

Accent Housing Annual Report to Residents 2016/17

Consumer Standards

The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) has set consumer standards which all 'registered providers' (housing associations and housing organisations) must comply with. This is our 'self-assessment' of how we meet these standards.

We are required to present this self-assessment to our boards and committees so they can challenge any poor performance and recommend service improvements, and publish the self-assessment on our website so all customers can see it.

There are four consumer standards:

1. Tenant Involvement and Empowerment.
2. Home.
3. Tenancy.
4. Neighbourhood and Community.

This report gives details of our performance against each standard.

1. Tenant involvement and empowerment

What this covers:

- Choices, information and communication appropriate to diverse needs.
- Complaints process.
- Wide range of opportunities to influence and be involved.
- Understanding and responding to diverse needs.

What have we done to meet the standard?

Accessing our services

Our customers can access our services in a number of ways. We have a national contact centre, which has a local rate telephone number. Our telephone opening hours are from 8am - 8pm Monday to Friday and from 8am - 12pm on Saturday. Outside these hours, we operate an emergency repairs service.

We aim to answer 95% of all telephone calls in an average of 20 seconds. The contact centre deals with all initial telephone, email and website contact, and aims to deal with 85% of this contact without the need to pass enquiries onto other teams.

We dealt with over 650,000 contacts last year, 70% of these were over the telephone, 9% were in person, 6% were by letter and 15% were by email. Contact by email more than doubled. We answered 96% of telephone calls in an average of 17 seconds.

We have mobile working arrangements in place for all our 'front line' (housing and contract) staff. This means they are out on site more than in the office, but they have the technology to deal with most enquiries when on our schemes, or in customers' homes.

With our customer portal, our customers can access their rent or service charge accounts, update their personal details or report repairs, anti-social behaviour or complaints. At the end of March 2017, there were 5114 active accounts.

We have information on our services available on-line, which can be downloaded as leaflets and other documents. For value for money purposes, we do not produce printed copies of these items, but we will print them individually on request. We also use Facebook and Twitter to communicate with customers.

Complaints

We have a three stage complaints process – informal, formal and review. We aim to resolve most complaints informally within a short space of time (for example 24 hours). We achieved this with 80% of complaints last year. If a complaint becomes formal, the appropriate manager will seek to resolve it within 10 working days. If a complaint is subject to review, the appropriate regional housing director is responsible for the review and trying to resolve it within 10 working days. We have provided complaints briefings to all ‘front-line’ staff during the year. Our national and regional complaint review groups bring staff together to review our performance and lessons learnt.

Two complaints escalated to the ombudsman and were closed within the year. One concerned a customer who had transferred from one home to another. They had disputed the recharge for clearing rubbish and other work needed to re-let the former home, as well as boiler problems at the new home. The ombudsman found we had nothing to answer for in how we handled the complaint or the action we took.

The second ombudsman decision came in favour of the customer, after finding we had failed in our dog ownership policy. We were told to apologise to the customer and pay £100 compensation for the inconvenience, stress and false expectations.

Engaging with Customers

We have engaged with more customers than ever before with electronic and paper surveys and the Accent Hub, and formal and informal customer groups. For example, as part of our complaints scrutiny review, we surveyed over 650 customers who had made a complaint in the last 18 months. 152 responded. One of the key outcomes was a change in target times as customers were more concerned with the way a complaint was resolved, rather than the time it was resolved in.

In each region, we have one formal engagement process - our compliance and scrutiny committees. Members are made up of customers and non-customers and they are responsible for scrutinising services. Members scrutinised a number of services last year, including:

- Complaints.
- Noise nuisance.
- Re-let variations.
- Tenancy terminations within 12 months.
- Customer communications.

Recommendations are reported to the service performance committee and, where appropriate, any high level recommendations are referred to the Accent Board.

We have a number of other informal customer groups. For example, in our southern region, we have 50 resident cleaning and grounds maintenance monitors. Every month, they scrutinise contractor performance and make recommendations for improvements. We are looking to expand this later this year.

In the Yorkshire and East regions, informal resident groups are involved in scrutiny exercises on behalf of their regional compliance and scrutiny committees.

Independent Living

Our independent living service was developed after we reviewed the services we provide to our older customers. We make health and wellbeing calls aiming to reduce isolation, offer support and to help people to continue to live independently.

We offer customers living in general needs homes greater access to advice and support services including our independent living schemes which will become community hubs.

Of our 3,234 customers over 60, we have called 1,965 so far. 530 have engaged with the service and 479 have asked for a call in six months' time. The remainder either did not respond to contact, or did not require the service.

We helped 248 customers to access services from Accent and elsewhere, and some were simply just happy to receive a call from us. 97 referrals were made for repairs, tenancy support or income recovery services. 64 were made for aid and adaptations. We also rehoused a number of customers, some in our independent living schemes.

How have we performed?

Service area	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
% calls answered	98	92.8	96
% complaints resolved within target time	84	55	78.5
% STAR overall resident satisfaction	82	81	81
% STAR satisfaction with listening and responding to views	60p	61	64

What areas will we improve?

We have set the following targets for the year ahead:

- Number of calls answered – 95%.
- Time to answer – 20 seconds.
- Customer contact: Digital – 20%, telephone – 70%, face to face – 10%.
- First call resolution – 75%.
- Satisfaction with call handling – 85%.
- Self-Serve (% of customers with a customer portal account) – 20%.
- Satisfaction with complaint handling – 80%.

We will improve our contact arrangements using Accent Connect, our new multi-channel contact system. This will allow us to:

- Add contact channels to make it easier for customers to get in touch with us, for example webchat/video/self-service/automated systems.
- Manage all customer contact from one system.
- Continue conversations across channels.
- Contact customers more using email, SMS and secure messaging.
- Know our staff's availability live - no matter where they are

We are also finding out more about our customers' needs and priorities, with customer profiling information.

We will be improving our website with:

- A self-service lettings and allocations process.
- Comprehensive information for our homeowners.
- The ability to view homes and carry out lettings.
- The ability to book and track repairs appointments (and change appointment times).
- The ability to attach photos to complaints and comments.
- Access to all tenancy documents
- Property webchat - for example heating system manuals.
- Financial support, information and guidance.
- Customer engagement surveys.

2. Home

Regulatory standard summary

What this covers:

- Decent Homes Standard compliance.
- Accent Property Standard.
- Cost-effective repairs service.
- Meet statutory requirements around health and safety.

What have we done to meet the standard?

Our Homes

The Decent Homes Standard (DHS) for Accent now stands at 94.10% as of March 2017. This is slightly lower by 1.66% from 2015-16. We no longer replace 'components' (kitchens, bathrooms, heating systems etc.), until their lifecycle has ended, or unless their condition deteriorates earlier than expected. This means we will never achieve 100% at any given time. We have discussed and agreed this principle with the Homes and Communities Agency so we can deliver greater value for money. We replaced 3,236 components in 2016-17 at a cost of £11.2m.

We have an Accent Property Standard (APS), which exceeds that of Decent Homes. We currently set the APS at:

- Double glazing.
- Over bath showers.
- Composite doors.
- Hard wired smoke detectors.
- Carbon monoxide detectors.
- Adequate loft insulation.

We work to maintain all homes to at least the DHS. We have plans in place for this financial year, and we have a thirty-year plan to make sure we maintain the DHS as a minimum.

We have an effective repairs and voids service. During 2016-17, 93.9% of repairs were fixed first time, 96.65% appointments were kept and the average time to complete a repair was 7.66 days. Overall, 92.40% of customers who received a repair were satisfied with their experience. When compared to 2015-16, repairs fixed first time remains the same, appointments kept improved by 2.70% and the average time to complete a repair improved by 0.96%. Customer satisfaction improved 0.50%.

We are now a member of Vantage. Vantage is a 'benchmarking' (comparison) club for housing organisations where results can be measured and compared. We are better than the benchmark for first time fix, appointments kept and customer satisfaction.

We achieved 99.97% gas safety compliance in March 2017, meaning all but five homes with a gas supply received a gas safety check and a valid Landlord's Gas Safety Record Certificate. We complied 100% with our legal process.

We have arrangements in place for managing 'serious detriments', (asbestos, electrical testing, fire safety risk assessments, legionella testing and lift maintenance). If problems are identified, we take the necessary action quickly and effectively.

In 2016-17, we continued to support customers by investing in a significant number of aids and adaptations in partnership with local authorities.

- Minor adaptations – 537 at a cost of £99,000.
- Major adaptations – 98 at a cost of £344,00.
- Total – 635 at a cost of £443,000.
- Grant funding received - £195,000.
- Total net cost - £248,000.

We managed our overall maintenance budget well, with only a small underspend of 5%.

We know our costs are higher than average for the sector. To address this, we are procuring new contracts for repairs, voids and planned works. Initial results from the new contracts, most of which start in September 2017, suggest our costs will come down significantly, and our standards of service will be at a good level. We are also

re-procuring most of our maintenance services to set new service standards and to represent better value for money.

How have we performed?

Service area	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
% Decent Homes compliance	96.39	95.76	94.10
% Gas compliance	99.98	99.96	99.97
£ Spent on planned works (capital only)	£15.0m	£12.8m	£11.2m
Components replaced	4,358	3,245	3,236
Average days to complete repairs	6.70	8.62	7.66
% First time fix	91.40	94.00	93.90
% Appointments made & kept	93.00	93.95	96.65
% Satisfaction with repairs service	94.30	91.90	92.40
% Satisfaction with planned works	96.20	96.42	96.80

What areas will we improve?

We have set the following targets for the year ahead:

- Aim for 100% compliance on all serious detriment activities.
- Average time taken to fix a reported repair – 7 days.
- 94% of appointments kept as planned.
- 93% of reported repairs fixed first time.
- 95% of customers very or fairly satisfied with the way repairs are dealt with.
- 95% of customers very or fairly satisfied with the way planned works are dealt with.
- Launch of new contracts and service offer – significantly reducing the number of contractors we work with.
- Reduced costs on key contracts following procurement for gas servicing and repairs, repairs, voids, planned works and grounds maintenance.
- Purchase own materials on ‘big ticket’ items to reduce costs and to control supply chain (helping first time fix on repairs and general understanding of our product portfolio).
- Launch a new repairs handbook outlining responsibilities and the service offer

We have more work to do around properly managing our properties, how we invest in them and how we make quick and commercial decisions about their future. The information we collect will be combined with our property condition information to provide a complete view of our properties and the customers who live in them. This is a key business improvement area for us in the coming year.

3. Tenancy

What this covers

Regulatory standard summary

- Let homes in a fair, transparent and efficient way.
- Provide access to mutual exchange services.
- Provide range of tenancy types to achieve sustainability and efficient use of property.
- Have a robust, but fair, approach to income management (this is not part of the consumer standard, but we have added it in as a key area of importance for Accent)

What have we done to meet the standard?

Letting our Homes

To meet housing need, we have reviewed our work on Choice Based lettings (CBL) schemes and nominations, and improved our partnerships with local councils and agencies. We have also introduced our own direct waiting lists. We advertise through more channels, including social media and internet sites to attract a broad range of people in housing need.

We have regional long term empty property plans which we use whenever we have a home we think may be difficult to let. These plans include initiatives such as using our website, and other websites (like Gumtree), to advertise vacant homes, and for the development of local waiting lists for independent living and some general needs schemes.

We offer a range of tenancy types including licences, assured and shorthold, affordable rent, shared ownership, intermediate, and market rent. We use local lettings plans to tackle specific issues on estates, including high turnover and low demand.

ABODE is a shared housing product in the North West, which we see as a potential way of responding to the forthcoming changes to the local housing allowance for under 35s. Six homes have been converted for ABODE with a new tenancy agreement, and a rent and service charge of £99 inclusive of council tax and utility costs. It is early days and we are tracking progress closely to see how and if we might introduce this product in other areas of the country.

We have also piloted a supporting independence initiative, the aims of which are to ensure the right applicants are offered the right homes via a rigorous pre-tenancy process. We look for the risks, then work with our customers to help them overcome them and become independent via skills development and career progression where appropriate.

Overall, the process has been successful. Each region will continue with the approach in the pilot areas we have agreed, and also extend them to other 'high risk' schemes.

We comply with S106 planning requirements in letting homes in rural areas, use starter tenancies to ensure new customers meet their responsibilities and carry out immigration checks under the Government's Right to Rent requirement on all direct lettings.

To make better use of our homes, we offer House Exchange to promote mutual exchanges, and offer incentives for down-sizing.

We provide decoration vouchers and, on occasions, carpets, decorating and white goods as incentives. We also provide a tenancy support service to help vulnerable customers settle in their home.

During the year we have:

- Upgraded our website so we can track what visitors to the website are looking for and improve our service to them.
- Continued to provide back-to-back lettings to reduce long term empty home turnaround times
- Reviewed our lettings process and agreed a new digital, self-serve, transparent and easy to access service.

We developed a new survey to gauge the ease and transparency of our lettings process. 89% of our applicants tell us that our process is simple and easy to use. 95% are happy with our process and found our staff friendly, polite and knowledgeable.

In Yorkshire we carried out a programme of social media and public space advertising which improved recognition, engagement and our performance. This will be introduced in other regions in the year ahead.

Managing Arrears and Recovering Income

Responsibility for income recovery rests with several teams, with our housing officers at the centre. The contact centre deals with low level arrears and aims to answer incoming calls on debt at first point of contact. There is a specialist income recovery team in each region, responsible for higher level arrears, but there is a strong connection between all our front line teams in preventing and reducing arrears with a key focus on helping customers achieve a level of personal economic stability to help them sustain their tenancies. Over the course of the year our current tenant arrears reduced to £2,036,000, a reduction of over £500,000.

We have introduced pre-court and pre- eviction meetings with customers who are in severe financial difficulty. These meetings are run like case conferences and aim to address the debt issue for the customer, reduce the number of cases we take to court and reduce the number of evictions we carry out. Over the year the number of evictions reduced from 116 to 79.

We continue to use the 'Call to Collect' automated text service to contact customers on low level arrears. This enables us to focus our staff time on the customers who need more in depth assistance to pay their rent. We are also focusing our resources on the customer groups who are most at risk of not paying their rent.

Over the coming year we will adapt our system and use of technology to ensure we can respond positively to the challenge we face by the launch of Universal Credit across many of the areas where we have homes.

How have we performed?

Performance indicator	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Lets within the year	314	298	2,569
Average re-let time (days)	28.6	25.3	27.5
Back to back lets	N/A	N/A	353
Mutual exchanges	N/A	N/A	129
Transfers	N/A	N/A	122
Turnover	11.7	11.3	10.2%
% Current tenant arrears	3.9	3.1	2.3%

What areas will we improve?

We will:

- Increase web based engagement with potential applicants.
- Procure and implement a web based application process.
- Reduce average re-let times to 20 days.
- Reduce void loss to £950,000.
- Reduce rent arrears of current tenants to £396,000

We will continue to review CBL schemes we are members of to ensure that they are enabling us to make sustainable lets to our homes.

4. Neighbourhood & community

What this covers

Regulatory standard summary

- Keep neighbourhoods and communal areas clean and safe.
- Work in partnership to promote social, environmental and economic well-being.
- Work in partnership to prevent and tackle anti-social behaviour.

What have we done to meet the standard?

Our approach to properly managing our neighbourhoods and communities is to provide well trained professional estate services, tenancy management and tenancy support teams. Our local neighbourhood plans are focused on us being a first class landlord, providing services that support security, neighbourhoods and communities. We work closely with police, our own legal team and third party anti-social behaviour agencies to make sure our services are responsive and effective in tackling the issues that undermine neighbourhoods.

During the year 2016/17, our teams dealt with 717 cases of anti-social behaviour of which 483 involved criminal offences. 26 incidents were hate crime and 17 cases of were domestic abuse. Most cases occur in deprived inner city areas. The housing manager and tenancy sustainability manager in each region regularly review all open cases, and the tenancy sustainability manager audits all closed cases to ensure good management and for future learning.

We analyse anti-social behaviour by region, development, type and whether it is criminal or non-criminal. We have robust management arrangements to make sure trends and hotspots are noted and effective actions are taken.

We have robust case management and review processes, and work with a range specialist partners to support our work.

Our staff will be attending further training this year.

We invest in the quality of our homes and neighbourhoods as a priority, and address issues of fuel poverty directly through our investment programme.

We have a stronger approach to understanding estate service needs on schemes, and we ensure they are developed and factored into our contract procurement. We clearly state what services should be delivered to schemes to ensure the service charge is accurate and transparent to our customers and the business. By gathering this information, which includes details of the areas needing maintenance, we feel we now have an opportunity to deliver excellent services which provide value for money into the future.

Our successful tenancy support service helps our customers manage their homes and their tenancies. Last year, we supported over 1,600 residents to remain in their homes by providing additional help and support to manage their tenancy, settle in to their new home, and help with debt and finances.

Tenancy support officers work with a range of partners to help residents tackle debt, dependency and financial exclusion. We have secured grant funding for furniture, white goods, discretionary housing payments, housing benefit backdates and debt reduction. We helped residents bring in over £450,000 extra income. 97% of people were satisfied with the service we provide.

We work in close partnership with the police, social services, fire services, community mental health, environmental health, substance misuse services and local charities working in the community. We attend multi-agency meetings in most of the local authority areas we work in. We are a signatory to a number of information sharing protocols across the country.

How have we performed?

Service area	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Referrals to tenancy sustainability service –	1080	1262	1826
Anti-social behaviour cases reported -	667	713	719

% Satisfaction with anti-social behaviour case handling	82	88.4	87.8
% Satisfaction with anti-social behaviour case outcome	82	83.2	86.8
% Satisfaction with neighbourhood as place to live	79	80	79
% Satisfaction that service charge presents value for money	55	60	62

What areas will we improve?

We will:

- Continue to improve how we manage anti-social behaviour and aim to close cases within an average of 60 days.
- Develop our tenancy assessment process for potential customers.
- Develop our help and advice service for older people in general needs housing through our independent living service.
- Introduce a new way of measuring customer satisfaction with services such as cleaning and grounds maintenance.
- Procure new service contracts for cleaning, grounds maintenance, fire safety, lifts, warden call and water hygiene. These will go live in 2017/18. The new contracts will see us work with much fewer contractors and make savings which directly impact the service charge.
- Commission a tree survey of all communal trees across the business so we have a tree register and can plan for all tree maintenance works to keep our neighbourhoods healthy.
- Consider using GIS to better manage our estates and to understand and deliver all necessary requirements.

Thank you for your interest in our self-assessment for Accent Housing. For more detail on any of the information contained in this document, please contact us. For regional performance and news, please view our regional reports and our value for money self-assessment for customers under the customer publications section of our website.

You may also like to view our online animated video of our annual report for residents.

If you would like more detail on anything included in this document, please contact us on **0345 678 0555**