

Select Committee on Environment – 29th January 2007

Report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services

Patch-Working and Estate Management

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to update Members on progress made over the last two years with patch-working across our housing estates and the impact this has had on estate management.

Background

2. A review of patch-working was carried out in 2004 and a number of recommendations were made in October of that year to bring improvements to the service.
3. The review identified 6 key areas where it was considered the service could be improved. These were:
 - Creating a more consistent approach to patch-working and service delivery across the 5 areas of the Borough;
 - Development of a more pro-active service;
 - Better use of Human Resources;
 - An enhanced profile of the service;
 - A more accessible service;
 - Continuous improvement and better performance.
4. To achieve these improvements a comprehensive service improvement plan was developed.
5. The following sections of this report will highlight the progress that has been made to the service against each of the 6 key areas of improvement outlined above.

Consistency

6. The review carried out in 2004 identified that through the introduction of patch-working a number of inconsistencies in how the service was delivered had arisen across the 5 management areas. These inconsistencies had arisen for a number of different reasons, sometimes because policy and procedures had been interpreted differently, sometimes because there was no clear policy or procedure to follow and sometimes because officers had been innovative and developed good practice in an area in response to a local problem but had not shared this experience with others so they could learn from it.

7. To address this inconsistency work was carried out in 2005 to develop and communicate a clear vision for the future of the service to officers and other stakeholders. This vision can be summarised as our desire to deliver a pro-active housing management service that is customer focused, continually improving and delivered by enthusiastic and professional Housing Managers.
8. Much work has also been carried out over the last two years in reviewing, updating and developing a comprehensive set of procedures for the core functions of Housing Managers' work. These procedures provide the framework for Housing Managers to be able to carry out their duties in a consistent way with their colleagues, but are written in such a way so as to allow Housing Managers the freedom and discretion to be innovative and pro-active in solving problems.

A pro-active service

9. During the review of 2004 extensive consultation was carried out with stakeholders on their perceptions of the service. Much of the feedback from this consultation was positive with most respondents agreeing that patch-working had improved the housing management service. However there was a common consensus amongst all stakeholders that the service needed to be more pro-active so that problems on estates were identified and dealt with before they escalated into more problematic and difficult to resolve issues.
10. Action to address this has focused very much on the development of 3 service areas. These are Estate Inspections, Estate Walkabouts and Home Checks.
11. Estate Inspections and Estate Walkabouts were already taking place prior to 2004 however the review set up some clear service standards on the frequency of these actions to ensure that Housing Managers spent sufficient time on their estates to be able to identify issues as they occurred and deal with them before they became a major problem.
12. Housing Managers are now set individual targets for Estate Inspections and Estate Walkabouts and their performance in this area is monitored at regular performance meetings with their managers. So far this financial year 178 Estate Inspections and Walkabouts have been carried out across the 48 patches.
13. However, the biggest change to a Housing Manager's work has been brought about by the introduction of our Home Check procedure.
14. Home Checks are the inspection of individual tenants' properties with the emphasis being on identifying breaches of tenancy conditions or other issues that may affect the sustainability of a person's tenancy. These visits allow problems to be identified early enough to make our interventions more effective and in doing so prevent problems escalating into more serious issues that impact on the lives of other residents.
15. Home Checks were rolled out across all patches this financial year following a pilot on the Priory Estate. A Borough target has been set to complete a Home Check on all properties on a 3-year cycle. To date 3762 Home Checks have been completed which represents approximately 16% of our stock.

16. A review on the effectiveness and impact of Home Checks is currently underway and will be completed later this month. However, the initial view being formed from this review is that they are effective and worthwhile and have the desired effect.

Better use of Human Resources

17. The review in 2004 identified an imbalance across the areas managed by Housing Managers in terms of individual workload. The areas or patches managed by Housing Managers had historically been set by geographical boundaries. This had not taken account of the nature or workloads created by the individual estates and it was considered this was having a negative impact on the performance of some Housing Managers. It was also identified that it was possible to make some efficiency savings by reducing the overall number of patches because the impact of 'right to buys' on stock numbers in the preceding years had significantly reduced the number of properties that some Housing Managers were managing.
18. As a result, in 2005 a review of individual patch sizes was undertaken. This resulted in the reduction of overall patches from 53 to 48. A number of changes were also made to other patches which resulted in some increasing in size and the reduction in the size of others. The effect of these changes were to evenly distribute workload, rather than property numbers, and ensure Housing Managers managing estates where more intensive estate management is necessary have the capacity to do so by having fewer properties.
19. The opportunity was also taken to re-allocate some Housing Managers to different patches where it was considered they had the specific skill sets required to manage the issues on those particular estates.

Profile of Service

20. Action has been taken over the last 2 years to raise the profile of Housing Managers so that residents and other stakeholders are both aware of who they are and what are their roles and responsibilities. This has included the change in their job title to Housing Managers from the original Estate Management Officers.
21. Following the changes to patch sizes and movement of some officers, residents were sent a leaflet explaining who their Housing Manager is and what their role is on their estate. This leaflet is now routinely sent out when there is a change of Housing Manager on a patch.
22. Housing Managers have also been empowered to make more decisions regarding their estate and are responsible for the management of a small devolved budget as well as responsible for identifying and submitting bids for larger works through community safety funding and other capital resources.
23. Efforts have also been made over the last 2 years to forge better links with other service providers both internal and external to the Council. Housing Managers have effective working arrangements with Neighbourhood Managers where they work in the same area; the re-modelling of the Council Directorates has brought about closer working relationships with our colleagues in Social Services and better links are being made with the police through the new neighbourhood policing initiatives.

Accessibility of service

24. We have been working hard over the last 2 years to improve the accessibility to our service. We recognise that this is sometimes seen as a barrier to the service. In some respects this is a consequence of the service moving from being a reactive one, where an officer sat in a office waiting for the problem to come to them, to a pro-active one where officers are out on the estate or at meetings taking a pro-active approach to resolving problems and preventing them from occurring in the first instance.
25. At the inception of patch-working a duty line system was set up to provide support to our contact centre that are there to provide an immediate response to customer enquires. The review in 2004 recognised a number of problems with the duty line arrangements that existed at that time and in 2005 a number of changes were made to improve the way in which this operated.
26. These changes did bring some improvements but it was recognised last year that a more fundamental change was required to improve the accessibility of the service.
27. An appointment system has now been set up through Dudley Council Plus which enables customers to book appointments to see their Housing Manager about specific subjects or for their enquiry to be taken and an assurance given that a Housing Manager will respond to the customer within set timescales. This service is only currently available to customers who visit the Dudley Council Plus Offices but there are plans to make this available to all customers via telephone contact with the transfer of the handling of housing management telephony calls to DCP.
28. Last year we also responded to specific concerns of Elected Members and Tenant Representatives that they were having difficulty in contacting their Housing Managers by issuing the direct land line and mobile number of Housing Manager to Elected Members and Elected Tenant Representatives.

Continuous Improvement

29. We believe our Housing Managers provide a difficult and testing service very well but also recognise that improvements can always be made. With this in mind we have set up a number of structures and mechanisms for ongoing review of the service to ensure this happens.
30. We have established a forum for Housing Managers to share good practice and identify barriers in service development that need to be addressed.
31. We have set up a robust performance management framework to monitor performance of individual Housing Managers against a set of key service area targets.
32. We continue to canvass the opinion of stakeholders on the service provided and feed this into our service planning. We have in the last few months consulted with tenants who are amongst the first to receive a Home Check and will be using their feedback as part of the review on the impact and effectiveness of this service area.

Summary

33. Much work has been carried out over the last two years since the completion of the review of patch-working. Whilst we recognise that there is still more work to be done and areas where further improvement can be made we believe that the service has improved in the last two years and will continue to do so as we begin to bed in some of the bigger changes such as Home Checks and access to the service through Dudley Council Plus.

Finance

34. There are no financial implications from this report.

Law

35. The Council may do anything incidental to, conducive to or which facilitates the discharge of its functions under Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972. This would include anything incidental to the Council's housing powers and duties under the various Housing Acts.

Equality Impact

36. This report has no direct Equality Implications. The provision of the housing management service complies with the Council's policy on Equality and Diversity.

Recommendation

37. It is recommended that:-
- Member note the contents of this report.



.....
Linda Sanders
Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services

Contact Officer: Nigel Collumbell
Telephone: 01384 815050
Email: Nigel.collumbell@dudley.co.uk

List of Background Papers