

Scrutiny Team Survey of Housing/Income Officer role and remit.

TENANT SATISFACTION SURVEY: HOUSING/INCOME OFFICERS.

**DERWENT LIVING
SCRUTINY TEAM
2011**

Derwent Living Housing Association

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1. Introduction

Derwent Living Scrutiny Team conducted this survey in respect of the Housing / Income Officer Role and remit. It had been noted during a shadowing exercise by a member of the team, that due to the patch sizes and number of customers served, the role of the Housing Officer had the potential to reduce the quality of service to the customer.

It was later suggested to the team, that although the role is not generic, there is a link between the role of the Housing Officers and the Income Officers. In view of this, the team agreed to look at the two roles in tandem.

The main aim of scrutiny is to measure the performance of the organisation against the corporate objectives, help plan for the future, and to develop and improve the current service, and customer satisfaction levels.

2. Method

Research has shown that text messaging provides a good and effective method of reaching a higher number of customers than is potentially contacted by door to door or postal surveys. After consultation with the Resident Involvement Manager at Derwent Living the Scrutiny Team was able to send a simple text message to tenants. This actually provided us with a much higher and faster return than we expected.

We further interviewed customers by asking a series of questions. This was conducted by face to face and telephone contact.

A request was also made to interview Housing / Income Officers and Senior Management Staff, individually. The parties agreed and were most co-operative with us.

All interviewees were assured at the outset that anonymity will be retained, and remain confidential for this report.

3. Text Survey

The Scrutiny Team decided after consultation with a Derwent Living Officer that a simple text message to customers would be good.

We received **521** text replies from customers within just a few hours of sending.

The Question was: - **Are you satisfied with your housing officer?**

Age	Yes	No	Unaware of housing officer	Neither
17-30	57%	21.5%	3%	18.5%
31-40	58.5%	18.5%	5%	18%
41-50	63.5%	22.5%	2.8%	11.2%
51-60	68%	21%	3%	8%
61-70	58.3%	23%	4.2%	14.5%
71-80	64.6%	25%	0%	10.4%
81-92	57.5%	20%	7.5%	15%
Average	61%	21.6%	3.7%	13.7%

4. Officer shadowing

Two Housing Officers were shadowed by members of the Scrutiny Team, one in normal hours and one out of hours. This was to give us an overview of their duties.

It became evident to both team members that the Housing Officer has tremendous difficulty in keeping to appointment times, due to customers wanting to speak to them without appointment, whilst they are on the various schemes. The workload they have and the travel involved does not help the matter. It was also noted that some customers are not aware that they too, have responsibilities, and are inclined to miss appointments at their own

homes. This puts a further burden on an already busy workload. Other customers suffer as a result of this attitude.

Emergencies such as house fires and meetings with various other agencies, such as the Police and Social Service, whilst being part of their duties, also means that there are times when keeping targets becomes extremely difficult.

One member of the Scrutiny Team was concerned that the Housing Officers may be very vulnerable at times. Their only protection being the mobile phone they carry. Whilst being shadowed one Officer was approached by a man who appeared initially to be quite threatening. The Officer handled the situation very well and very professionally on this occasion.

The findings from the Scrutiny Team showed that the officers do a massive amount of work, but no matter how well some of them prioritise they cannot fully accomplish their duties due to the tremendous workload, and travelling involved.

We found the officers to be a good and dedicated group, who are aware of the requirements of the post, although some are described by customers as having a less caring approach.

5. Questions and responses to/from 11 Officers

Q1. Do you feel you have job satisfaction?

Seven Officers responded with a definite YES, but then qualified this:-

Added Statements

- I would like more time to be able to do the job properly.
- It's good when I can help someone.
- I would like to have more time.
- It's an uphill battle.
- I could do a better job with more back up and support.
- We are there to help, but we have to follow procedure.
- We get to know people. It has its high spots.
- I have job satisfaction and enjoy the work.

Four Officers responded with **No, Mostly No, Yes, Yes and No or sometimes**. Again there was further qualification.

Added Statements

- We deal with some of the most vulnerable in society, but have no time to be effective.
- There are feel good times that makes the job worthwhile.
- If we had more time, there would be more satisfaction.
- Rent arrears are never a finished job and can be seen as an up hill battle.
- If the tenant does not lose their home, there is a feeling of achievement. Loss of a home leaves a sense of failure, either on the part of the customer or officer.
- We need to signpost people.
- Bailiffs are an area of concern for tenants, caused by Benefit backdates.

Q2. Is time management a problem, with regards to your admin work and covering your patch?

All eleven Officers agreed that time management is a concern.

Added Statements

- Everything has to be constantly updated. All letters have to be done manually. Because of the growth of the business, admin has been withdrawn. On the manual side of the job, everything has to be documented and recorded.
- Three Officers made specific comments that there are not enough hours in the working day.

All the Officers interviewed told us that they work on average more than the specified number of hours in their contract. The extra hours ranged from 5 to 13 per week, on a regular basis. Time off in lieu has to be taken within the current month. This can create even more difficulties.

Time management is a serious problem for the Housing Officers, and there is feeling that they are not taken seriously, or cared about.

We were made aware of the following issues.

Taking holidays is a major problem and can be a source of stress. Several officers now opt to take only one week at a time, as the backlog of work defeats the benefit a holiday should bring. There is no backup, should a member of staff go on sick leave.

Travelling time was an issue for several of the Officers. Sign ups and travelling time is a major factor in work management, and has to be very carefully planned. Up to half a working day can be taken up with travelling to and from a single sign up. Factoring in travel time makes it difficult to achieve goals which are already set.

Added Statements

- The job is target driven.
- We are trying to catch up, all the time.
- We tend to have to be re-active rather than pro-active.
- Priorities are determined by the pressures at any one time.
- The wider aspect has a knock on effect.
- We are constantly 'Fire Fighting'.
- Circumstances in Derby mean that there are rent arrears caused entirely by delays to customers Housing Benefit.
- Court attendance causes a lot of time problems.
- Income Officers never have time to go on the patch to introduce themselves

Q3. How do you feel about residents scrutinising your role?

We really did not know what response would be to this question but all Officers seemed happy to meet with us, they were able to relax during the interview and we felt they were very open.

Officer Statements

- It's really good that someone else is looking into our roles as Housing and Income Officers.
- This can only be a positive thing, I hope someone listens.
- I am happy the Scrutiny Team is looking into our roles and hop it can show how difficult our jobs really are.
- It's fine and no real difference from an outside Board. I hope this is beneficial.
- Any suggestions to improve the service are welcome.
- If the correct resources were available we could do a better job. Good it can only help matters.
- Yes, I welcome the help
- It's a good idea, I was dubious at first, and we can't please everyone. It's positive to be scrutinised

Q4. Are your out of hours detrimental to your work/home life balance?

All seven of the Housing Officers said Yes to this question.

The four Income Officers acknowledged that it is not so much of a problem for them, but that it can be telling under certain circumstances, and for some of them a certain amount of work is conducted out of hours.

Housing Officer Statements

- I am very tired.
- Indeed it is very detrimental to my family life.
- My family life has been put on hold for Derwent Living.
- It has a big impact on my home life.
- I work so many out of hours time, just to keep up with things.
- Work/Family life balance can be telling. Several hours a week extra have to be worked by the Housing Officers.

Income Officer Statements

- Not so much as on others, it has no direct impact.
- It did at one time, performance fell, but I was helped.
- I am selective. Around 5-7 extra hours a week are worked by Income Officers.
- It is not so much of a problem for the Income Officers as the Housing Officers.

Q5. In your role as Housing/Income Officer and in an ideal world, what one thing would you change about your job?

All the Officers wanted to be able to offer a better service, this is reflected in their answers to this question.

Response to this question

- To have more time and resources to be pro-active and follow things through. I do not want to fight fire all the time.
- Smaller patch sizes
- I would like more hours in a day to do things more efficiently.
- To have a high level ASB officer to take up the weight of the bad cases.
- Have extra resources to hand to help relieve the pressure we all face. I could be more efficient if I had a smaller patch to cover. I could do a much better job and achieve more.
- More hours and smaller patches to be able to see things through from beginning to the end.
- Smaller patch sizes
- More admin support would be helpful.
- Welfare Benefit Support, extra resources, would be helpful and be an asset to us all.
- A smaller patch size would be more manageable.
- It would be good for us to have 'Same Job, Same Money' one day,

- we could all reach the same salary. At the moment we can never all reach the same pay

Q6. Derwent Living has a duty of care towards you; do you feel that they perform this?

Officer responses:

- DL is a good employer.
- We are allowed to get on with the job.
- The line manager is very supportive.
- The last twelve months have been difficult.
- ASB is a very big problem; it needs its own officer.
- Team meetings are not always useful.
- Local offers come on top of work load.
- There is no consultation with us what so ever.
- Sometimes.
- Morale is very low.
- In the area of personal problems the support is excellent.
- Meeting targets and performances can sometimes mean that capability is implemented regardless of circumstances.
- There does seem to be a level of unfairness, with all having to work to the same level regardless of their preferred method.
- There are times when staff feel they are not listened to.
- Derwent Living doesn't really care.
- There is some help available, but not enough.
- Stress management is available, but we don't have time to take it.
- There is a culture of aggression from Senior Management.
- There are Parking issues which affect time.
- Policies and procedures are now in place and we are on a lone working system.

6. Management Survey

We asked the following questions of two Senior Staff members.

Q1. Could we please have your comments on the performance of the Housing/Income Officers?

- All staff work to the best of their abilities.
- There are issues of time management and customer/client handling techniques.

- They are working over capacity. Patches are too large and are bigger than in other organisations. Patches should be organised by location not Local Authority. New Officers coming in should have knowledge of the job. If justified, the cost is acceptable as it pays to invest.
- The qualities of individual officers were described as 'gutsy, good, enthusiastic, good time manager and customer focused, reactive, does the job, a bit abrasive-does the job, not always able to cope, some are less enthusiastic than others. Response to challenge is not always good.
- As a group there is a more positive attitude and more is being achieved.
- A smarter service would accommodate 50% of customers instead of 20% - 35%.
- Daily they deal with ASB, vulnerable customers and mental health issues. They are a good bunch and are aware of what is required of them. They are doing a good job. Their role isn't publicised enough.

Q2/. What do you see as the link between Housing and Income Officers?

- This is under review; theory was that there is a link and some merit in combining the two roles. However it isn't a generic role, there is a difference between the Housing officer and Income Officer. All rent should be dealt with by rent recovery.
- Combining these two roles would reduce some of the patch sizes but the Housing Manager would have more staff to deal with.

Q3. Do you think DL could offer a better service?

- Yes, there is always room for improvement.
- Staying still offers no support
- Smaller patch sizes and numbers, with only one person dealing with the customer would seem to help.
- It is important that the necessary changes are made.

Q4. Are you satisfied?

- No, there is always room for improvement. Customers need to complain.

7. Results of survey of 50 customers

These General needs customers were selected at random by face to face and telephone contact.

The areas covered by the survey included Alfreton, Barwell, Chesterfield, Daventry, Derby/shire, Gainsborough, Leicester, Lincolnshire, Milton Keynes, Nottingham/Shire and Stoke on Trent.

Questions	Yes	No	BMG status survey 2010
Do you know your Housing Officer?	57%	43%	No data
Have you contacted your Housing Officer?	85.7%	14.3%	Yes 80% No 16% Difference of 5.7% for yes and 1.7% for No
For what reason did you make contact?			
ASB	44.5%		BMG 20% Difference of 24.5%
General advice	11.1%		
Administrative problems	11.1%		
Other	33.3%		
Are you satisfied with the outcome?	33.3%	55.5%	BMG 44% Difference of 10.7%
How long did it take to get a response?	33.3% stated 1 to 2 days	55.5% stated 2 to 3 weeks or more.	BMG 1-2 days 51% Longer 27% difference is 18.7% for 1-2 days and 28.5% for 2-3 weeks
Are you happy with the service?	38.1%	47.6%	BMG Happy 44% Unhappy 34% Difference of 5.9% for happy 13.6% for Unhappy

We do appreciate that this survey was conducted with a much smaller number of customers. However the results show a marked decrease in customer satisfaction, with higher level ASB being a very big problem.

The figures were benchmarked against the Derwent Living Status Survey, which was conducted by BMG in 2010

Comments Received from customers during the survey.

- I have Shared ownership, my home, the neighbours and locality is lovely.
- I am very happy; I just keep myself to myself, and do not need a Housing Officer.
- I have a beautiful house in a nice area, I am very happy with Derwent Living. I love my house.
- It is almost impossible to make contact with the Housing Officers, if they are on holiday you have to wait for them to return to work.
- We never see the Housing Officer.
- The office is too far away, they don't understand us.
- If you look after your home and keep it respectable, you get overlooked for improvements. Some people get thousands of pounds spent on their homes, it's unfair.
- ASB is a problem, sometimes people get 'told off' but it all starts up again, and the officer doesn't want to know then.
- Cases take months to conclude-that's if they are concluded.
- Some customers said they are thinking of moving as DL doesn't do anything to help the situation. Some customers complained of being spoken to in a rude manner and felt badly treated, when they were the innocent party.
- The administration is appalling, even when you are assured that a matter is closed, it raises its head again.
- The monthly Service Charge of £172 is very expensive.
- I have always received a good service from Derwent Living.
- I have lived here since 1984, and DL is a generally good landlord.
- I would like to move but I am not even considered and that seems a bit hard.

8. Additional information

Staff stated that there does not appear to be a recognised pay scale, where they can reach the top of the scale and receive the same pay for the same job. Some staff felt they will never catch up no matter how experienced they become.

There are no buffer lines of staff between Officers and the Manager. There are no Senior Officers with a reduced patch size, who can assist when the need arises.

Stress is a huge factor and plays a major part in both job and customer satisfaction.

Policies and procedures are in place, but are not always implemented. Housing Officer and Income Officer morale is generally low.

Whilst conducting this survey it came to the attention of the Scrutiny Team that some customer contact details were incorrect. This could also be a factor to why the customer is not always contacted by the Housing Officer.

We are now aware that a Housing Officer is on sick leave and may be for some time. There appears to be no-one to take over her duties, which will inevitably leave customers without what they consider an adequate service.

Patch size benchmarking

We compared Derwent Living patch sizes and numbers with neighbouring areas:-

- Nottingham Homes = 1 Officer to approximately 400 homes
- Derby Homes operating only in Derby area has 14,000 properties covered by 5 Area Offices, each with around 5 Housing Officers. Averaging 550 customers per officer. There is no long distance travel involved.
- The average patch and number size for Derwent Living Officers is around 700+ customers. The average mileage claimed by Housing Officers being around 7,500 per year

9. Summary

These interviews were very enlightening, with stress and emotion in evidence, in some cases. There was a lot of concern from the Housing Officers, about their role and the expectations placed on them.

Evidence shows that the officers work extra time, out of hours on many occasions, just to keep up or catch up with the daily routine.

All Officers stated that there were not enough hours in the day, with most of them commenting that the patches were too big to be properly managed. It is difficult to achieve job satisfaction, when one always needs more time to accomplish the task. They cannot always see cases through to the end and feel a sense of frustration by this.

Targets are not always met and the end result is that the customer suffers.

There are times when they do feel job satisfaction. Time management is a very big problem for the majority of them. It was also said that better back up would help both them and the customers.

Most officers also stated that the duty of care for them is not taken seriously. When asked the question: - Does Derwent Living perform the duty of care toward them?

The response was very interesting as most of them said "No" or "Not really". There was a suggestion that a culture of aggression came from the senior management. One Senior Manager feels that he is probably seen as a bit of a bully, but he sees the need to meet standards

As previously reported, all Officers are working extra hours at home just to keep up. Everyone we interviewed from Housing Officers to Senior Staff suggested that smaller patch sizes would be most beneficial to all.

The officers came across as a good group of hard working and dedicated people, but they are being weighed down, and target driven, with lack of support.

Housing Officers do a very good job, but it's obvious that the patch sizes and customer numbers make the job difficult. It soon became obvious to the Scrutiny Team that the Housing Officers have extreme difficulty in balancing and performing their duties, in fulfilling customer's expectations and meeting targets required of them.

The issues stated above are contributing to customer satisfaction levels that are currently low and are decreasing.

10. Scrutiny Team recommendations

In doing this review we found that Housing Officers are working above capacity. Targets cannot be met within the allotted working hours and travelling times and costs are substantial.

This impacts on the customer, and current satisfaction levels are lower than in 2010.

We would therefore like some consideration to be given to the following recommendations:-

No.	Recommendation
1	Improved advertising on Derwent Living website of the names and areas of each Housing & Income officer
2	Increase the number of Housing & Income Officers in order to decrease patch sizes in-line with equivalent housing providers
3	Give consideration to appointing a Senior Housing Officer
4	Re-examine the current geographical patch boundaries for efficiency and cost
5	Review and improve performance in responding to ASB
6	Appoint a Senior ASB officer to deal with more difficult cases
7	Introduce a Mediation Service to deal with neighbour disputes
8	Look further at Housing & Income officer safety whilst on estate visits
9	All staff to update customer contact details as standard after each phone call
10	Involve Housing & Income officers in decision making regarding delivery of their role and duties