

**HABINTEG HOUSING
ASSOCIATION (ULSTER)
LTD**

MYSTERY SHOPPING

REPORT

NOVEMBER 2011



Homes for all



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1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Mystery Shopping is a tool traditionally used by companies to measure the quality of their service from a customer perspective and to progress service improvements. This model of research has previously been adopted by Local Authorities and Housing Associations throughout England, Scotland and Wales and is recognised as an effective method of evaluating the provision of housing services.
- 1.2 Supporting Communities NI has been facilitating an annual programme of Mystery Shopping for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive since 2002. In 2006 SCNI facilitated a pilot exercise of Mystery Shopping with 12 Housing Associations. In 2010, SCNI carried out a Mystery Shopping exercise on behalf Habinteg Housing Association (Ulster) Ltd.
- 1.3 The purpose of Mystery Shopping is to examine how organisational policies and procedures are translated into actual customer service provision. In other words it focuses on the customer's experience of Housing Management. Mystery Shopping is not used to 'catch people out'; queries are not obscure or complicated. The scenarios used relate to everyday issues and Mystery Shoppers are objective in their approach.
- 1.4 The results provide an opportunity for Habinteg Housing Association (Ulster) Ltd to view themselves as their customers do. The analysis provides the Association with an opportunity to consider any requirements for overall organisational improvements.

Mystery Shopping is a powerful way to assess service standards and complements other research methods utilised by the Association.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Supporting Communities NI undertook management of the project.

2.1 AREAS OF SERVICE

A number of key service areas were examined by Mystery Shopping, these were:

- Finance
- Development
- Human Resources
- Complaints
- Anti-Social Behaviour
- House Sales
- Rent

In addition, Mystery Shoppers made observations on:

- Response to Letters
- Website
- Visits to Habinteg North and West and Holywood Offices
- Visits to Habinteg Schemes
- Telephone Service

The project also included a survey of:

- Maintenance – Actual Repairs
- Commencement of Tenancy visits

2.2 SCENARIOS

In order to gain the maximum effect of the exercise, possible scenarios were drawn from everyday issues and set the scene for the Mystery Shopper to enact. The scenarios were proofed to test they were practical, straightforward, relevant, credible and objective.

Habinteg Housing Association (Ulster) Ltd highlighted the most appropriate desired outcome for each scenario. Scoring and reporting templates used ensured that a consistent approach was taken and that the process was as user friendly as possible.

2.3 FRAMEWORK FOR MYSTERY SHOPPING

The framework used for the Mystery Shopping exercise took account of S.C.N.I. experience in managing similar projects.

- 8 Areas of Service were subject to a number of telephone calls.
- 2 letters sent to Habinteg Offices regarding Housing.
- Habinteg Website was subject to an Observation.
- 6 survey calls were made regarding the commencement of tenancy service.
- 7 survey calls were made regarding the repair service.
- A total of 15 observations were made of the Telephone Service.
- 4 visits were made to Habinteg Offices.
- 8 visits were made to Community Assistant Schemes.
- Mystery Shopping was conducted between June-September 2011
- Habinteg Housing Association (Ulster) Ltd staff team was informed of the intent to conduct Mystery Shopping but not of the actual timeframe for the exercise.
- Reporting templates used by the Mystery Shoppers included a checklist of potential outcomes.
- The service experience was scored using a range of Poor, Fair, Good or Excellent.
- Mystery Shoppers were advised not to make reference to the names of individual members of staff on the reporting forms.
- Participants were asked to only make comments when they supported the score awarded.

2.4 SELECTION OF MYSTERY SHOPPERS

Habinteg Housing Association (Ulster) Ltd agreed to have the exercise carried out by SCNI staff and tenant representatives from their Residents Forum. The Tenant representatives received training through joint workshops facilitated by SCNI and Habinteg staff. As parts of the process Mystery Shoppers were required to adhere to confidentiality at all times and take a balanced and objective view of service provision.

2.5 MYSTERY SHOPPING WORKSHOPS

In preparation for the commencement of the exercise, Mystery Shoppers attended a workshop where their roles and responsibilities were explained.

During the workshop, each Mystery Shopper was provided with a tailored work programme.

Mystery Shoppers were encouraged to contact SCNI during the exercise with any queries or concerns they may have experienced.

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3.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

3.1 This report provides an overview of the findings from the Mystery Shopping exercise.

3.1.1 In relation to **Finance**, 100% of the service was considered to be Excellent.

There were no instances where the service was deemed to be Fair, Good or Poor.

It should be noted that in the Mystery Shopping exercise carried out in 2010, 100% of the service was judged as Poor. Therefore, there has been a significant improvement to this service.

3.1.2 In relation to **Development**, 100% of the service was judged to be Good.

There were no instances where the service was deemed to be Poor, Fair or Excellent.

3.1.3 In terms of **Human Resources**, 100% of the service was judged to be Poor.

Mystery Shoppers reported that very limited information and advice was provided, however consideration must also be given to the difficulties of examining such a confidential service on an anonymous basis.

3.1.4 In terms of **Complaints**, 50% of the service was deemed Excellent, 25% Good and 25% Fair.

It should be noted that this is an improvement from the 50% Fair and 50% Poor scores in 2010. Additionally, the scores varied significantly between the North West and Holywood offices. If the Calls had been analysed separately, the calls made to the North West Office would have shown 100% Excellent and the calls made to the Holywood Office would have amounted to 50% Good and 50% Fair.

3.1.5 In relation to **Anti-Social Behaviour**, 100% of the service was judged as Excellent.

This represents an increase in customer satisfaction from the 50% Good and 50% Fair scores awarded in 2010.

- 3.1.6 In relation terms of **House Sales**, 100% of the service was judged as Excellent.

This shows a significant increase in customer service from the previous Mystery Shopping exercise in 2010, where the scores amounted to 50% Good and 50% Fair.

- 3.1.7 In relation to **Rent**, 50% of the service was deemed as Excellent, 25% as Good and 25% as Poor.

In comparison to the scores in 2010, no significant change has been noted, as the scores during this period showed 50% Excellent and 50% Fair.

Furthermore, it should be noted that a significant difference in customer service was highlighted between the North West Office and Holywood Office, where separately, the North West Office scores were 100% Excellent, whilst the Holywood Office scored 50% Good and 50% Fair.

- 3.1.8 In relation to the response from **letters** by Habinteg Staff, 100% of the service was judged as Excellent.

This is a significant improvement from 2010, where the service was scored as 100% Poor.

- 3.1.9 In terms of **Website Observations**, 100% of this service was deemed as Excellent.

There was an increased improvement to this service which was judged as 100% Good in 2010.

- 3.1.10 In relation to **Visits** carried out to the two Habinteg Offices, 50% of the service was scored as Excellent and 25% was Good and 25% Fair.

Again, it should be duly noted that when scored separately, 100% of the service was judged as Excellent in the North West Office and 50% Good and 50% Fair in the Holywood Office.

- 3.1.11 In terms of **Visits to Schemes**, 37.5% was scored as Excellent, 25% as Good, 12.5% as Fair and 25% as Poor.

This service has improved following the previous Mystery Shopping exercise in 2010, where 100% of the service was judged as Poor. However, Mystery Shoppers did highlight that in some instances there was no staff present in the schemes, so the exercise could not be completed.

- 3.1.12 In relation to the survey of **Repairs**, 43% of the service was judged as Excellent, 43% as Good and 14% as Fair.

- 3.1.13 In terms of the survey of **Commencement of Tenancies**, 33% of the service was scored as Excellent, 33% as Fair and a further 33% of calls made, received a 'No answer' from tenants.
- 3.1.14 Across **All Service Areas**, 55% of the service was judged as Excellent, 21% as Good, 13% as Fair and 11% as Poor.
- 3.1.15 In relation to observations made to the **telephone Service**, 93% of calls were answered promptly and the person answering the calls identified the Association in 100% of the cases.

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4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 SUMMARY FINDINGS

4.1.1 From the exercises completed the summary results in terms of Poor, Fair, Good or Excellent were as follows:

	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	EXCELLENT	NO ANSWER
FINANCE	-	-	-	100%	-
DEVELOPMENT	-	-	100%	-	-
HUMAN RESOURCES	100%	-	-	-	-
COMPLAINTS	-	25%	25%	50%	-
ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR	-	-	-	100%	-
HOUSE SALES	-	-	-	100%	-
RENT	25%	-	25%	50%	-
LETTERS	-	-	-	100%	-
WEBSITE	-	-	-	100%	-
VISIT TO HABINTEG HQS	-	25%	25%	50%	-
VISITS TO SCHEMES	25%	12.5%	25%	37.5%	-
REPAIR SURVEY	-	14%	43%	43%	-
COT SURVEY	-	33.3%	-	33.3%	33.3%
ALL SERVICE AREAS	11%	13%	21%	55%	-

4.1.2 For comparative purposes, the table below displays results from the 2010 Mystery Shopping Exercise

	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	EXCELLENT
RENT	-	50%	-	50%
MAINTENANCE	50%	50%	-	-
COMMUNITY ASSISTANT VISITS	100%	-	-	-
COMPLAINTS	50%	50%	-	-
ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR	50%	-	50%	-
FINANCE	100%	-	-	-
DEVELOPMENT	50%	50%	-	-
HOUSE SALES	50%	-	50%	-
PETS POLICY	-	50%	50%	-
SECRETARIAT	-	-	100%	-
HUMAN RESOURCES (EMAIL)	-	100%	-	-
LETTERS	100%	-	-	-
WEBSITE	-	100%	-	-

4.1.3 In relation to the telephony service the following summarises the findings:

	Yes	No	n/a
Calls answered promptly	93%	7%	-
Person answering the call identified Habinteg Housing Association (Ulster) Ltd	100%	-	-
Where the call was transferred it was transferred to the correct person	60%	7%	33%
Where the call was transferred it answered promptly	53%	14%	33%
Where the call was transferred the person answering the transferred call give their name and department	46%	27%	27%

4.2 OVERALL RESULTS

4.2.1 From the exercises completed the following highlights the results per telephone call or visit:

	Call 1	Call 2	Call 3	Call 4	Call 5	Call 6	Call 7	Call 8
FINANCE	Excellent	-	-	-	-	-	-	
DEVELOPMENT	Good	-	-	-	-	-	-	
HUMAN RESOURCES	Poor	-	-	-	-	-	-	
COMPLAINTS	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Fair	-	-	-	
ASB	Excellent	Excellent	-	-	-	-		
HOUSE SALES	Excellent	Excellent	-	-	-	-	-	
RENT	Good	Excellent	Poor	Excellent	-	-	-	
	Observation							
WEBSITE	Excellent							
	Call 1	Call 2	Call 3	Call 4	Call 5	Call 6	Call 7	
REPAIRS SURVEY	Excellent	Good	Good	Fair	Good	Excellent	Excellent	
COMMENCEMENT OF TENANCIES	Excellent	Excellent	Fair	Fair	No Answer	No Answer	-	
	Letter 1	Letter 2						
LETTERS	Excellent	Excellent	-	-	-	-	-	
	Visit 1	Visit 2	Visit 3	Visit 4				
VISIT TO HABINTEG OFFICES	Excellent	Fair	Excellent	Good				
	Visit 1	Visit 2	Visit 3	Visit 4	Visit 5	Visit 6	Visit 7	Visit 8
VISITS TO SCHEMES	Good	Poor	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Excellent	Good	Excellent

4.3 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

4.3.1 Following analysis, the following services yielded the highest satisfaction, scoring 100%:

Finance
Anti-Social Behaviour
House Sales
Website Observations
Letters

4.3.2 The service area that yielded the least satisfaction was **Human Resources**, where 100% of the service was considered to be Poor.

4.3.3 Across all service areas, 55% of the scores were identified as Excellent, 21% as Good, 13% as Fair and 11% as Poor.

4.3.4 There was found to be a high standard of service provided in relation to the telephony system.

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5.0 PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

The Mystery Shoppers were invited to reflect on the process and experience of Mystery Shopping:

5.1 TAKING PART IN MYSTERY SHOPPING

The Mystery Shoppers were asked to highlight:

- Their Observations
- What they most liked about the exercise
- What they least liked about the exercise
- Any lessons learnt
- Any other comments

5.1.1 Observations made by Mystery Shoppers

- Mystery Shoppers highlighted the difference between the service provision in the North West Office and Hollywood Office
- In some instances, there were delays in transferring calls in the Hollywood Office
- In most cases, the staff dealing with the calls were very helpful and had a caring nature
- Good knowledgeable staff members

5.1.2 What the Mystery Shoppers Most liked

- The overall exercise
- Workshops
- Information and support provided by Habinteg and SCNI Staff
- The feeling that it was a worthwhile exercise
- Knowing that the work being carried out was going to improve the service

5.1.3 What the Mystery Shoppers Least Liked

- Waiting to be transferred
- In one instance, a staff member kept pushing for more information and made the Mystery Shopper feel uncomfortable

5.1.4 What the Mystery Shoppers Learnt

- It is good to look at the bigger picture- not just own issues
- Putting themselves in other peoples/tenants shoes
- Mystery Shopping
- Deeper appreciation for Habinteg Services

5.1.5 Any other comments

- Enjoyable but sometimes painful exercise
- The exercise was very rewarding
- Looking forward to examining Habinteg's services in the future, in particular the new telephone system

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6.0 CONCLUSION

- 6.1 Mystery Shoppers have examined how organisational policies are translated into customer service. Mystery Shopping has proven to be a cost effective method of gauging satisfaction with service provision.
- 6.2 In general terms the findings have been positive and have shown a significant increase in service standards in light of the feedback received from the 2010 exercise.

It can be seen from the results that there is room for improvement in some service areas such as Human Resources and Visits to Schemes.

Additionally, the difference in services between the Hollywood and North West Offices is an area which may need to be addressed by Habinteg Housing, to ensure that there is an overall consistent and effective service provision within the organisation.

- 6.3 It is imperative that the exercise is not considered complete when the results are published rather the exercise should be considered to be part of an ongoing cycle of service improvements. An improvement plan should be developed to ensure that areas of concern are addressed.

Specific areas of concern could be addressed by introducing 'model answers' as part of staff training. This would provide staff with general subject areas and key questions/answers related to the service area.

- 6.4 In terms of future possibilities there is significant scope to extend and enhance Mystery Shopping in Habinteg Housing Association (Ulster) Ltd.

The value of the exercise could be enhanced by conducting Mystery Shopping on a rolling programme. Rather than focussing on a particular time of the year the service areas could be examined across the year. This would enable an increased sample size to be examined.

There is also an opportunity to further extend the scope of the exercise to consider other areas of service delivery such as:

- Transfer/Exchange
- Equality – Race Relations/Disability
- Tenant Participation

Additionally, the use of tenants in the exercise has proved an invaluable resource and should be utilised as fully as possible in future Mystery Shopping exercises.

APPENDIX 1

INDIVIDUAL CALL REPORTS

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SCNI

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