



Newcastle Tenants Federation

Response to Your Homes Newcastle

Concierge Service Review

August 2009

Introduction

This report highlights the Federation's response to the Concierge Service Review which is currently being carried out by Your Homes Newcastle (YHN). The main drivers for the review are highlighted below:

- Cost of the service – customers don't pay the full cost of the service at present so it is being subsidised by other tenants across the city
- To make sure that the service is value for money
- The National CCTV Strategy which recommends the link up and sharing of CCTV provision between partners including the Police and the Council
- The need to review the management structure within the service as the current structure does not allow for regular support for staff. This has an overall impact on the quality of service tenants receive
- The regeneration of Riverside Dene formally known as Cruddas Park

The below 3 options were identified for consultation with tenants:

- Option 1 – Selective monitoring
- Option 2 – Centralised monitoring from one control room with responsive and on site staff
- Option 3 – Centralised monitoring from two control rooms with responsive and on site staff

Our response pulls together comments and feedback from a number of events/consultation sessions including: the Living in Flats Working Group; two Federation Open Meetings held in November and July 2009; two field trips to view the current service provision and CCTV provision in Sunderland; feedback from TARAs and comments from various consultation sessions attended by Community Development Coordinators.

1. Background

The Concierge Service that tenants currently receive is considered to be vitally important to the overall welfare, satisfaction and security of tenants living in flats.

Many tenants involved in the review consultation stated that it was one of their primary reasons for choosing to live in a flat. This is further quantified in the YHN Concierge Satisfaction Survey 2008/09 which states that “87% of respondents who indicated that having a Concierge did have an influence on their decision to move also indicated that they were satisfied with the overall service”.

Tenants living in flats are passionate about the service they receive from the Concierge. This is partly to do with the fact that the Living in Flats Working Group at the Federation has played a key role in shaping the service as it is today. The group came into existence in 2003 specifically to tackle issues of security, cleanliness, void levels and isolation within the blocks and has worked in partnership with YHN to contribute to the overall improvement of the service. Some of the key improvements are highlighted below:

- Increased and improved CCTV
- A significant reduction of the number of void properties within high and low rise blocks
- Contribution to the setting up and monitoring of the cleaning standards
- The incorporation of the “good neighbour role” into the concierge duties
- The publication of the “Good Neighbour Guide” in 2008

The achievements of this partnership group were highlighted as good practice and contributed to the successful review of YHN’s Charter Mark Award for the service in 2006.

2. The Consultation Process

The Consultation Process So Far

Tenants living in flats who attended an Open Meeting at the Federation in November, called for all tenants receiving the service have an opportunity to comment on any proposed changes. They wanted the consultation be wide reaching and offer different ways of involvement.

The Federation would like to acknowledge Your Homes Newcastle for listening to this request and working closely with the Living in Flats group to develop a wide ranging consultation plan which included a questionnaire, 21 information sessions held across the city in July, consultation events held via TARAs across the City, advice and information across the telephone and four open meetings here at the Federation.

The consultation focussed on the 3 options highlighted in the introduction of this report and did not include an option for keeping the service in its current state. Whilst the Federation understands the need to review the service, it was generally felt that tenants should have been given the opportunity to shape any options being considered for consultation and that more options should have been available. Many tenants felt that they were limited in choice, that the three options were quite restrictive and that the decision had already been made.

Future Consultation

Tenants involved in the consultation that has taken place so far are keen to be involved in any further developments of the service. It was suggested that this should happen through the Living in Flats Working Group and also when appropriate on a block by block basis, utilising any active tenants and residents associations or by further information sessions. Tenants would like YHN to acknowledge that a one size fits all approach does not work and that at times there may be a need to develop the service according to the block.

3. General Concerns

The headings below detail the main concerns of tenants whether they have a resident concierge or 24 hour service provided by a shift worker.

Community Safety

All tenants felt that having a regular on site Concierge contributed greatly to the overall safety of tenants. Having a physical presence on site was seen as a deterrent to anti social behaviour and tenants felt that this particular aspect of the service could not be replaced by CCTV cameras or visiting staff.

The current Concierge staff in most instances had built up a sound intelligence of the issues for that particular area, for example, they were aware of any known trouble causers or anti social tenants and were able to act appropriately or be an independent witness if an incident occurred. One example that a tenant gave was a problem that they had been experiencing with a neighbour who played music loudly when returning from the pub at the weekend. The Concierge in this incidence was able to tackle the problem by having a quiet word with the perpetrator when they arrived back at the flats, reminding them to keep their music down so as not to disturb their neighbours.

One of the major concerns for tenants was tailgaters and how they would be challenged. Tenants accept that tailgating is a problem that will always be prevalent, however, were keen to point out that it is currently being managed at a local level by Concierge staff with local intelligence. Although the improvement of the CCTV cameras was welcomed by most tenants, it was generally the opinion that this problem would escalate, especially if being monitored from a central location.

CCTV

Tenants generally welcomed the upgrading of the CCTV in blocks and felt that this would be beneficial. Many blocks currently have outdated CCTV systems, with poor quality images that cannot be used by the Police or YHN if an incident occurs.

Although tenants felt that upgraded CCTV systems were a positive, the following concerns were raised:

- CCTV could not replace the intelligence and proactive service currently received from having a Concierge on site
- Some tenants were concerned about the over reliance on CCTV and would feel like they were being watched constantly a bit like Big Brother
- Tenants would like to know where the CCTV cameras would be placed as once someone is in the building they are free to access each landing
- How many staff would be monitoring the cameras? Tenants where concerned that incidents would be missed no matter how many resources were put in place

- Tenants raised concerns that the service would be changed without upgrading the CCTV in all the blocks and that finance would be used as an excuse
- New CCTV equipment and adequate staff to monitor it would come at a cost, tenants wanted to know how this would be financed taking into account the need to reduce the deficit

Customer Service/Good Neighbour Role

Tenants generally were happy with the service they currently receive and this is because the Concierge offers a friendly face to many tenants who may not be in contact with family/friends or may feel isolated. Tenants have seen the “good neighbour” role of the concierge develop over the years and feel that the presence of a familiar face adds an unexplainable value to tenants living in flats.

Many tenants have built up strong relationships with their Concierge and rely upon them for general support, looking out for vulnerable tenants etc. One elderly tenant stated that if it wasn't for the Concierge she would not have a conversation with anyone and would feel even more isolated.

Condition of Flats and Void Properties

Many tenants expressed concerns about the possible deterioration of flats and increased void properties or lack of demand. It was felt that changes to the service would have a detrimental affect on the demand for flats as many tenants chose to live in a flat because of the Concierge Service and the security and peace of mind the service offers. Concerns were also raised about the general cleanliness and condition of the flats. Tenants felt that the service would become a responsive service.

Responsive Staff

Concerns were raised with regards to response times due to the lack of clarity in terms of how many staff would be on duty and what would happen if the traffic was particularly bad. Questions were also raised about the cost of providing vans and fuel for these staff and would this not add to the cost of the service?

Tenants felt that if responsive staff were to be put in place then having a familiar face was vital, they were also keen to see responsive staff patrolling the city whilst on duty rather than sitting in an office waiting to be called to deal with an incident. Tenants, however, felt that the service would be more difficult to manage in terms of knowing who was where and keeping track of the work being carried out.

Cost of the Service

The cost of the service was a major issue raised by tenants, who felt that they needed to know what the true costs were. Many tenants had calculated what each tenant was paying and could not equate it to the level of service they received.

Concerns were also raised in relation to any future subsidy for the service. Tenants wanted assurances that if the service were to continue to be subsidised that their charges would not go up dramatically in the future.

Tenants wanted a detailed breakdown of the current costs and future costs of the service to enable them to make more informed decisions. It was suggested that this be brought to a Living in Flats Group.

The Definition of “Concierge”

Concierge is a French word and refers to an employee that lives in an apartment block and carries out general care taking duties. Tenants feel that they were paying for a service that would change into something completely different to what they had signed up to.

4. Specific Feedback on the Options

Feedback in this section of the report has been split into two parts in order to deal with feedback from tenants who currently have a resident concierge and tenants who receive the 24 hour Concierge Service.

Resident Concierge Feedback

Specific Concerns

All tenants that currently have a resident concierge service felt extremely strongly about not losing this service for the following reasons:

- The Resident Concierge (RC) takes pride in his work as it is his home
- The RC's are an integral part of the community, they bring the community together and are excellent neighbours
- Whilst tenants understood that the Concierge was only employed to work a 37 hour week, many RC's go that extra mile and are prepared to help tenants after hours if there is an emergency. They do this because they are good neighbours
- RC's tend to be within blocks which are age designated or house vulnerable people, they know their customers and can quickly assist those in greater need in an emergency
- Tenants were concerned about the cleanliness of the blocks deteriorating. Some referred to the blocks being "like a tip" when the resident concierge is on holiday/sick leave

Option 1

- Tenants receiving the resident concierge service currently felt that this option would leave people even more vulnerable after hours
- Concierge's that did not live on site may have less pride in their work
- The sense of community and safety would be lost
- Crime and anti social behaviour levels would increase
- The overall fear of crime would increase

Option 2 & 3

Tenants currently receiving the resident concierge service felt that these options were totally inappropriate for their blocks and would not consider option 2 & 3.

24 Hour Concierge Feedback

Below is specific feedback and comments from tenants who currently receive the 24 hour concierge service.

Option 1

- Concerns over response times when monitoring is centralised
- Majority of tenants wanted staff to be on site on an evening, especially at the weekend when incidents of anti social behaviour/crime are higher

Option 2 & 3

- Most tenants would like to see the Concierge staff around the site carrying out duties as oppose to being confined to their lodges
- Tenants generally wanted to keep an on site presence due to the reasons stated earlier in the report
- Some tenants who live in a block without a lodge were happier with on site staff during the day and responsive staff on an evening because they felt they were disadvantaged currently as the Concierge staff are confined to lodges which are not located in all blocks. One lady talked about being attacked in the entrance of the building. The concierge could not assist her apart from phoning the Police
- Tenants saw the benefit in having two control rooms but were concerned about the cost
- Tenants felt that the new service would be more reactive than proactive and that general satisfaction levels would be reduced

5. Services that tenants would like to see the Concierge cover

Tenants were asked what services they would like to see covered by the Concierge Service in the future and they said that they would like the Concierge to be responsible for the general management of the blocks including the following:

Environmental:

- Grounds maintenance – keeping the communal gardens looking nice (free from weeds and rubbish) and planting flowers

- Litter picking in and around the blocks
- Disposal of rubbish
- Help with the disposal of furniture

General Cleaning Duties:

- Cleaning of all communal areas
- Cleaning of windows both internally and externally at the entrances
- Cleaning to include floors and communal seating
- Regular chute cleansing
- Regular cleansing of the bins

Security:

- Be a visible presence to alleviate anti social behaviour
- Be a visible presence to reduce the fear of crime
- Report any incidents
- Stop people entering the flats who are not authorised

Repairs and Maintenance:

- Provide a handy man service to deal with low level repairs e.g. changing light bulbs, clearing blocked U bends, fixing bin chute catches
- Continue to keep keys and allow access to workmen for tenants who work

Development of the “good neighbour role”:

- Look after the overall welfare of tenants
- Provide help and assistance to vulnerable tenants

6. Additional Ideas/Suggestions for improvement

The following information is additional ideas and suggestions for the service.

Clear Vision and Objectives for the Service

Tenants would like a service that is clear and transparent for both staff and tenants. They would like clarity on what the service will deliver to put an end to the confusion that exists both with staff and customers.

Tenants would also like to see a transparent breakdown costs for the service.

Allocations and General Housing Management

Tenants would like to see a more proactive approach being taken to tackle anti social tenants living within the blocks. They would also like to see a strict process in terms of allocations and would like were appropriate for blocks to be designated by age. Tenants who took part in the Sunderland visit felt that this was one of the success factors of the scheme.

Main Entrances

Tenants felt strongly that if the service were to change that investment would be needed in the main entrances of the blocks. Many people talked about fobs not working, doors systems old and constantly breaking down, needing repair.

After the visit to Sunderland in June where tenants had the opportunity to view a particular block of flats the following suggestions were put forward:

- All blocks should have clearly defined defensible space. In Sunderland this was in the form of fencing around the communal areas of the block. Tenants felt that this would make people feel safer and would act as a physical deterrent for anti social behaviour
- All communal entrances to blocks need investment. Many communal entrances across the city are not considered to be particularly inviting. Many are in a poor, dark and dingy condition and attract anti social people. One example is the Westgate Multis. Tenants generally feel that if the entrances were brought up to a modern standard with good lighting that this would help to deter trouble makers

Tailgaters/Access to Landings

Tenants generally felt that the issue of tailgating was a major problem and one that was very difficult to eradicate all together. It was generally felt that tailgaters wanted access to landings and stairwells and once in the building were difficult to trace due to the fact that they would go up in the lift to one level, then come down the stairs to another and then proceed back into the lift until they reached their destination.

A suggestion put forward by a tenant as a possible solution to this was to lock all the fire doors to the stairs from the outside. This would mean that tenants could access the stairwells without needing a key in case of a fire, but would need a fob, coded especially for their landing to be able to access their landing and flat. This would limit the freedom that tailgaters currently have and may deter them accessing the building in the first place or assist in the monitoring of them.

The Fourth Option

It was suggested at one of the Federation Open Events for a fourth option for the 24 hour sites, please see below:

- On site staff during the day carrying out general duties such as cleaning, rubbish removal, good neighbour duties etc
- CCTV to be monitored centrally
- Nightshift staff based on site when tenants feel most vulnerable to tackle anti social behaviour etc

Staffing

- Concierge should be trained to signpost tenants on to other services
- Regular, familiar concierge staff was considered very important for the future of the service as they will be able to build up relationships and trust with tenants
- Employ staff with excellent customer service skills and offer a comprehensive training package to ensure consistency
- Put in place an easy way that tenants can show recognition/compliment those members of the concierge staff who deliver a service over and above what is required

General Suggestions

- Provide a notice board with details of the on site staff e.g. a picture with information such as name, times available on site etc
- Provide a lockable, wall mounted box where tenants could post issues/concerns/suggestions/compliments/complaints etc when there was no on site staff available

- Provide tenants living in flats with standard sized bin bags to stop chutes getting blocked
- On line access/touch screen monitors to access YHN website and services
- Intercoms to be placed in communal entrances for those needing to speak to the concierge

7. Conclusion

The Federation would like it's response to be considered by YHN's Board when making any decision for the future of the service. Tenants that took part in developing the response look forward to working with YHN in developing/implementing any future options.

Tenants and Residents Associations that participated in the response:

Adelaide House TARA
Avondale House TARA
Cruddas Park Tenants Group
Cruddas Park High Flats TARA
Denton Park House TARA
Dover Court Residents Association
Battlefield TARA
Eastfield Action Group
Harehills Towers TARA
Hill Top House TARA
Melbourne Court TARA
Mill House TARA
Pendower TARA
Queens Court TARA
Saftoe and Ewart TARA
Shieldfield House TARA
Shieldfield Three Towers TARA
The Spinney TARA
Vale House TARA
Westgate Multis TARA
Wyndley House TARA