

Small housing association of the year: winner

Westfield Housing Association



Please provide evidence of how your housing association is delivering high quality services to residents, across a range of service areas

The Association has undertaken a bi-annual satisfaction survey amongst its tenants since 1996.

The survey in 2010 revealed the following highlights:

- Satisfaction with WHA as a landlord was 97% with 70% saying they were "very satisfied"
- Satisfaction with the "opportunities for participation" was 98%
- Satisfaction with the "quality of communication" was 97%
- Satisfaction with the repairs service was 94% with 67% saying they were "very satisfied"
- There was 100% satisfaction with both the reception service and the housing management service with 96% saying the reception service was "good" and 86% saying the housing management service was "good".

During 2011, the Association consulted its tenants on the TSA Regulatory Framework and attained the following levels of satisfaction:

- 98% with our proposed Service Statement
- 100% with our proposed Approach to Tenant Involvement
- 100% with our proposed Approach to Service Delivery and Improvement

In our tenant consultation exercise we explained that our approach to ensuring a quality and improving service is not driven by the adoption of inflexible standards and procedures. Instead we focus on listening to each and every customer and clearly understanding what matters to them as individuals. We encourage our staff to make decisions and meet those customer needs as they understand them, using their own common sense and initiative. Our systems are designed to focus our work on what adds value to our customers, increasing effectiveness and reducing wasteful activities. In other words, we try to shape our work to meet customer demands recognising that, as those demands change, so we need to change.

We survey all our day-to-day repairs jobs and, in the current financial year, are achieving the following levels of satisfaction from the 494 responses received:

- 98% with the overall time taken to complete the job (95% saying "good" or "very good")
- 99% with the efficiency of Association staff (96% saying "good" or "very good")
- 100% with the quality of workmanship (98% saying "good" or "very

- good")
- 100% with the politeness of the contractor (99% saying "good" or "very good")
- 100% with the cleanliness of the contractor (98% saying "good" or "very good")

The Association has a large annual planned maintenance programme of over £400,000 which currently covers kitchen and bathroom improvements and an external door replacement programme. All the stock has double-glazing with standards far in excess of decent homes.

Despite its size (499 units) the Association provides value for money even when compared to larger landlords; for example, based on HouseMark figures for 2009/10 for its 150 "traditional" housing association members:

- our housing management costs were £420 per unit compared to an average of £517 and an upper quartile figure of £446
- our responsive repairs costs were £507 per unit compared to an average of £798 and an upper quartile figure of £683
- our planned maintenance costs were £1,082 per unit compared to an average of £1087.

Please tell us about a specific project or achievement which sets you apart from other good performing housing associations

In 2004, the Association purchased, from Cumbria County Council, the Westfield Infant School building which was, by then, surplus to educational requirements. Using nearly £700,00 of funding from 8 sources (including regeneration and European monies), and including a contribution from its own resources of £255,000, the Association converted the building into a local service delivery centre that housed the Association itself as well as the local Children's Centre, Cumbria Police Community Safety Team, independent Domestic Violence advisors and a childcare nursery.

The childcare nursery, Footsteps, was set up by, and continues to be owned and managed by, the Association. When it opened in July 2004, it had 28 children on the register and 5 members of staff. It has grown over the years to now have an annual turnover of £400,000 with 145 children on its roll and to provide employment to 26 staff. Most recently, an extension has been added to provide a further 26 nursery education places for those children accessing Nursery Education Grant.

It was identified by OFSTED at its last inspection as being "Outstanding" in all areas, the only private childcare setting in West Cumbria to achieve that standard. In 2011 Footsteps received the Golden Apples Early Years Award from Cumbria Newspapers Group in recognition of its excellence.

Five staff members are qualified to degree level with Early Years Practitioner status and 10 other staff members are currently studying for Foundation Degrees and Early Years Practitioner status. Childcare charges are half-price for Association staff and tenants.

Why is your approach innovative/unique?

We are generally recognised as having an approach and “character” that sets us apart from the other (larger) landlords in West Cumbria. For example, we are explicitly not a target driven organisation, believing targets to have the potential effect of distorting performance, with the result that we fail to deliver exactly what the customer wants.

The Association’s staff members are recognised for their commitment and excellence. In delivering our service, we try to ensure that our “expertise” is put at the front end of our contacts with customers. For example, all members of staff are able to handle repair enquiries, placing the work immediately with our external contractors.

Staff development work is currently focussing on the growth of leadership throughout the organisation, meaning that all should feel able to take issues forward in a responsible manner; staff members engage with each other in an organic way to implement change. The cultural maturity of the organisation is evidenced by the fact that it is the staff members themselves, through a collective bi-annual process, who establish the salary scale for each of their colleagues.

Our development agreement with the HCA is innovative in that it does not involve any grant. We are increasing the rents on our estate to "affordable" levels, using the additional income generated to "buy-back" properties previously lost through the Right-to-Buy. This innovative and grant-free approach could be replicated in other areas with housing need but relatively low value properties - assuming there was a political will of course.

Please provide evidence to demonstrate the positive impact of your project or achievement for the communities involved

Our Westfield Estate is in one of the most deprived areas of the country being in the worst 10% for both health deprivation and disability and for education, skills and training.

The Association showed community leadership and drive to push through the development of the former infants school into a neighbourhood centre focussed on the local delivery of mainstream services. A number of years after the opening of the centre, and as the impact of the spending cuts start to take effect, it is clear that the positive impact of the initiative will continue, in particular through the Children’s Centre, now firmly established, and the childcare nursery, Footsteps, which is owned by the Association.

Services delivered by the Children's Centre (run by Action for Children) within the neighbourhood centre include:

- promotion and activities to support child development and learning ("Baby Sign")
- adult and family learning ("Training 4 Parents", "All About Teens")

- childcare for special groups or disabilities ("Little Rainbows", "5-8 Fun Time")
- family support ("Respite Childcare")
- healthy child programme ("Breast Feeding Support Group", "Development Checks")
- antenatal and post natal support ("Young Parents Group", "Bumps and Babes")
- supporting healthy lifestyles ("Youth Group", "Parent Carer Network")
- intensive family support for families with multiple problems ("Family Support", "Play 2 Learn")
- parenting programmes ("Triple P", "Sleep Right")
- domestic violence ("Recovery Toolkit")
- mental health ("Bereavement Group").

The overall effectiveness of the early years provision at Footsteps Nursery was described as outstanding by OFSTED; the inspector described it as an "exceptionally well organised, superbly resourced, stimulating and inclusive setting". In terms of the five outcomes for children in the early years foundation stage, as detailed below, OFSTED awarded an outstanding grade, meaning "this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality" - the extent to which children:

- achieve and enjoy learning
- feel safe
- adopt healthy lifestyles
- make a positive contribution, and
- develop skills for the future.

The Nursery has been nominated for the NDNA Nursery Awards 2012 with one parent saying, "our child is happy, safe and developing well – what more could we ask for?"

The Association has no doubt that these services, being delivered from its neighbourhood centre, will positively impact the early years outcomes for the children of our community in future. It intends to build on the successes to date by establishing a Healthy Child Project in conjunction with the local Health Visitors. The project worker, directly employed by the Association, will take forward the following aims:

- i) to examine the level and quality of service around the Healthy Child Programme (HCP) currently being delivered to tenants of the Association;
- ii) to identify gaps and weaknesses in the service delivery;
- iii) to explore and identify ways of improving the HCP outcomes for our tenants; and
- iv) to work in conjunction with health visitors and partners (GPs, midwives, Children's Centre and others) to provide tailored support that meets the individual needs and preferences of the Association's tenants.

Please tell us briefly why your housing association should win this award

Despite being very small, with just five full-time and six part-time staff members, the Association is totally independent and provides its own accountancy and development functions. The Association has an open membership policy and is effectively a tenant-controlled organisation; a third of the board are tenants, as is the Chairman.

The Association has a Neighbourhood Investment Committee, comprising tenant board members and residents, which provides "tenant scrutiny" and oversees a fund of £50,000 per annum that is used to support a range of activities and initiatives within the community. The latest beneficiary is the Community Money Advice Service which has received funding of £2,500 to cover its running costs in 2012/13; as a consequence of this funding, the Service will visit Association tenants at home in order to best assist them with their financial challenges.

The Association has joined forces with Home Group, Impact Housing and the University of Cumbria in a project designed to utilise £3.7 million of European funding on retrofit works. The Association has already installed PV, solar thermal and air source heat pumps on a number of properties and will undertake external wall insulation works to 27 of its rural "hard to treat" properties over the next two years.

In an era when it is often heard that organisations are merging "in order to deliver more and better services to our customers", Westfield is an example of how small organisations can effectively and efficiently deliver as much, if not more.