



*2006-2007
Improving Housing Services
by Involving Tenants*



Beacon case study

Beacon theme: Improving housing services by involving tenants
Authority name: Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council
Case study title: Performance management

Green inspectors

This case study shows how customers were involved in the review of a major service level agreement (SLA) for the environmental care of Bolton at Home estates. The SLA was made between Bolton At Home and Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council environmental services. This case study illustrates how customers continue to play a pivotal role in monitoring those services.

Background

Bolton is situated in the north west of England and has a population of 261,000 living in 115,000 households. Over 11 per cent of the population belong to black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups. The Indian community is the largest ethnic minority group at 6.1 per cent. There are high levels of deprivation in the borough. The Department of Communities and Local Government's (DCLG) Indices of Deprivation 2004 show that Bolton is rated as the fiftieth most deprived local authority out of 354 councils. Of the 115,000 homes in the borough, 70 per cent are owner-occupied and 22 per cent are social housing. This is split 18 per cent and four per cent between council ownership and housing associations respectively. Private rented homes account for the remaining eight per cent of Bolton's housing stock.

Bolton at Home was formed in December 2002 to manage and improve the council's 19,000 homes. It officially launched on the 10 May 2003. It is committed to providing excellent services, and modernising and improving council owned homes and neighbourhoods throughout Bolton. Bolton at Home is the only arms length management organisation (ALMO) in the country to have responsibility for delivering public and private sector regeneration.

Bolton at Home recently received the coveted Audit Commission three-star award for delivery of its housing and regeneration services, which it operates on behalf of Bolton Council.



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Key Issues and problems

When Bolton at Home was established we recognised that we were not only responsible for the management of council properties, but that we also had a significant role to play in the overall cleanliness and environment on our estates. At the time we had an existing service level agreement (SLA) from when we were still part of the council. We, and the environmental services department at Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council were both parties to this agreement.

There were a number of problems with this, including:

- neither we nor the service provider used the document actively as a reference
- there was too much jargon in some of the terminology
- customers had not been involved in setting service standards
- there had been no assessment of value for money in relation to the SLA

What Bolton At Home did

With the gaps identified, we set about reviewing the service level agreement with our customers.

It was decided that we would continue with the existing service provider – environmental services at Bolton Council. There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, customers were broadly happy with the services that the council provided and felt confident that the council could deliver the improvements they wanted. Secondly, in a value for money analysis, environmental services were found to be 14 per cent cheaper than private sector companies providing these services.

After deciding to team up with environmental services we began work on the detailed SLA. We consulted with key customer groups such as the Bolton Affiliation of Tenant and Residents Associations (BATRA). We worked with them to consult our 15 neighbourhood panels. The consultation examined in detail the range of services to be provided within the SLA based on the issues that were important to customers. It also looked at the standards these services were to be provided at, where appropriate.



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We then sat down with senior managers in environmental services to negotiate the service level agreement. One particular outcome of customer involvement was the use of easily understandable pictorial standards to illustrate the service expected by our customers.

The SLA was crucial for establishing clear standards of service. Just as crucial was the necessity for dialogue between our customers and environmental services. Some of the changes that have been achieved are down to improved customer relationships that came about through this dialogue.

It was important that customers were actively involved in monitoring standards as well as establishing them. This is where 'green inspectors' became important.

Green inspectors

Since 2002 Bolton Council has been completing reality checks with customers about various services, such as void management and the capital programme. In 2004 Bolton at Home completed a large consultation exercise about the environmental services customers received on their estates. This exercise showed that there is a need and demand for customers to be involved in the monitoring of environmental services. 'Green inspectors' were recruited from around the borough, through various methods such as open days and residents' associations. There are currently 50 green inspectors. Each inspector is trained on the performance standards set in the service level agreement.

The best value performance indicator (BVPI) 199 model influences these standards. ENCAMS set this BVPI to facilitate reporting on the cleanliness of the environment in local authorities, as a member of the public would perceive it. This ensures the results will be comparable with the overall national returns delivered to the Government every year. It will help to assess the success of current cleansing regimes.

There are four levels of standard:

A – excellent	pass
B – good	pass
C – average	fail
D – poor	fail



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The first checks took place in October 2005 and now continue monthly. The first quarter results (October to December 05) showed a positive result with all services having an average of 73 per cent pass rate. In December 2005, the review of the

service level agreement started, taking into consideration comments and suggestions from the green inspectors.

Key outcomes

The key outcomes relating to the success of the green inspectors project include:

- high satisfaction results – in the quarter October to December 2005, the pass rate averaged 73 per cent; this rose to 75 per cent in the quarter January to March 2006
- improved partnership working – the service provider has a better understanding of customers' views
- increased opportunity for residents to be involved in the decision making in their community
- improved services and an improved SLA

Resources

The resources of a senior manager and a project officer have been partly dedicated to the establishment of the SLA and the green inspectors. This was matched by an equal commitment within environmental services. In addition, the success of the green inspectors is due to customers' time and effort in making the process work. Financial resources are also dedicated to delivering various aspects of the actual environmental service. Further details about this can be obtained from the contact below.

Critical success factors

The critical success factors have been the partnership working between Bolton At Home and environmental services; and the commitment of our customers dedicating their time and effort to improving the standards of the environment on their estates.

Key contacts

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