

Glasgow Housing Association

Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) is a not-for-profit organisation committed to delivering better homes and better neighbourhoods that help create better lives. GHA was created in 2003 through transfer of the City of Glasgow Council housing stock and factoring responsibilities and now has 60,000 tenants and 26,000 factored homeowners. It employs over 2,000 staff and delivers services through its city-wide network of 57 local housing organisations, strategically located Local Shared Services centres and its Corporate Offices in Glasgow's city centre.

It is the GHA aim to be an exemplary landlord, engaging, listening and responding to its tenants and homeowners and playing a central role in the physical, social and economic regeneration of Glasgow. In September 2007, Communities Scotland (since replaced by the Scottish Housing Regulator) in its Inspection Report, said that GHA 'was meeting many of its promises...more tenants have become satisfied with GHA...and, more think it is a caring and listening landlord', but recognised that more needed to be done. In early 2008, to recognise the importance of transformational change over incremental change and of setting and achieving clear outcomes, GHA committed itself to achieving accreditation to the Customer Service Excellence (CSE) Standard as a means to ensure that its improvement agenda put customers at the heart of all service delivery and change decisions.

Chief Executive, Martin Armstrong, says "GHA had strengths in planning and developing services, but we needed to do more to transform our service delivery for customers. What we knew could help was a structure around which our preferred culture and values could be demonstrated through the personal experiences of our customers in every contact they made with our staff. We chose CSE as a mechanism to take this forward".

Empowering and engaging the customer

During 2008, a great deal of work was done to bring insight about customer groups and their needs and preferences into the centre of business planning. Business plans recognise the characteristics of different customer groups and how these need to be reflected in customer focused services. A new Customer Service Strategy was prepared with significant customer input. This was followed by an Empowerment and Engagement Strategy designed to ensure that wide ranging consultation methods are used to improve the flow of information and opinion both ways between GHA and its customers. A major initiative was the decision to carry out City-Wide Satisfaction Surveys on an annual basis and to revise the question sets to seek customer views on the service delivery issues that impact on customer satisfaction, along with the longstanding community and neighbourhood issues. A range of themed telephone call-back surveys was introduced to help customers to tell GHA about the various journeys they make with the service.

Maureen Dowden, Head of Customer Engagement at GHA stresses the importance of engaging all customers in the development of the strategies and policies. “We used Customer Review Teams to look at proposals through the eyes of customers, but we also widened the range and scope of engagement methods to try to ensure that all customer groups, however hard to reach, had a chance to exert influence”.

Structured continuous improvement

Along with the development of new plans and strategies came the realisation that a more structured approach to continuous improvement was required. A Quality Assurance Team was established with a remit to develop a GHA Improvement Model and roll this out as a self-assessment and continuous improvement tool across the organisation. Building on work in Scotland to develop the Public Sector Improvement Framework, the GHA Improvement Model seeks the views of all staff on the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation against the requirements of the CSE Standard, European Framework for Quality Management (EFQM) and Investors in People (IIP). From late in 2008 through to the spring of 2009 all services in GHA were supported by specially trained advisors through self-assessment, consensus workshops and improvement planning days leading to the production of Improvement Plans for every service.

Quality Assurance Manager, Liam Spence, says “The value of structure in changing culture should not be overlooked. By everyone working together through self-assessment leading to agreed improvement plans for every area of service we achieved a culture in which continuous improvement is encouraged and promoted throughout the organisation?”

CSE Champions

The QA Team took responsibility for the development of the GHA application for CSE accreditation. The CSE assessor was asked to carry out pre-assessments to help identify strengths and weaknesses in the existing approach. This proved very important in targeting the programme appropriately. Using the assessment feedback and the learning from self-assessment and detailed analysis of the existing policies and procedures, a number of GHA-Wide improvements were identified. To support the continuous improvement in the relationship between front-line staff and the corporate body, a team of CSE Champions was established. Locally selected representatives from each service were provided with training on the core principles and requirements of CSE and given responsibility for empowering change of culture and service delivery in their own areas. The Champions were also attendees at fortnightly meetings to review progress with the CSE application and provided numerous ideas for change to improve customer experiences. Many of these ideas found their way into the assessor’s evidence box. A further group of CSE Champions will be brought together during the run up to the first surveillance visit by the CSE assessor.

Carolann Burns, Customer Service Officer in one of the Local Housing Organisations says: "As a CSE Champion, it was important to share with colleagues that CSE was an opportunity to improve, not merely a gong we were after. For years we knew what was wrong but weren't allowed to fix things - now we have the opportunity, the tools, the freedom and the means to fix it for the customer".

Making real improvements

It was noted that handling unsolicited feedback in the way of complaints, comments and compliments was inconsistent. The journey made through the complaints process was good for some customers, but unacceptably slow and sometimes difficult for others. An Interim Complaints Procedure was introduced to improve the process and raise the profile of good complaints handling. At the same time a full review of process was launched, with involvement of all interested parties, leading to the introduction of the new Complaints Policy approved by the GHA Board in November 2008. By the time of the Customer Service Excellence assessor's visit in May 2009, the new process was well embedded throughout the network of offices. GHA were delighted when the clarity, simplicity and customer focus of the procedure led the assessor to give a compliance plus rating.

A linked area for development was the handling of customer contacts by telephone, particularly those relating to complaints and response repairs. It was decided to establish a Customer Service Centre (CSC) and with a great deal of effort this was delivered within six months and opened in September 2008. Although customers have free choice in how and where to inform GHA of any complaints, a high proportion of customer complaints are recorded in the CSC and the use of Customer Relationship Management software enables more effective tracking and escalation procedures with significant benefits for customers. The new approach was tested during the CSE assessment when the assessor identified a random sample of complainants and with agreement of customers, listened in and monitored complaints call backs.

Following a review of the repairs contracts, the CSC took on responsibility for all repairs calls and transferred by TUPE the repairs call staff from City Building, the City of Glasgow Council contractor. Although repairs are carried out by contractors' staff, all now wear GHA uniforms and drive GHA vehicles, recognising that it is GHA that makes the commitment to its customers.

The strategic reviews also caused GHA to recognise that the commitments made to customers for the timeliness and quality of services, especially in the customer service areas needed to be clearer and more visible. Again following consultation with the many interested parties, GHA published a new range of Customer Commitments in a suite of themed leaflets. The leaflet on response commitments has led to the introduction of a Customer Contact Card, handed to each customer on each visit by GHA staff and contractors.

Recognising the need to know whether customer experiences on the timeliness and quality of customer service are up to the standards delivered elsewhere, GHA is now leading on establishing a benchmark matrix for these issues in housing organisations across Scotland. It is hoped that this will eventually lead to a common set of standards to inform customers of performance comparisons.

Internal services were not overlooked. Their customers are often colleagues, but important nonetheless and many changes were introduced as a result of the activities of CSE Champions in internal services. The CSE assessor's report commented in particular on some of these changes and the progressive attitudes he found when meeting staff. The changes to staff recruitment, training and development, introduced by HR Services fully recognise the role of all staff in delivering for customers. The way Legal Services have reflected on and improved their approach to dealing with customers and meeting their needs was warmly complimented by the assessor.

Preparing for the assessment

As the time for assessment approached, GHA set up a number of Business Excellence Service Teams (BEST) in different areas of the business, including a Customer Service BEST Group. As the Head of Customer Service, Nancy Brown, says: "We have made great strides in developing a culture in which customers always come first, but we have not reached a destination. The journey will continue". The Customer Services BEST Group meets monthly to consider customer service issues and maintain the customer focus of GHA as a whole.

Despite all the preparation, when the full CSE Assessment commenced, everyone was understandably nervous. The assessor was thorough and rigorous throughout his time in the organisation. He met large numbers of staff, across the full range of services; customers reflecting the different delivery areas and partners from many linked organisations. Colleagues who assisted the process enjoyed watching and learning from the way the analysis was conducted.

The Quality Assurance Team Leader, Paddy McLaughlin, says "The assessor kept us up to date with his findings on a daily basis. This helped to ensure that we were able to bring forward further evidence and customers or staff to clarify some points. It meant that toward the end of an exhausting, but exhilarating assessment there were no real surprises. We had several areas for further improvement and are working to try to get full compliance at our first surveillance. We also had four areas of compliance plus, which pleased us greatly. We had thought long and hard about how to change things for our customers and it was good to see some of this was recognised. We are looking forward to our surveillance next year. We will be tested again, but that is what demonstrating excellence is about".