

RSP review of service charge information, cleaning, and grounds maintenance services

December 2022

1. Introduction

The Resident Scrutiny Panel (RSP) has recently expanded to include new members. Since July 2022, RSP has undertaken training in scrutiny techniques and completed a service review.

The Panel considered performance and customer feedback information to help them to decide which service area they should review. They chose to review cleaning and grounds maintenance services, and to review the quality of information provided for customers about the charges made for these services.

2. Completing the review

The RSP's review included the following activities:

- Information gathering: colleagues from the Estates Services, Procurement and Finance Teams met with the Panel members to provide information about the cleaning and grounds maintenance services and the service charge letters that are sent to customers. The Panel asked a wide range of questions, which the officers responded to.
- Review of customer feedback: the Panel members reviewed customer complaints and feedback about the cleaning and grounds maintenance services
- Good practice research: the Panel reviewed the information displayed on IVH's website and compared this with information shown on other housing association's websites

3. Findings

Service charge information (letters and website content)

- Information provided in service charge letters is confusing
- More explanation is needed for customers about:
 - ✓The services the charges cover
 - ✓How charges are calculated
 - ✓What time period the charges relate to
- Impact of changes to services on charges e.g. building on land at Sale so no need to for continued grounds maintenance on the land used
- Who pays the charges i.e. tenants and leaseholders?
- Customers need more notice if charges will be increasing, especially considering the cost of living crisis
- The letters look okay but would benefit from removing (or explaining) jargon and technical terminology which customer may not understand
- The service charge letters do not provide details of a named contact person or team that customers can contact, if they have enquiries about the service charges

- Inadequate checks to ensure that services charged for have been delivered on time and at the specified standard
- Estate inspections by Community Co-ordinators are not frequent enough to carry out adequate levels of checking
- How much explanation is given to new customers about service charges and what they cover?
- Very little information on the website about what customers can expect in relation to cleaning and grounds maintenance services – e.g. what will be done in each location and when

Cleaning and grounds maintenance services

- Tender evaluation questions do not check turnover of staff or whether the contractor pays the living wage – this could indicate whether or not the contractor is a good employer
- Customers should be involved in selecting the cleaning and grounds maintenance contractors
- Tender evaluation process should be more robust e.g. include site visits, involve customers
- RSP members were positive about customers becoming involved in checking the standard of contractors' work and this being used to manage the contracts and provide quality control
- Panel members were supportive of bringing the cleaning contract in house – more control over quality of service and more responsive when things go wrong
- Offering compensation in response to complaints:
 - ✓ Resolution is more important than offering compensation.
 - ✓ Focus on fixing problems and speaking/visiting customers – show understanding
- Information about Community Co-ordinators' estate inspections is included on the website, but:
 - ✓ Very little advance notice
 - ✓ Lack of feedback following inspections

5. Recommendations

The RSP recommends that the following actions be taken to address their findings:

Service charge information

- Remove technical terminology and jargon, or provide a separate explanation document with the letters
- The letter needs to include the details of colleagues who customers can contact to discuss any concerns relating to service charges/rent statement
- Clarity is required in the service charge letters, about the time period the charges relate to
- The letter to include next 12 months' plans to address communal matters so that customers know what to expect and validate visits from contractor.

Grounds maintenance and cleaning contracts

- Include questions about level of staff turnover and reasons for this, and question about living wage, as part of the quality evaluation questions

- Involve customers in the tender evaluation process – 4 RSP members volunteered to get involved
- Ask contractors to provide examples of work they have done for other associations and include site visits to see the quality of their work for other associations
- Increase the frequency of hedge cutting
- Work towards bringing the cleaning contract in house:
 - ✓ Offer apprenticeships
 - ✓ Ensure effective training is provided
- Involve customers in checking the standard of cleaning and grounds maintenance in their areas
- Consult customers about cut and collect grass in preparation for tendering the new grounds maintenance contract (which is due to start in October 2023)
- Include information about the grounds maintenance schedule on the website, e.g. setting out a calendar of activities. One of the examples identified as illustrating this point was the information displayed on Great Places' website <https://www.greatplaces.org.uk/?news=ground-maintenance-working-for-you> .
- Include pictures on the website, showing what 'good' or acceptable standards of grounds maintenance that customers can expect
- Provide greater clarity for customers, on the website, about the areas that IVH is responsible for maintaining, and are therefore incurs a service charge for grounds maintenance