



APPG on Customer Service: Social Housing

Tuesday 12th July 2022

This meeting was an in person meeting, held in Room W1, Westminster Hall, Houses of Parliament

In attendance:

- Philip Davies MP, Chair (Conservative, Shipley)
- Liz Twist MP, Vice Chair (Labour, Blaydon)
- Andrew Lewer MP, Vice Chair (Conservative, Northampton South)
- Margaret Ferrier MP, Vice Chair (Independent, Rutherglen and East Falkirk)
- Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle, Vice Chair (Green)
- Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb (Green)
- Jo Causon - CEO, Institute of Customer Service
- David Dagger – Marketing and Communications Director, Institute of Customer Service
- Rachel Crownshaw – Executive Director of Operations, GreenSquareAccord
- Trafford Wilson – Executive Director of Customer Service, The Guinness Partnership
- Martyn Blackman - Chief Investment Officer, Bromford
- Oliver Hazell – Account Director, Cavendish Advocacy
- Alexia D’Rosario – Account Executive, Cavendish Advocacy

Philip Davies opened the session by thanking all speakers and parliamentarians for their attendance, given the current political climate. He opened the APPG with the AGM section of the meeting, with voting confirming that Philip Davies MP was to be re-elected Chair of the Group, with Steven Bonnar MP, Liz Twist MP, Andrew Lewer MP, Margaret Ferrier MP, Martyn Day MP and Baroness Bennett elected as Vice-Chairs of the APPG.

Contributions from speakers and attendees

Rachel Crownshaw - Executive Director of Operations, GreenSquareAccord

- Ms Crownshaw began by highlighting that the underlying concern around customer distrust has only grown in recent years. She noted that the Grenfell disaster had encouraged further discontent between housing associations and their residents, with this being the main reason behind a lack of faith in social housing providers from their own customers.
- Outlined that there remains a gap between what customers need and what social housing providers are willing to supply. She said it was essential for leaders and senior staff to recognise that communication, alongside an engaged team, is the best route to build customer confidence.
- Noted that management should not focus on metrics for the sake of metrics, as this drives unintended behaviour towards a false goal of hitting targets, rather than guaranteeing that the customer is at the forefront of providers’ minds. And the need to drive a culture of service that is sustainable.
- Stated that investment in front line teams was vital and was keen to support the Institute with the wider professionalisation of service agenda. Recognising this starts in the boardroom.
- Noted that league tables are likely to appear, in light of the White Paper, even though they are not a requirement. Said the competition might increase providers’ ambitions to improve their services, but the fear will be that it is not for the correct reasoning. “Doing good not looking good” is the main aim here Rachel urged.

Trafford Wilson - Executive Director of Customer Service, The Guinness Partnership

- Mr Wilson explained that the main aim for the Guinness Partnership is to improve people’s lives through good quality homes and high standard customer service.
- Noted that even though Guinness is a national provider, they operate on a regional level to give regional managers autonomy over their specific customers. This culture ensures that tenants have a close point of contact, as opposed to having to contact national teams that they have no real connection with. Outlined that Guinness’s holistic approach to customers and their needs only strengthens this link further, providing a greater amount of trust within the Partnership.



- Outlined that Guinness had recently created a scrutiny panel made up of residents to provide another level of accountability for customers. Not only can residents go to the panel with any concerns but the panel monitors and examines the work the Partnership are doing.
- Said the Partnership has been a long-term supporter of the ICS and the UK Customer Satisfaction Index (UKCSI), as the Institute and the UKCSI provides information on how the Partnership can improve and better their customer service. Also noted that the only way to benchmark progress and success with customers was through the UKCSI.

Margaret Ferrier MP

- Noted that Guinness had a solid customer service plan and ethic, which more social housing providers should emulate.
- Mentioned a constituency case study she was currently dealing with, that displayed the growing levels of poor customer service provided in the private rented sector by a landlord and estate agent – with the estate agent acting as the manager of the tenancy and had been making it increasingly difficult for a resident to live within the property and have repairs fixed on time.
- She highlighted that those customers are not being made aware of their rights and what providers can do to protect them.
- Noted the overall decline, in her opinion, of customer service across the economy, particularly highlighting issues with airlines' customer service provision at present.

Rachel Crownshaw – Executive Director of Operations, GreenSquareAccord

- Suggested that the stigma around social housing was impacting the support residents had been receiving. She remarked that the social housing sector could do better, that vulnerable residents should be well serviced but that there was more the sector could be doing.

Philip Davies MP

- Observed that he didn't associate social housing and customer service as one entity. The sector isn't going far enough to protect tenants at the moment and that residents experiencing issues with their social housing provider was rife at the moment.

Joanna Causon – Chief Executive, Institute for Customer Service

- Said that she is not surprised by Philip's comment, and this is not a new perception.

Margaret Ferrier MP

- Local councils are not doing enough to rectify the issues that customers are facing with social housing providers, because of this, issues are escalated to the MP who has very little remit and time to find solutions.

Joanna Causon – Chief Executive, Institute for Customer Service

- It is evident from the UKCSI that the social housing sector is one of the most challenged nationwide, scoring 10 points lower than other sectors.
- Housing members of the Institute are at different stages of their customer service journey, and this should not be dismissed as shortcomings, but the sector has a lot to do overall in terms of improving its performance.
- Noted that there were 2.4 million social housing tenants and that the sector was a diverse one. She noted concern about the regulator and outlined the clear correlation between customer satisfaction and productivity, exemplified in the July UKCSI results. She wanted to see culture prioritised and benchmarking and measurement outside of sector not just within the sector.
- Noted accreditation of service was key for sustainable performance.
- Benchmarking outside of the sector would be vital for the continued progression of social housing providers in the context of their customer service provision.
- She was concerned that the sector was reinventing the wheel over measurement and that the Institute had the necessary measurements already in place.

Philip Davies MP



- Noted that customers had no choice in who their social housing provider was. He asked how that compared with other sectors.

Joanna Causon – Chief Executive, Institute for Customer Service

- Noted that a focus on culture was key to success for the sector and leadership was vital too. She noted that there were more problems than ever in terms of social and economic aspects of peoples' lives and that complaint handling needed to be improved to improve productivity.

Martin Blackman – Chief Investment Officer, Bromford

- Noted that a focus on culture at board level was vital and providers having a clear purpose was important as well. However, he outlined that the nature of large organisations such as national social housing providers caused issues in providing customers with the best service at times.

Joanna Causon – Chief Executive, Institute for Customer Service

- Was clear that the levels of complaints that staff were having to deal with would drive up staff leaving organisations. Noted the concern of some members that supply chain issues were delaying repairs in residents' homes. Outlined the higher level of mental health concerns from staff since the pandemic.

Andrew Lewer MP

- Asked whether any customers had complained about leadership of the providers present and the number of managers at an organisation and if there were any elements of the White Paper the providers present did not favour. He also questioned the lack of clarity that occurred in the sector between what is the responsibility of the regulator and of the ombudsman.

Rachel Crownshaw – Executive Director of Operations, GreenSquareAccord

- Noted that customers do not care about leadership or management if providers are dealing with issues at hand. All that customers are concerned with is the level of care that is being provided by the organisation and if the organisation can resolve issues swiftly.
- Outlined the importance of explaining to customers where changes are made why this was the case.
- Noted that between 50-60% of complaints were regarding repairs.

Trafford Wilson - Executive Director of Customer Service, The Guinness Partnership

- Supported Ms Crownshaw, noting that 55% of complaints at Guinness are regarding repairs and that this was the main concern for residents as opposed any form of leadership or management concerns. He continued by stating that management has only ever been called into question when complaints are not able to be dealt with.
- Outlined that the complaint handling element of the White Paper wasn't particularly favourable at present, as only people who have ever made a complaint can contribute and feed back on this part of the White Paper.

Joanna Causon – Chief Executive, Institute for Customer Service

- Outlined the importance of focussing on sorting out complaints and the speed of response, rather than residents not knowing what's happened with their complaint. Noted the vital need of many social housing residents to be able to talk to someone at their provider.
- Said there remains confusion from tenants rather than housing providers around the role and responsibility of the Housing Ombudsman and the Regulator. This should be remedied to make certain residents are aware of who they approach in future.

Trafford Wilson - Executive Director of Customer Service, The Guinness Partnership

- Noted the progress that Guinness had made on reducing complaint handling communications, brought down from 28 days to 5 days, alongside actioning emergency repairs for residents in the same timescales.
- Said that complaints were highly transactional and that this needed to progress to providers becoming more personal with residents around the communications with them about their complaints.



- Also noted that many social housing providers also contribute to their communities but that a 'community' isn't well understood physically or socially and can mean different things to different residents.

Rachel Crownshaw – Executive Director of Operations, GreenSquareAccord

- Noted the need to drive down the number of complaints from residents across the sector.

Andrew Lewer MP

- Reiterated his question about the blurred lines that some in the sector appeared to have between the regulator and the ombudsman.

Rachel Crownshaw – Executive Director of Operations, GreenSquareAccord

- Noted that the difference between the regulator and the ombudsman was well understood across the sector, but that the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill could blur these lines.

Joanna Causon – Chief Executive, Institute for Customer Service

- Noted that there was certainly a confusion between the regulator and the ombudsman from a customer perspective.
- Outlined and reiterated the need for providers to have a long term view of cultural change within their organisations to ensure sustained and valuable change in providers' customer service quality and provision.

Philip Davies MP

- Questioned the democracy of the Partnership's scrutiny panel, Philip doubted whether they were truly able to resolve issues of residents they cannot resonate with. He queried whether there was a chance they could potentially start to conform to the views of Guinness rather than those they have been elected to represent.

Trafford Wilson - Executive Director of Customer Service, The Guinness Partnership

- Noted that, as the panel is only two years old, they have not fallen victim to this. Outlined that elections to the panel were held annually, so there is always the potential for the group to change as time goes on.
- Said that there is sometimes difficulty in ensuring that the panel is demographically reflective of the group they are acting on the behalf of. Noted the majority of panellists are older with different time availability compared to new younger tenants/customers.

Martin Blackman – Chief Investment Officer, Bromford

- Noted the importance of having a panel of residents that was truly representative of all resident demographics.

Philip Davies MP

- Was concerned about the unintended consequences of measurement that may lead to 'gaming' of KPIs.
- Cited his time at Asda monitoring queue lengths, which led to some stores finding loopholes into being the most efficient.
- He highlighted how this might end up being the case for housing associations, who only seek to top the leader board through loopholes rather than bettering their services.
- He asked Mr Wilson how the Partnership praised successful customer service teams if they were regional.

Trafford Wilson - Executive Director of Customer Service, The Guinness Partnership

- Agreed that 'gaming' was a potential possibility, like everything in life, but that this was something that needs to be fixed at the source with the Regulator – who needed to eliminate loopholes.
- Noted that regional disparities are often expected, but they should not be normalised – regional groups should come together to discuss their strengths and weaknesses so that all customers can expect the same level and standard of customer service regardless of where they are located.



- Outlined this being implemented with the London team being 'buddied up' with the Sheffield Team, as the northern branches had been performing better in customer service terms. In this case, Guinness seek to encourage teams to better one another and their customer service practices.

Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle

- Asked about skills and providers' access to skills, specifically whether the organisations look to recruit staff from different socioeconomic backgrounds who are also residents of the organisations.

Trafford Wilson - Executive Director of Customer Service, The Guinness Partnership

- Responded that a number of staff are Guinness residents. Through their apprenticeship scheme more BAME groups can be accepted and become part of management teams – to increase representation throughout the organisation.

Rachel Crownshaw - Executive Director of Operations, GreenSquareAccord

- Outlined that, as the sector was struggling with availability of labour, particularly for repairs, it is no wonder that there are growing complaints on repairs. Services are aligned to serving the community and their specific needs and this cannot be done if there is no one available to carry out these services.
- Urged the need for providers to have locally based services for residents.

Philip Davies MP

- Will always get a complaint about a social housing provider from a constituent but has received far less complaints from private rented sector tenants. Questioned what the private rented sector were doing differently to mitigate complaints that the social housing sector is seeing daily?

Rachel Crownshaw - Executive Director of Operations, GreenSquareAccord

- Responded that the social housing sector is serving the most vulnerable people and their communities, where some of those people need even greater support. The social housing sector is not as good as it could be at delivering services and communication could be improved. Noted that there is generally more of a drive for customers to raise issues when they come up. Noted the better signposting in private rented sector to organisations such as Shelter and the Citizens' Advice Bureau.

Trafford Wilson - Executive Director of Customer Service, The Guinness Partnership

- Noted the lack of social housing in London which drove people towards the private rented sector as they had no other option for housing in the capital.

Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle

- Outlined that many residents still believed that the local council provided social housing so saw social housing providers as tantamount to government agencies or organisations still, hence the higher rate of complaints.

Joanna Causon – Chief Executive, Institute for Customer Service

- Noted that vulnerable residents needed to speak to their provider more often in most cases and that the need for a speedy, but considered and clear, response from their providers was key. Noted the importance of skills in the sector and the need to not measure the wrong things which could lead to 'gaming' of KPIs and providers becoming more interested in measurement than delivering valuable customer service.

Philip Davies MP brought the meeting to a close and thanked all in attendance for their views and contributions.

Ends at 10:32am