

Audit Commission

Southampton CC – June 2008



Improving service outcomes

Gas, Voids and Income Management

Southampton City Council

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19 June 2008

Key Headlines

Gas, Voids and Income Management

Our assessment[^] – against our KLoEs is:

- Gas servicing: Weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths
 - Void repairs*: Weaknesses outweigh strengths
 - Income Management: Strengths and Weaknesses are balanced
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- [^]these judgements include relevant aspects of the cross-cutting housing KLoEs
 - *we also looked at some aspects of allocations as well as repairs, but not in enough detail to assess this overall

Recommendations (1)

1. Ensure the Council undertakes its legal obligations* in relation to gas safety and servicing by:
 - immediately amending the target for the service, to achieve a safety check of all gas-serviced stock within 12 months; and
 - amending procedures and monitoring to ensure this is achieved.
2. Improve the focus on customers, by:
 - working with customers to develop service arrangements and access, including appointments, service standards, payment methods and customer information;
 - improving procedures in each of the services, to ensure that they focus on outcomes for customers and in particular address weaknesses identified in this report; and
 - reviewing service charges to explore the costs and benefits of de-pooling, with customers.

* As this relates to a legal obligation, it must be actioned.

Recommendations (2)

3. Improve value for money within the service, by:

- developing a robust timetable to market test void repair and gas servicing arrangements;
- ensuring comprehensive benchmarking of costs and performance with relevant authorities and other providers;
- assessing opportunities to increase dec. voucher value; and
- reviewing payment methods with customers.

4. Increase potential for maximising improvements, by:

- Developing a robust strategic framework around voids/CBL and financial inclusion, linked to other strategies (e.g. AMS, affordable warmth);
- addressing weaknesses in performance management;
- improving joint working and shared responsibility for improvement across teams;
- Ensuring improvement plans are SMART, outcome focused and are effectively monitored; and
- implementing the accepted recommendations of the HouseMark and scrutiny reviews with relevant priority, to improve outcomes.

Recommendations (3)

5. Improve capacity within the service, by:

- reviewing the structure of service teams, as part of improvement planning;
- removing real and artificial barriers to joint working through better shared aims, targets and objectives;
- assessing the balance between choice and performance / costs and capacity to enable the optimum balance to be achieved in the CBL / voids process;
- removing inefficiencies within service procedures, to remove duplication of effort and avoid historic bureaucracy.

6. The Council should also address all other weaknesses identified as part of this process.

7. We also recommend that the outcomes of this work are shared with customers and implementation of improvements is monitored by them and reported to the appropriate elected member forum regularly.

Positive aspects (all) and (gas)...

- committed staff who demonstrate a friendly and caring approach towards customers
- newsletters provide relevant, easy to read information
- diversity awareness among staff seen is generally good
- mostly a strong self-awareness of current service delivery and areas that need to improve
- apprenticeships scheme in place to help build capacity and ensure succession
- mobile ICT system project underway
- significant reduction in levels of gas servicing outstanding
- opti-time making more efficient use of operatives
- external quality checks of gas servicing
- IT system is recording difficult to access cases, to enable earlier start of process next time, automatically

Fundamentals and Customer Focus

Gas servicing:

- **The Council is not ensuring its arrangements meet its legal obligations (13 month target, relaxed approach, database)**
- **Performance is not strong, despite massive improvement (96.8% annual gas services achieved and 97.7% with legal gas safety certificates, several cases well overdue without checks - not assured that information is robust)**
- **Opportunities to avoid forced entry are not maximised (reactive procedure, no shared responsibility)**
- **Appointments are not suited to all customer needs (limited availability, not agreed with customers)**
- **Servicing arrangements are not comprehensive (no checks on customer appliances or servicing smoke / CO detectors)**
- **No procedures related to tenants sleeping in rooms with gas appliances**

Positive aspects... (voids)...

- **improving trend in completion of void repairs**
- **voids seen essentially meet the (basic) void standard**
- **consultant and scrutiny review has built knowledge of improvements needed in letting homes**
- **decoration is undertaken for vulnerable residents**
- **move-in visits are undertaken four weeks after tenancy starts**
- **ethos of ensuring customer choice**
- **some efficiencies achieved in materials procurement processes**
- **customers needing adaptations are matched to stock**

Fundamentals and Customer Focus

Voids:

- strategic framework is not sound (CBL outcomes)
- overall performance is not strong mainly because of sheltered housing voids (individual tenants recently consulted on sheltered housing review)
- no formal policy on DHS and voids
- void standard is outdated, basic and not provided to customers prior to letting
- viewing arrangements are not fully effective (accompanied only at repairs stage which happen rarely)
- inconsistency in approach (linked to silo working, historical practice, out of date relet standard)
- lack of assessment of balance between choice and performance / costs

Positive aspects... (income mgt)

- **very positive relationships with the welfare rights service – resulting in training, shadowing, effective referral arrangements... dedicated welfare rights web pages and self-help leaflets**
- **Texting in place and started ‘twilight’ recovery days**
- **quality checking of arrears cases undertaken**
- **pre-action protocol recognised within procedures and understood by staff**
- **links to support to sustain tenancies seen as important**
- **good relationship with court service**
- **KLoE review of income management has informed action plan**

Fundamentals and Customer Focus

Income Management:

- **strategic framework on financial inclusion under-developed (no strategy, not a business plan priority)**
- **service badged as and subsequent procedures / information for customers through ‘debt recovery’ / ‘enforcement’**
- **Performance in current arrears improved in the last year but remains below average compared to other councils; performance in former tenant arrears is extremely poor**
- **HB performance is not strong, relationship with housing under-developed (but improving) and service inconsistent**
- **service charges are still pooled within rents**

Driving improvements in all services

- Track record mixed (gas, void repairs vs. voids overall, arrears)
- Performance management has gaps (e.g. stages of access for gas, monitoring long term outstanding cases, breakdown of stages for voids, refusals, current and FTA relationship in arrears, FTA age-debt profile, movement between stages)
- Silo working is reducing scope for improvement (especially voids)
 - separation between teams, lack of analysis of relationship between each to each other and impact on customer
- Weaknesses in improvement plans – plans are not in common format, not SMART and not set within clear strategic framework
- Long time to move from analysis to action plan – voids and audit recommendations (arrears)
- Capacity limited, particularly in voids and gas repairs teams, plus FTAs and welfare benefits, to meet needs
- Partnership not maximised (HB, money advice services)
- Learning underdeveloped