the option to contact their Housing Officer during working hours directly on their MHA mobile phone which allows for an immediate response if the Housing Officer is able to take the call.
- 4.1.9. MHA aim to provide a positive service through learning from customer feedback.

4.2. Findings and Recommendations

The TIG research raised a number of issues which this report highlights and suggests recommendations for change. These recommendations were agreed by TIG when all the review information was collected, considered and analysed.

Findings	TIG Recommendations
<p>The Customer Service Standard Policy</p> <p>The Policy was due for review in April 2018. The TIG identified areas of good practice and suggested improvements or amendments to be considered and taken into account as part of the review.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The findings of this scrutiny project form part of the review. Customers are consulted on the reviewed policy. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The review should also take account of current legislative and good practice requirements including: The Scottish Social Housing Charter; The Housing (Scotland) Act 2014; Equalities legislation; Disability legislation; Energy Efficiency Standard for Social Housing in Scotland; and the Scottish Housing Regulatory requirements. • The policy needs to be clear about how it links to other policies. • The policy should be revised to update on tenant and community engagement and include the role of tenant scrutiny. 2. A training programme for staff should be provided to update on the new Customer Service Standards when they are reviewed.
<p>MHA aims to ensure that customers know how to complain if they are not satisfied with the service. Tenants are able to find out this information by asking their Housing Officer and by leaflet.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. MHA review how tenants can access this information and ensure that the procedure is available on the website and explained to tenants at sign up.
<p>Staff and contractors are usually identifiable by uniform and should carry official identification when outside the office. Generally, tenants are familiar and recognise staff but sometimes need to ask for identification in the case of agents, contractors and suppliers.</p> <p>In addition, staff do not wear name badges when in the office.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Staff wear visible identification badges both in the office and when in the community. The badges should show the staff full name and position.

Findings	TIG Recommendations
The Customer Service Standard Policy	
<p>It was reported that MHA office currently closes at Christmas for two weeks. It has been some time since this arrangement has been reviewed.</p>	<p>5. MHA consult with tenants regarding the convenience and practicality of this arrangement. MHA consider the results of the consultation and amend operations if required.</p>
<p>MHA staff aim to visit tenants in their home at least once a year. TIG members discussed if this is necessary but agreed it allows the opportunity for relationships to be formed and strengthened and vulnerabilities identified.</p>	<p>6. The policy should state this is a courtesy visit and should be arranged if required in advance with the tenant. Arranged visits should be meaningful and proportionate.</p>
<p>TIG members were unable to undertake a full and robust mystery shopping exercise, however they were able to report on their experiences in contacting the office by phone and in person.</p> <p>TIG members reported that phones are answered quickly and staff members are polite, courteous and helpful.</p> <p>This is also reflected in office visits and TIG members expressed high satisfaction.</p>	<p>7. This good practice continues and positive feedback is provided to MHA staff.</p> <p>8. A standard greeting for answering the telephone is developed and used. Staff should be welcoming and give their name in the welcome.</p> <p>Eg "Good morning. Muirhouse Housing Association. Harry speaking. How may I help?"</p>
<p>On contacting MHA by phone it is not always possible for the customer to speak to the relevant person.</p>	<p>9. If another staff member is to phone the customer back, it is important that staff state who will phone and an approximate time the call back will occur.</p>
<p>Many Social Housing providers in Scotland have introduced social media communications as well as more traditional electronic communications.</p>	<p>10. MHA further develop the use of Facebook and Twitter as approaches to customer service and information.</p> <p>11. The Customer Service Standards Policy is reviewed to include MHA approach to dealing with all social media communications.</p> <p>12. The revised policy should include reference to digital inclusion.</p>
<p>The policy allows for the opportunity for staff to visit customers at home.</p>	<p>13. The policy should state that this will take place in office hours or at a time to suit the customer.</p> <p>14. TIG recommend that a calling card is left in situations when the tenant has been unable to respond to the visit.</p>

Findings	TIG Recommendations
The Customer Service Standard Policy	
The policy states that MHA sends customers the annual report however only Association members receive the report.	15. The policy is amended accordingly and copies of the annual report are also available on request.
The policy refers to the website being kept up to date as a source of keeping customers informed. TIG members highlighted that the website is not user friendly and is in need of a revamp.	16. As MHA redevelop the website, customers are consulted and involved to ensure that information is readily and clearly assessable.
The format of the policy is relevant for staff and MHA use and is less “user friendly” for tenants and customers.	17. MHA produce a summary of the revised policy which is inviting, illustrated and easy to read. Consideration is given to whether this summary is available as a hard copy or is downloadable from the website by the customer or on request. The summary should include information on how a customer can find out more and the availability of the information in other formats eg <i>Happy to Translate</i>
Complaints Policy	
The Policy is due for review in November 2018.	18. The finding of this scrutiny project form part of the review. Customers are consulted on the reviewed policy.
MHA follows the two stage approach to dealing with complaints in line with the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.	19. A quick guide/leaflet to the complaints procedure is devised to provide standardised information on the complaints procedure and provided to customers as sign up, on request and is available on the website.
Information about making a complaint is not currently on MHA website.	20. This information is included in the new website.
MHA do not currently provide customers with a form to submit a complaint as MHA currently offer a range of ways that a customer can make a complaint including face to face, over the phone, email etc.	21. A form is developed and customers are advised that it is one of the ways available to them to make a complaint.
Other Research Findings	
TIG considered the “Customer Charter” document from Port of Leith Housing Association and like the summary statements of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What MHA will do in terms of customer standards • What is expected of the customers 	22. MHA look to develop a Customer Charter relevant to the reviewed MHA Customer Service Standards Policy and communicate the Charter to tenants and other customers. The statements in the Charter should not be conditional on the customer.

Findings	TIG Recommendations
Other Research Findings	
TIG understand that the MHA website is being redeveloped.	The new website has information regarding staff whereby the customer can input his or her address and then the website presents the relevant housing officer details, photo and how they can be contacted.

5.0. Next Steps

TIG members considered this report in May 2018. The final agreed report will be submitted to Muirhouse Housing Association in June 2018. Thereafter a meeting will take place to allow:

- Staff and tenants who were involved in the scrutiny project to evaluate the process
- Muirhouse Housing Association to meet with TIG to discuss responses and agree specific actions to the recommendations
- TIG to present the report to the Muirhouse Housing Association Board
- TIG to agree the actions required to publicise the work of the Project and attract new members.

To demonstrate Muirhouse Housing Association’s commitment to scrutiny TIS recommend MHA work with tenants and customers to develop a Strategic Scrutiny Framework which clearly defines the opportunities and benefits of tenant led inspections as an approach to customer involvement in self-assessment and scrutiny.

6.0. Monitoring and Evaluation

It is essential that this scrutiny project is monitored and evaluated to find out if agreed objectives have been met, to recognise what works well and what may need to be adapted to meet the changing needs and priorities of MHA and its customers. This is about evaluating the effectiveness of the scrutiny project itself but also monitoring that the implementation of the agreed action plan has been carried out.

TIS recommend that an exercise to review the action plan takes place no later than October 2018.