

One Housing Group:
Island Homes
Telephone Mystery Shopper Report

August 2009



Executive Summary

Context

1. In February 2009 One Housing Group re commissioned Solon Community Network to Mystery Shop Island Homes to test their customers' experience of service provision within the organisation.
2. The telephone Mystery Shops tested Island Homes' general housing services, service standards and customer care practices. It also set out to test staff knowledge and information provision on specific housing management enquiries.
3. Four different telephone enquiries / scenarios covering specific and general housing management issues were used to test Island Homes.
4. Solon trained nine Mystery Shoppers who completed four telephone shops each (36 shops allocated in total).

Overall Mystery Shopping Results

5. Overall results for the organisation were positive but staff performance was variable.
 - A majority of shoppers (86%) got through on their first attempt.
 - Only one shopper had to use his second and third attempt but was unable to get through to a member of staff as all calls were answered by an answer phone service.
 - According to One Housing Group's '*Tenants' Handbook*' calls should be answered is within 4 rings (approximately 9 seconds). Only one shopper's call was answered within the standard of 4 rings.
 - Staff performed well when delivering the full greeting statement to shoppers. It is a requirement that staff give their name to callers and (67%) were given names by staff.
 - A majority of calls were handled by Contact Centre staff (61%). Given the enquiries that were allocated, it was expected that a higher percentage of calls should have been dealt with by the Contact Centre. Of the calls that were transferred a majority of the calls (82%) that were transferred were answered straight away.
 - The Customer Care results were on average positive. On scoring the quality of contact for the first staff member, shoppers reported that 78% of staff being quick and efficient and 86% being polite and courteous.
 - Good performance in Customer Care was also the case for the quality for the second staff member. Shoppers gave high scores (91%) for staff being polite courteous, quick and efficient.

- Staff performed less well when shoppers were evaluating the overall experience of making the call, including being transferred to duty housing officers. A majority of shoppers (67%) reported staff came across as professional and did all that was necessary to answer their enquiry.
- Staff performance was poor when dealing with the 'Request for a Transfer / Mutual Exchange enquiry'. Only 30% of staff informed shoppers correctly that Island Homes does not take self referrals or keep waiting lists and were told about referrals to local authorities.
- Staff met basic performance standards on the Rent Arrears enquiry, with almost three quarters of shoppers being advised that they might be able to claim housing benefit. Over a quarter (38%) were told they could come to an alternative arrangement with Island Homes on how to cover their rent payments.
- Shoppers were less satisfied with how staff dealt with the 'Reporting a Neighbourhood / Noise Nuisance' enquiry. Only half of staff encouraged shoppers to report the nuisance case over the telephone. A quarter of shoppers did report staff asked them to keep a record of the time and dates the nuisance incidents occurred. Few (13%) were told to contact Environmental Health and were given the contact number.
- On average shoppers were not advised correctly by staff on the Requesting a Tenant Repair enquiry, with only 33% of shoppers being told that Island does not carry that type of repair. The verbatim comments illustrate that a number of shoppers were offered repair appointments.

6. Our recommendations include:

- Fully publicising the Mystery Shopper programme results to staff and residents, and congratulating staff where they have achieved positive results.
- Setting or reviewing service and customer care standards where applicable, where standards do not reflect how services are delivered, for instance to review standard of answering calls within 4 rings given it takes longer for callers to speak to staff members
- Reminding staff of the corporate standards, either through staff appraisals, printing & distributing greeting cards, reminders by senior management or through the intranet. Where basic staff knowledge needs to be improved, Island Homes could for instance develop and review standards on dealing with basic housing management enquiries to aid staff in answering enquiries
- Training is an effective way to address gaps in staff knowledge and improve performance, as well as updating existing staff and inducting new staff in commonly asked housing management questions.
- To continually monitor staff performance and service delivery, we recommend that further Mystery Shopper exercises be undertaken at 6 to 12 month intervals.

MAIN REPORT CONTENT

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Methodology**
- 3. Profile of Mystery Shoppers**
- 4. Interpretation of Data**
- 5. Data Analysis**
 - Service Standards**
 - Customer Care Practices**
 - Knowledge & Information Giving**
- 6. Conclusions**

Introduction

- 1.1 In February 2009 the One Housing Group commissioned Solon Community Network to pilot a resident Mystery Shopping project with Island Homes.
- 1.2 Nine residents undertook 36 Mystery Shops to test the services provided by Island Housing Association over a period of 2 weeks, from 9 June until 19 June 2009.
- 1.3 This report covers:
 - Analysis of telephone shops
 - Detailed scenario analysis
 - Identification of areas for service improvement

Methodology

- 2.1 Island Homes posted approximately 1,000 flyers inviting residents to become Mystery Shoppers.
- 2.2 A total of 15 residents expressed an interest in becoming Mystery Shoppers, 13 were booked onto the training course.
- 2.3 Nine residents and one member of One Housing Group staff attended a full day training session on 8 June 2009.
- 2.4 A total of 9 Mystery Shoppers completed an average of four telephone shops each. All calls were directed to One Housing Group's Call Centre.
- 2.5 Shoppers had a total of three attempts in which to complete their enquiry in the event that lines were engaged, answered by answer phone messages or not picked up after one minute.
- 2.6 When numbers were dialled, they were pre-fixed with 141 so that the shopper's number was 'withheld'.
- 2.7 From the 36 shops that were allocated, a combined total of 43 telephone calls were made, over all three attempts. Of the 43 attempts that were made, 41 were successful. This includes all attempts over a two week period. One caller did not get through to a member of staff on all three attempts because the line was directed to an answer phone message.

2.8 The telephone shops tested staff performance against published standards in the following service areas:

Island Homes' Standards	Areas tested by Mystery Shopping
<p>How quickly the phone was answered</p> <p>Within 4 rings (on average 9 seconds)</p>	<p>Answer the phone within 'x' seconds</p>
<p>Greeting Statement:</p> <p>'We will ensure we greet you in a polite way and let you know who you are speaking to'</p>	<p>Hello, good morning or afternoon'</p> <p>Mention Island Homes</p> <p>Give their name</p> <p>Say 'How can I help you?'</p>
<p>Ending the call:</p> <p>N/A</p>	<p>Check enquiry answered satisfactorily</p> <p>Say 'Thank you'</p> <p>Say 'Good bye'</p> <p>Said nothing / remained silent</p>
<p>Dealing with the enquiry</p> <p>N/A</p>	<p>Deal with the enquiry themselves</p> <p>Explain they could not answer the enquiry</p> <p>Transfer the call to another member of staff</p> <p>Put the shopper on hold</p> <p>Ask the shopper to call back</p> <p>Offer to call the shopper back</p>
<p>Transferring calls:</p> <p>N/A</p>	<p>The first member of staff explained the reason for transferring your call</p> <p>They gave you the name of the staff member and/or Department you were being transferred to</p> <p>They informed you that your call would be dealt with soon</p> <p>They offered to take a message</p>

Island Homes' Standards	Areas tested by Mystery Shopping
Customer Services: We will be friendly, polite and helpful We will avoid jargon and explain technical terms	Staff were: Polite & courteous Quick & efficient Treat customers with respect Come across as professional Genuinely wanted to help

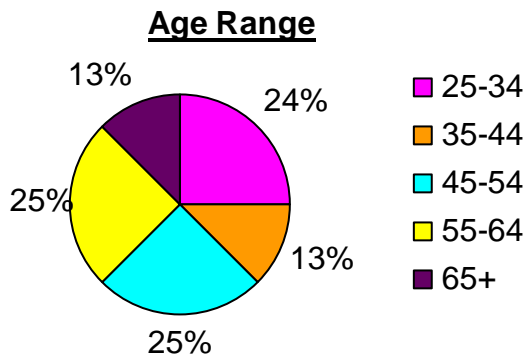
2.9 The four different telephone enquiries / scenarios used to test staff knowledge and information giving were:

Scenario	No of calls allocated	No of successful calls
Reporting a Neighbourhood / Noise Nuisance	8	8
Rent Arrears Prevention	8	8
Requesting a Tenant Repair	10	9
Requesting a Transfer / Mutual Exchange to a Island Homes property	10	10

Profile of mystery shoppers

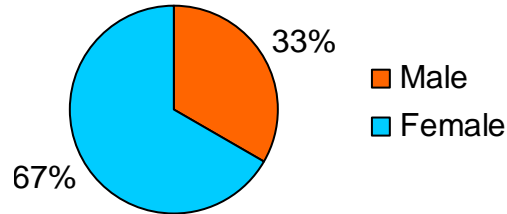
3.1 Application packs collected a range of demographic and other information to build a profile of the shoppers. The charts below summarise this data.

3.2 Age Range



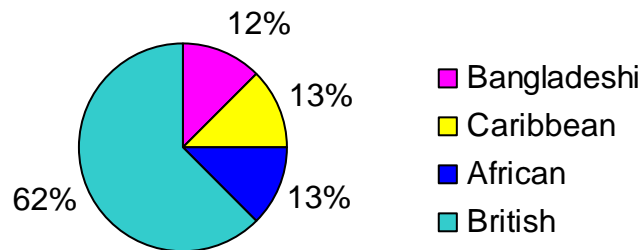
3.3 Gender

Gender



3.4 Ethnicity

Ethnicity



3.5 Disability

None of the shoppers reported having a disability.

Interpretation of Data

4.1 Throughout this report all percentages have been rounded up or down.

4.2 Apart from spelling, the verbatim comments in Appendix One and throughout this report have not been edited.

Data Analysis

5.1 The telephone Mystery Shops tested 3 areas of service provision:

- Service standards
- Customer care practices
- Staff knowledge and information provision

5.2 The objectives of the telephone Mystery Shopping were to:

- test staff knowledge
- provide a baseline of service provision
- make an evaluation of services from a resident's perspective
- carry out a real time audit of residents' experience of the service

Service Standards

Answering the phone at the first attempt

5.3 Of the 36 shops that were allocated, 43 calls were made, over all three attempts. A total of 81% (35 calls) were answered in all three attempts.

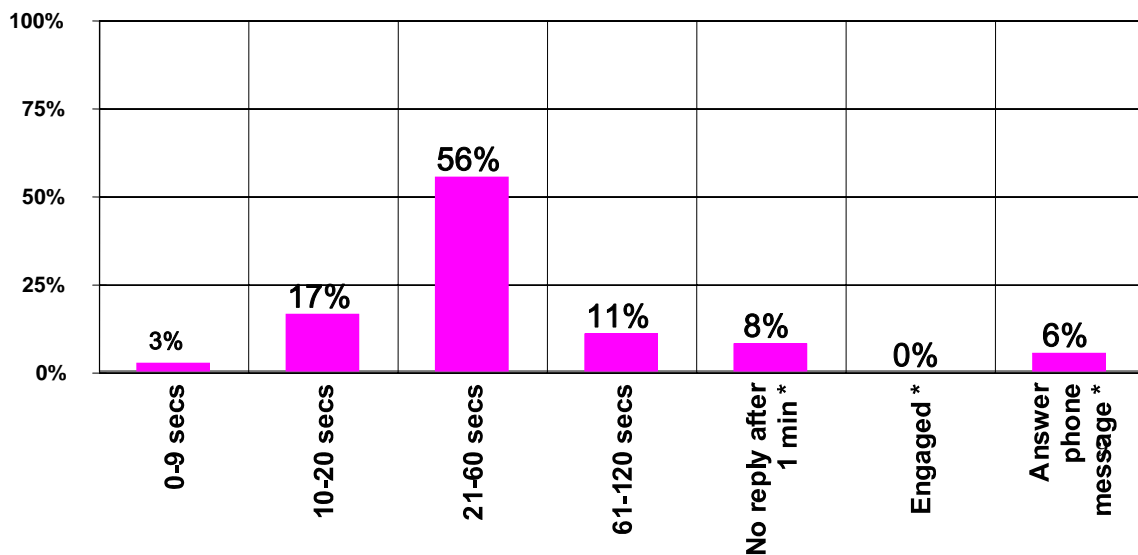
5.4 A majority of calls (86%) were answered within the first attempt. Only one call was not answered on all three attempts. The shopper reported the call was directed to an answer phone message on all three attempts.

How quickly calls were answered in all three attempts

5.5 Island's advertised service standard is that all calls should be answered within 4 rings. This equates to approximately 9 seconds.

5.6 Only one call (3%) was answered within Island's standards of 9 seconds or less. A majority of calls (56%) were answered within 21-60 seconds.

Length of time taken to answer calls



5.7 This poor result can in part be explained by the fact that shoppers were calling the Contact Centre's automated service and were recording how long it took to speak to a member of staff. We would recommend the standard being revised given that the waiting time to speak to a member of staff is longer than 4 rings.

5.8 Of the calls that were not answered on the first attempt within 9 seconds:

- 17% of shoppers were answered within 10-20 seconds
- 56% of shoppers were answered within 21-60 seconds

5.9 Only 8% of the callers had no reply after one minute. This was the case with one shopper that had to use his second and third attempt in order to get through to a member of staff.

Who Answered the Call

5.10 Mystery Shoppers were asked to verify who answered their calls. The expectation was that all calls would be answered by a Contact Centre operator. All the shoppers reported this was the case.

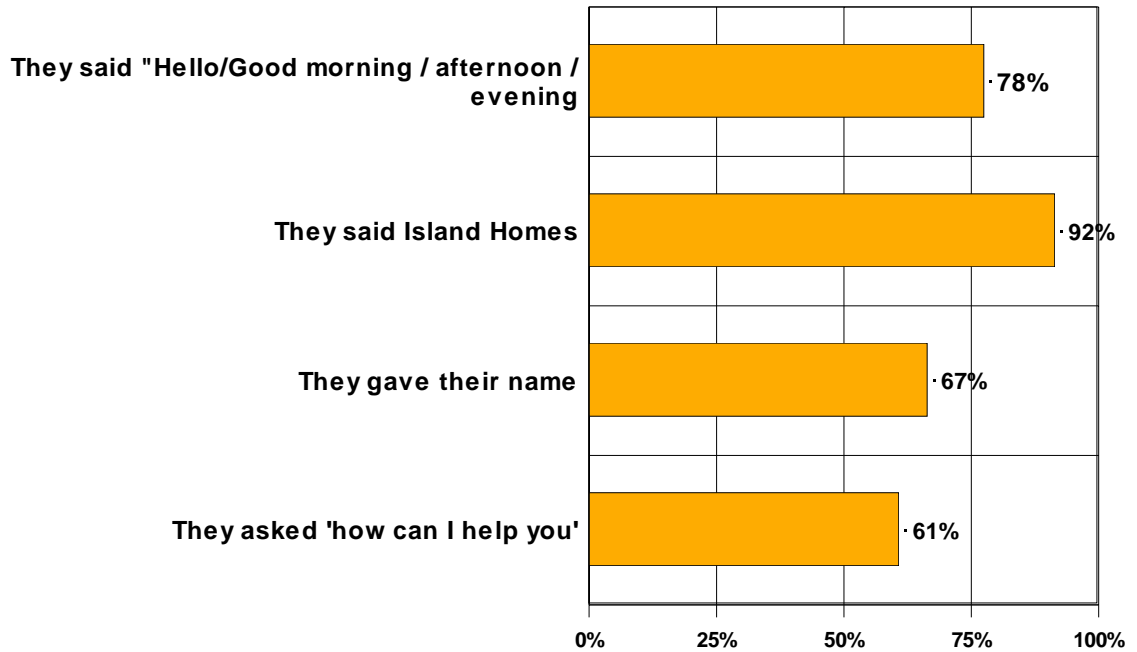
Greeting Statement

5.11 It is a requirement that all Island Homes staff greet shoppers by giving the name of the staff member answering the call. Overall 67% of staff identified themselves to the shoppers. This is a positive response when compared to testing in other organisations within One Housing Group; Community Housing (52%) and Toynbee (50%) respectively.

5.12 The remaining scores for staff delivering a full 'greeting statement' were positive:

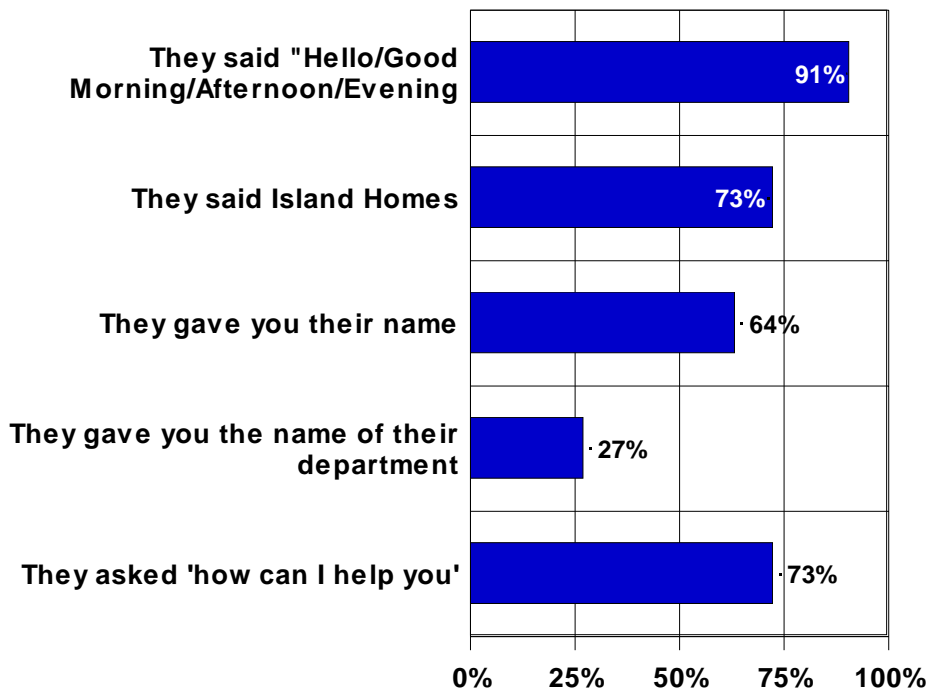
- 78% of staff said 'Hello, good morning, afternoon or evening'
- 92% of staff mentioned Island Homes
- 91% of staff said 'how can I help you?'

Greeting by staff

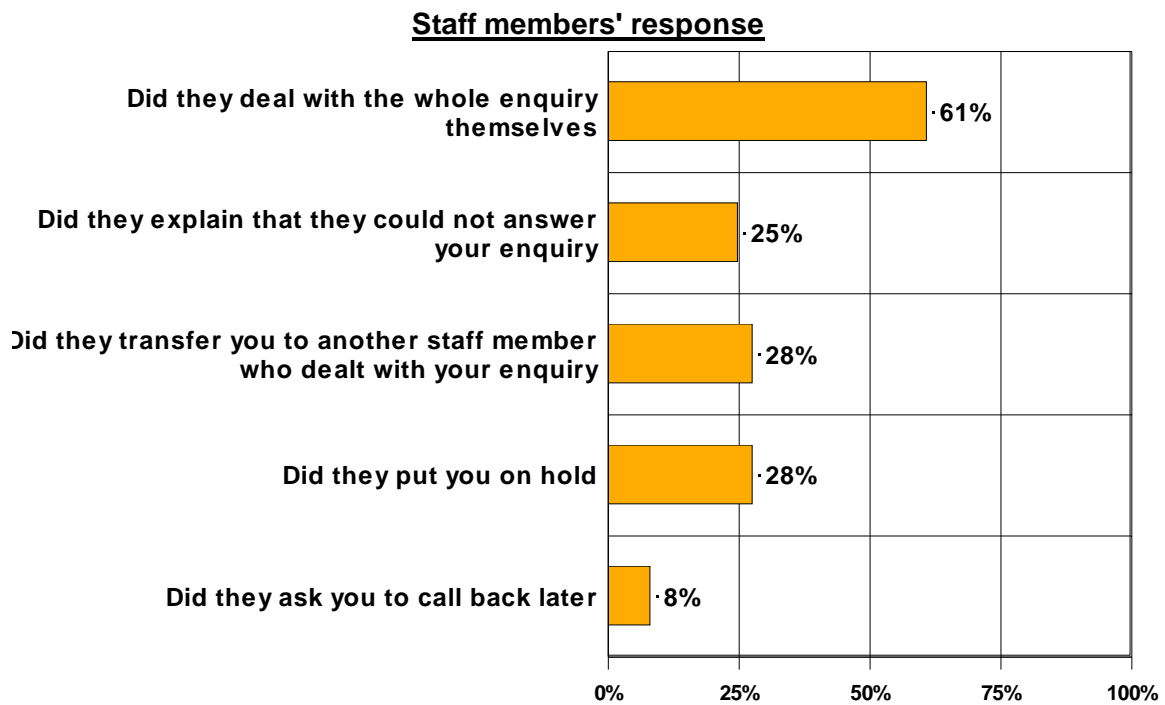


5.13 When calls were transferred, staff often did not identify their department (27%)
A higher percentage of staff (64%) gave their name when greeting shoppers.

Greeting on transferred



Dealing with the enquiry at the first point of contact



5.14 A majority of shoppers (61%) reported that the first person they spoke to answered their enquiry. The expectation from the outset was that most enquiries would be dealt with at the first point of contact by Contact Centre staff.

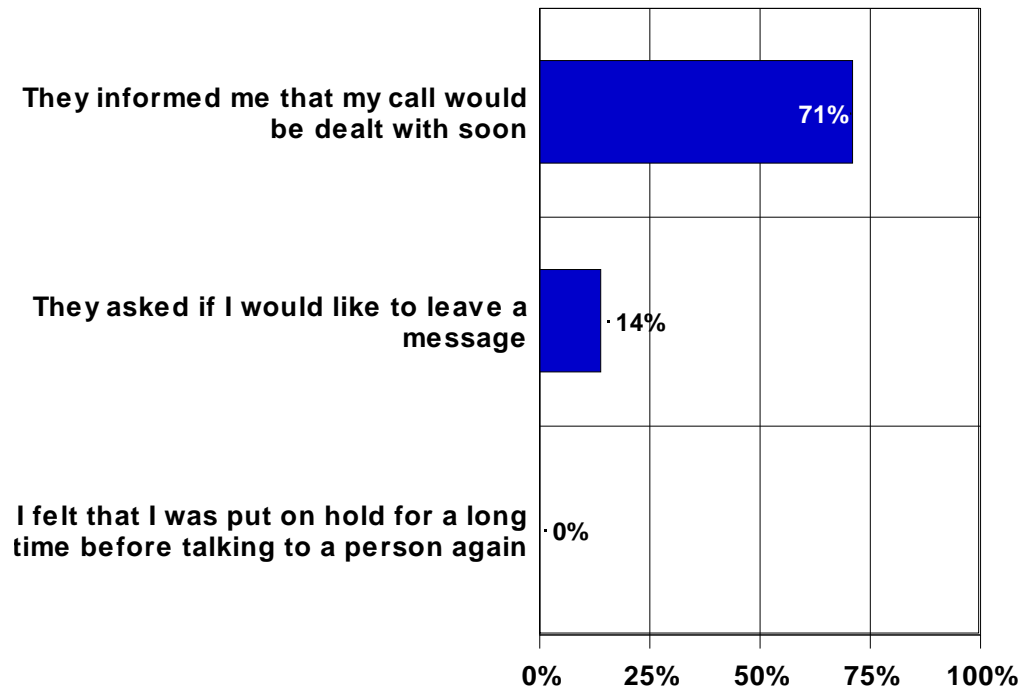
5.15 Overall, of the staff members who did not deal with the enquiry themselves:

- 25% explained that they could not answer the enquiry
- 28% transferred the caller to another member of staff
- 28% put the caller on hold

5.16 Three shoppers (8%) were asked to call back later and could not complete their shops fully.

5.17 Seven shoppers (19%) recorded how staff sign posted calls that were put on hold their enquiry was dealt with.

Experience of being on hold

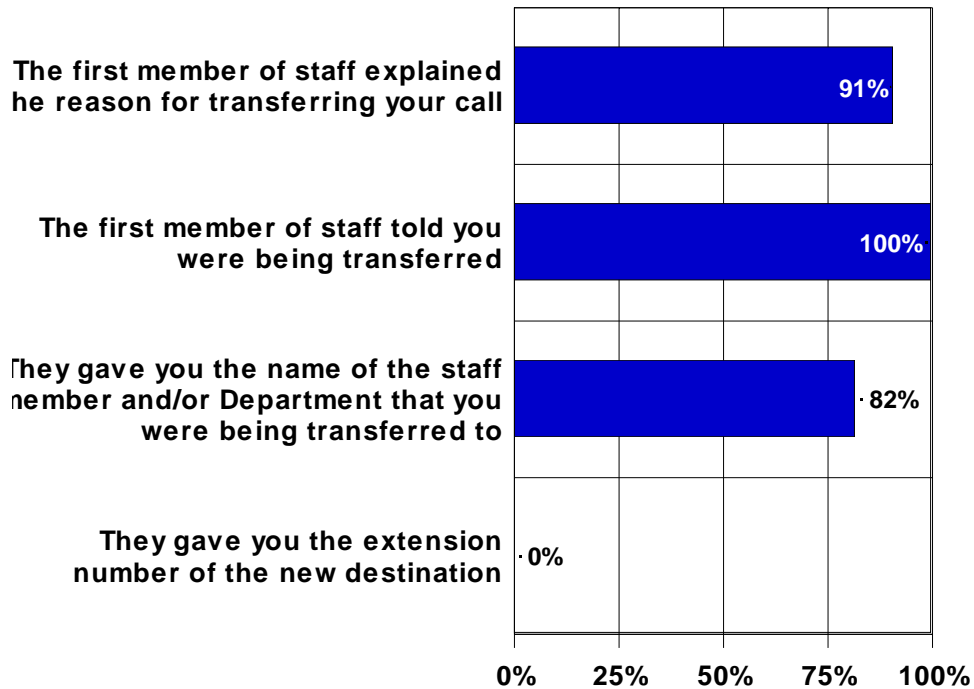


5.18 A majority of shoppers that recorded being put on hold (71%) said staff informed them that their call would be dealt with soon.

5.19 None of the shoppers reported that they felt they were put on hold for too long.

5.20 Most of the calls allocated were enquiries Contact Centre staff were expected to handle. A total of 11 (30%) calls were transferred to other extensions.

Experience of being transferred

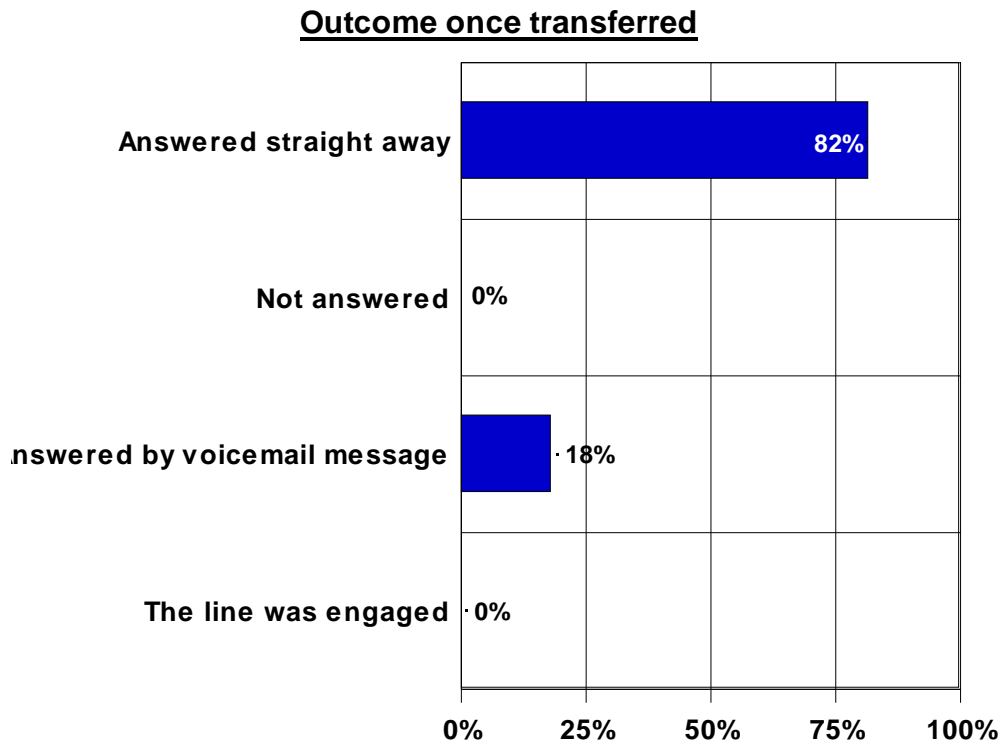


5.21 Similar to shoppers' experiences when being put on hold, a number of shoppers said staff kept them informed of the progress of their calls when calls were transferred:

- 91% of staff explained why shoppers were being transferred
- 100% of staff told shoppers they were being transferred
- 82% of staff gave the name and/or Department that the call was being transferred to

5.22 This is a positive result.

5.23 Once calls were transferred, a majority (82%) were answered straight away.



5.24 Only two shoppers (18%) reported that their call was answered by an answer phone message or engaged. This is a positive result.

Hearing the staff member clearly

5.25 A very high number of callers, 92%, reported that they could hear the staff member clearly.

5.26 Only 3 shoppers reported they were unable to hear staff clearly and stated the following reasons:

- *But the first operator spoke too quickly*
- *The phone call appeared rushed, and the operator came across as not having a clue to what I was asking, in fact I wanted to give him the information*
- *He spoke too fast*
- *I couldn't really understand his English properly*

Offer to Send Information

5.27 Overall only 5 shoppers (14%) received an offer from staff to be sent more information.

5.28 One would expect offers to send information to be low, given that the shoppers were calling on behalf of someone else.

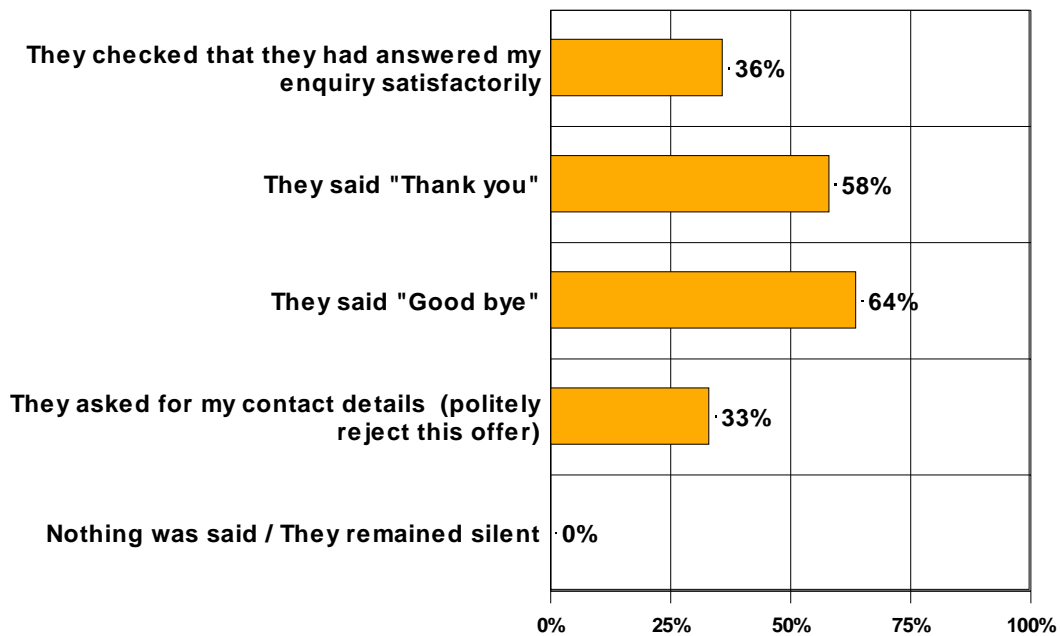
Questions relating to the Enquiry

5.29 Overall, just over half of the shoppers (53%) were asked questions relating to the enquiry.

Ending the call

5.30 Overall staff scored average on the parting greeting. A majority of staff (64%) said goodbye and rather less (58%) said 'thank you'.

End greeting



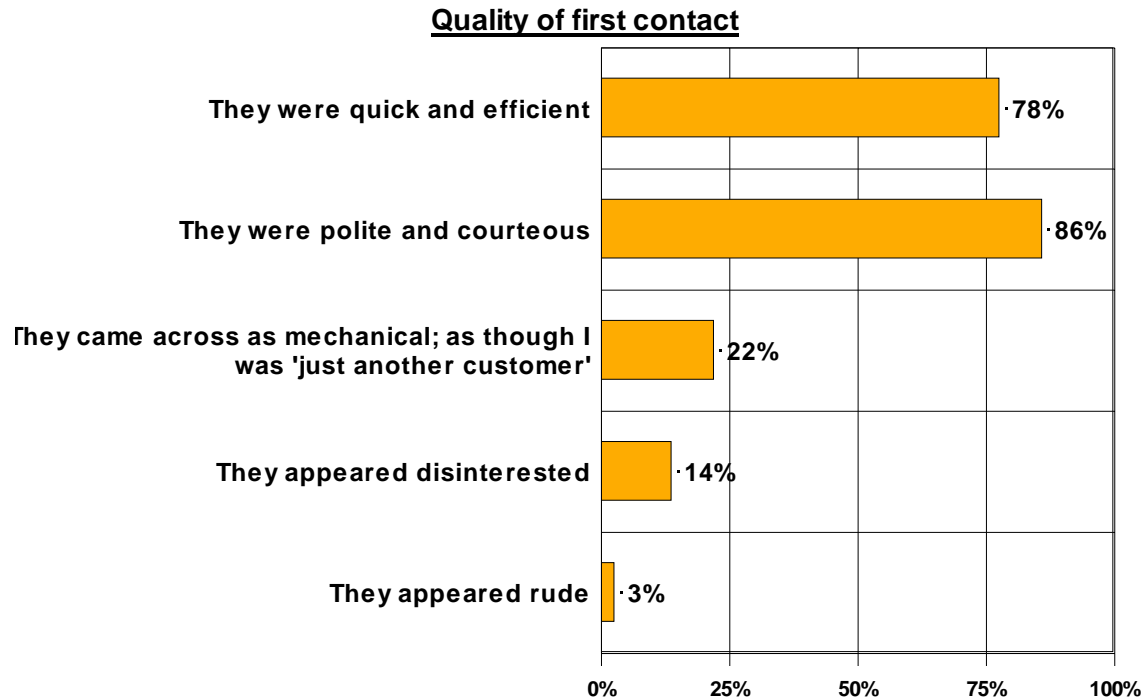
5.31 Only 36% of shoppers were asked if their enquiry was answered satisfactorily.

5.32 None of the shoppers reported that nothing was said and / or the staff member remained silent.

Customer Care Practices

Quality of Contact with the First Staff Member

5.33 Results indicate that a majority of staff who first answered the shoppers' calls provided good customer care. In some instances there were reports of poor customer care from staff.



5.34 Staff are expected to be polite at all times. They were given high scores for being polite and courteous (86%) and quick and efficient (78%).

5.35 Almost a quarter of shoppers 22% (8 calls) reported Contact Centre staff members came across as mechanical.

5.36 A further 5 shoppers (14%) said staff appeared disinterested in dealing with their enquiry.

5.37 Only one shopper (3%) reported staff as rude.

5.38 The verbatim comments below illustrate shoppers' impressions:

- *As I didn't give address after being asked two times the operator told me it's OK if I'm refusing in a rude tone and no good bye just put me on hold. But I was told who I would be speaking to.*
- *Didn't show any interest in what I wanted to know, in fact I felt the operator was bored with answering the phone overall*
- *Out of all my shops this was the best experience. The operator to me was perfect, clear, interested and not too pushy, but could of gave me more options*

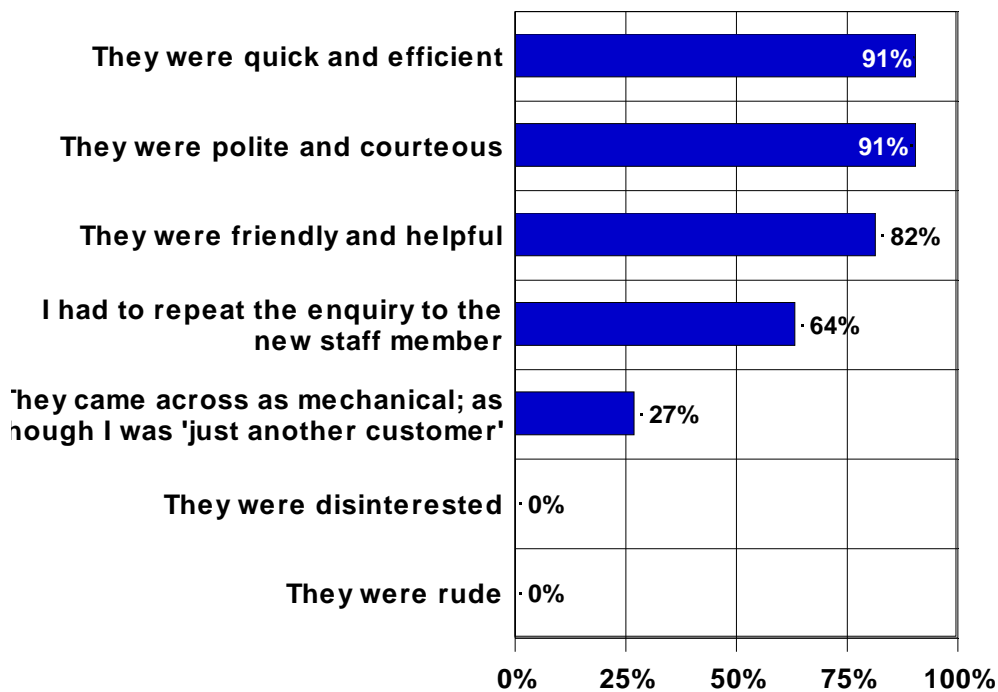
- *The operator may have been having a bad day but she couldn't get rid of me fast enough*

Quality of contact with Second Staff Member

5.39 Shoppers' scores for the quality of the second member of staff represent an improvement when compared to the quality of the first contact with:

- 91% of shoppers reporting staff were quick and efficient
- 91% of shoppers reporting staff were polite and courteous
- 82% of shoppers reporting staff were friendly and helpful

Quality of second contact



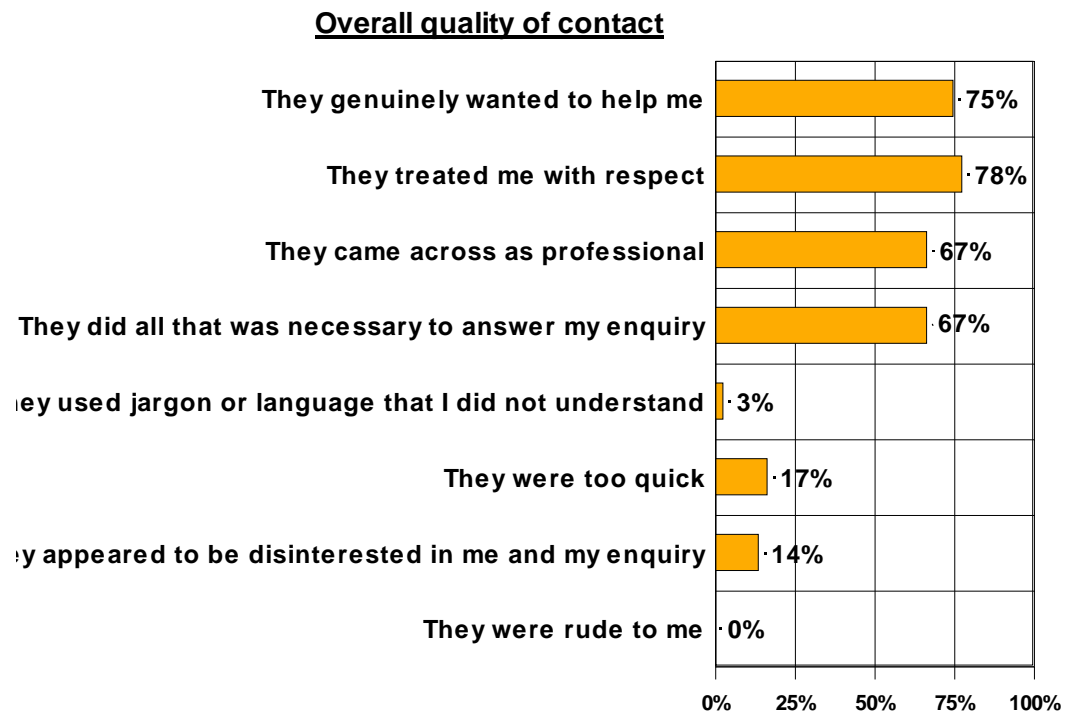
5.40 A majority of shoppers (64%) said they had to repeat their enquiry to the new member of staff.

5.41 Although positive scores for customer care increased, a high number (27%) of shoppers reported that staff came across as mechanical. This represents an increase when compared to the quality of the first contact.

Overall Impression of Customer Care Practice

5.42 Shoppers were asked to give scores for their overall impressions of how staff members dealt with their call.

- 78% thought they were treated with respect
- 75% thought staff genuinely wanted to help them
- 67% thought staff came across as professional
- 67% thought staff did all that was necessary to answer their enquiry



5.43 Results were less positive for the overall impression when compared to the quality of first and second contact. This could partly be explained by the low scores given by shoppers whose calls were terminated.

5.44 Six shoppers (17%) reported staff were too quick in dealing with their enquiry. A further five shoppers (14%) said staff were disinterested in their enquiry.

5.45 None of the shoppers reported the staff member being rude.

5.46 The shoppers' verbatim illustrate shoppers' overall experience of customer care:

- *The officer who ended the call, was very reassuring with ending the call by saying "Don't worry just keep in touch and we will be able to help you" That was nice*
- *Maybe he had been very busy all day but had this been a genuine enquiry I would be most put out.*

- *My call was handled poorly in a customer service way, all I got from the phone was that I had to speak to someone in allocations. I was give a name and number but no offer of transferring my call to the appropriate department*
- *Really good until he transferred me to the wrong operator*
- *He didn't sound like he knew what he was talking about, seemed very vague and unhelpful & didn't have a very good attitude although he wasn't rude as such*

Knowledge and Information Giving

5.47 The results show that for all four scenarios the majority of staff did not answer some enquiries fully.

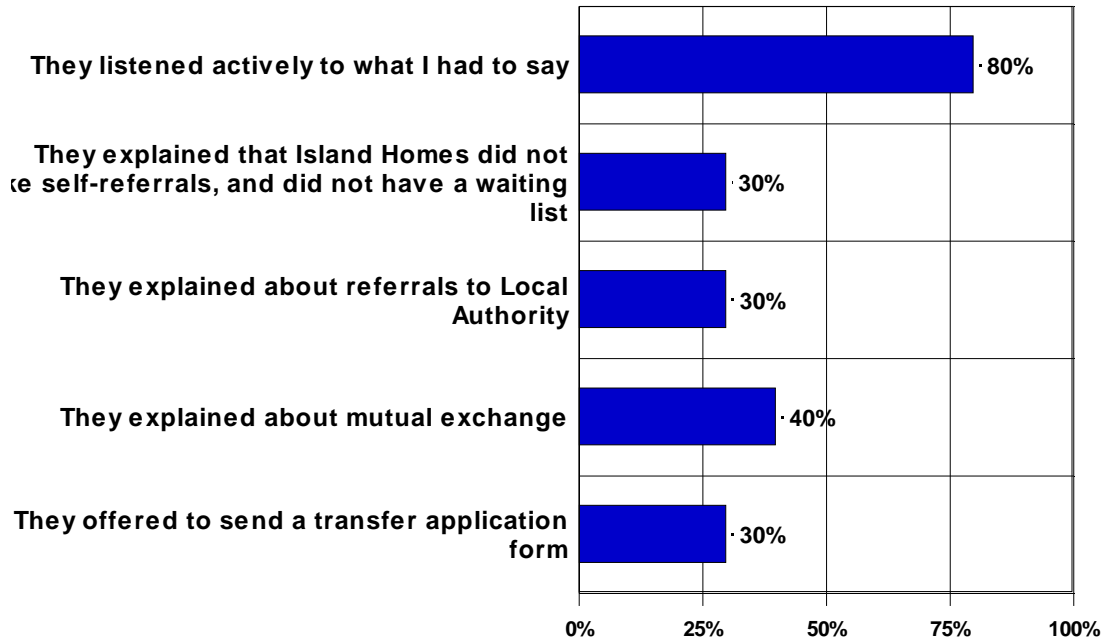
5.48 The four scenarios used to test departments in the organisation were:

- Requesting a Transfer / Mutual Exchange
- Rent Arrears
- Reporting Neighbourhood / Noise Nuisance
- Requesting a Tenant Repair

5.49 Requesting a Transfer / Mutual Exchange

5.49.1 A total of 28% of shops (10 in total) were allocated and all were answered.

Request for information on mutual exchange



5.49.2 The results show that staff performance was poor when answering this enquiry with shoppers reporting:

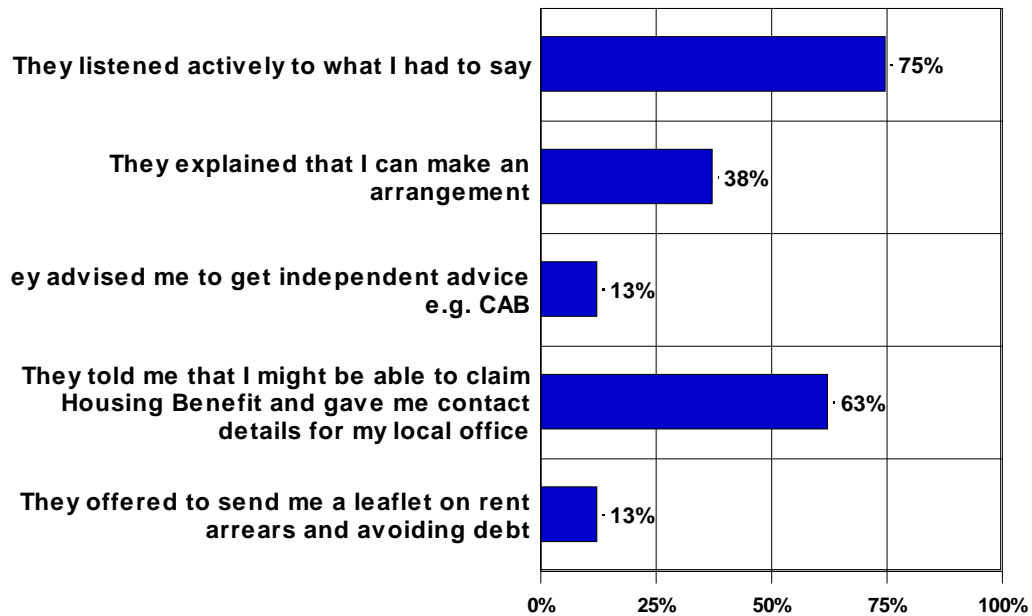
- 30% of staff correctly explained that Island Homes does not take self referrals and does not have a waiting list
- 40% of staff explained about mutual exchange
- 30% of staff offered to send a housing application form

5.49.3 The verbatim comments illustrate shoppers' impressions of how staff handled the enquiry.

- *She was very polite and asked if I need to speak to someone else, as all she offered was to try for a Home Swap or phone Tower Hamlet Transfer*
- *He was very informative explaining if I had special needs I would go higher up the list, but if me & my husband worked it would take a lot longer for a transfer.*
- *Very good (but said job transfer is not a priority for transferring of accommodation)*

5.50 Rent Arrears

Information on rent arrears



5.50.1 A total of 8 shops (22%) were allocated and all were completed.

5.50.2 Island Homes staff scored well when answering basic elements of the enquiry on Rent Arrears. Shoppers reported that:

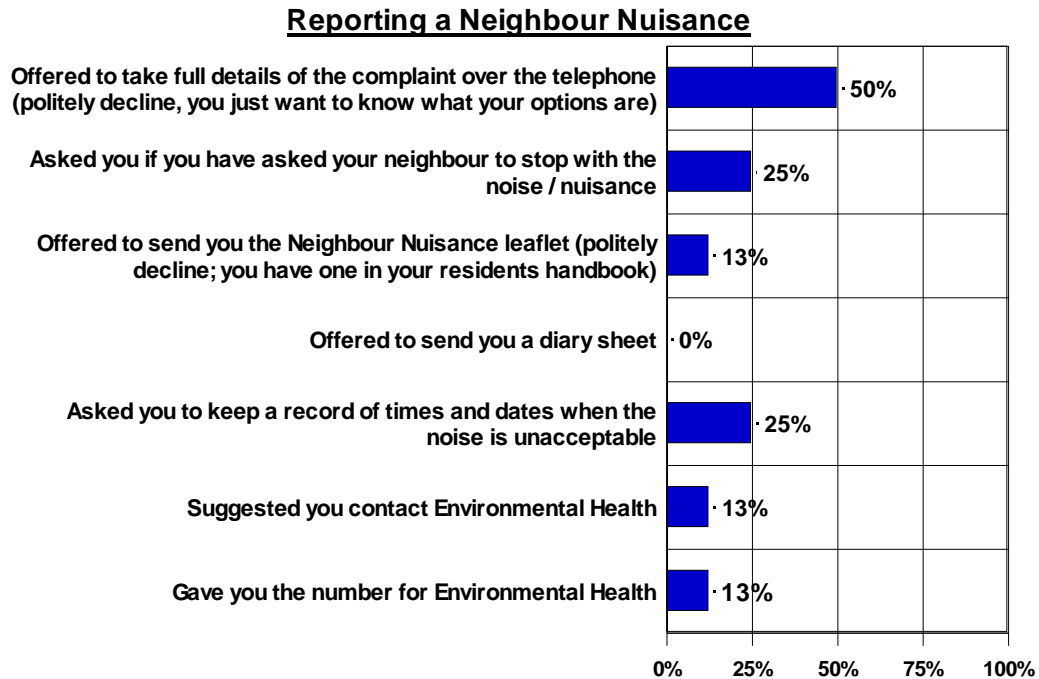
- 75% of staff listened actively to what they had to say
- 63% of staff told them they might be able to claim housing benefit but that they would need to contact their local security office

5.50.3 A small minority of staff advised shoppers to get independent advice (13%).

5.50.4 The verbatim comment illustrates shopper's experience of making this enquiry.

- *He gave me the information to get in touch with my housing officer, offered to give me the phone number (I declined and told him I already had it, he then wished me luck)*
- *They told me to speak to my rent officer and asked if I wanted to be put through, which I declined and told them I already had the number*
- *The operator said I could go to my housing benefit office but gave me no contact details*

5.51 Reporting Neighbourhood / Noise Nuisance



5.51.1 A total of 8 shops (22%) were allocated and all were completed by shoppers.

5.51.2 Island Homes staff performed less well when answering basic elements of the enquiry:

- 50% of staff offered to take full details of the complaint over the phone
- 25% of staff asked if shoppers had approached their neighbour about the nuisance
- 25% of staff asked shoppers to keep a record of times & dates when the noise is unacceptable

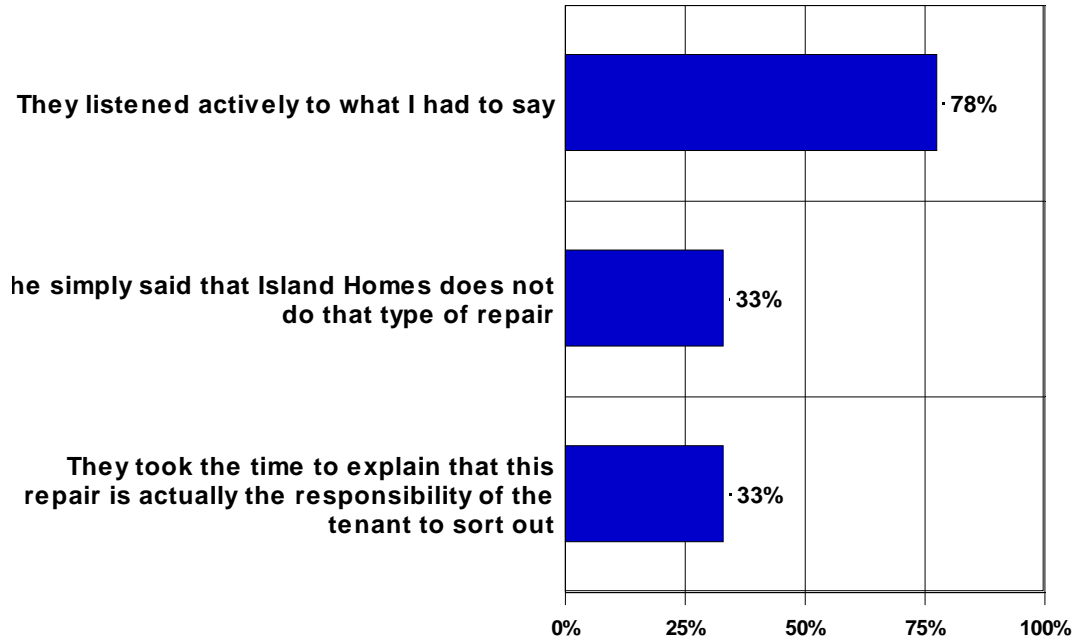
5.51.3 Only a minority of staff (13%) suggested shoppers contact Environmental Health and gave the contact details of Environmental Health.

5.51.4 The verbatim comments show how staff dealt with their enquiry.

- *Without compassion*
- *I was given the chance to make my complaint then I was told that my complaint would be strictly confidential and the complaint would be referred to a housing office who would open an anti social behaviour case, and investigate my complaint*

5.52 Reporting a Tenant Repair

Request for a tenant repair



5.52.1 A total of 10 shops (28%) were allocated but 1 shop had to be terminated as the caller's call was directed to an answer phone message.

5.52.2 Island Homes staff performed less well when dealing with this enquiry:

- 33% of staff explained correctly that Island does not do that type of repair
- 33% of staff suggested alternative methods for fixing the problem

5.52.3 A number of the verbatim comments below illustrate that staff incorrectly offered to deal with the tenant repairs being reported.

- *They handled my call satisfactorily. He said they will send someone to fix it*
- *I was told that if the battery was changeable then they might be able to help, before I could get any more information the line went and I had an automation voice saying this line is temporary unavailable, so call was ended.*

Conclusion

- 6.1** The results for Island Homes' Telephone Mystery Shopping was average, however a number of areas need to be improved to comply with internal performance targets.

Service Standards

- 6.2** Over all three attempts, a majority of calls were answered (81%). Only one caller was unable to get through to a member of staff after three attempts. This shopper reported that an answer phone message was in operation on all three attempts.
- 6.3** Only one call was answered (3%) within 9 seconds or less on the first attempt. Island Homes' published standard in the *'Tenants' Handbook'* states calls should be answered within 4 rings (approximately 9 seconds). This poor result can in part be explained by the fact that shoppers were calling the Contact Centre's automated service and were recording how long it took to speak to a member of staff. We would recommend the standard being revised given that the waiting time to speak to a member of staff is longer than 4 rings.
- 6.4** It is a requirement that staff greet shoppers by giving their name. A majority of shoppers (67%) were given names of staff members dealing with enquiries. However, staff performance was high with 92% of staff identifying the organisation and a further 78% saying Good morning / afternoon.
- 6.5** Over half of shoppers' enquiries (61%) were dealt with by Contact Centre staff. Contact Centre staff were expected to answer a majority of the enquiries used in the phase of testing and should therefore have handled a higher percentage of calls.
- 6.6** Of the shoppers that were transferred to other extensions, a majority reported they were told what was going to happen however a majority of them (64%) had to repeat their enquiry to the second staff member.

Customer Care Practices

- 6.7** Staff members delivered a good quality of customer care, as the scores given by shoppers demonstrates.
- 6.8** Island Homes' standard states that staff will be polite. A majority of shoppers (86%) reported that the first staff member they spoke to were polite and courteous. Staff were given high scores for the quality of the first and second contact. However a significant number of shoppers said staff came across as mechanical when dealing with their enquiries.
- 6.9** Ratings for the overall customer experience of making the call dropped slightly with 67% of shoppers reporting staff were professional and 78% of staff treated them with respect. This can in part be explained by lower scores given by shoppers whose calls had been terminated.
- 6.10** Six shoppers (17%) said staff were too quick. This was the case when shoppers assessed the overall experience of making the call.

Knowledge and Information Giving

- 6.11** Staff performance was poor when dealing with the 'Request for a Transfer / Mutual Exchange enquiry'. Only 30% of staff informed shoppers correctly that Island Homes does not take self referrals or keep waiting lists and were told about referrals to local authorities.
- 6.12** Staff met basic performance standards on the Rent Arrears enquiry, with almost three quarters of shoppers reporting being advised to that they might be able to claim housing benefit. Over a quarter (38%) were told they could come to an alternative arrangement with Island Homes on how to cover their rent payments.
- 6.13** Shoppers were less satisfied with how staff dealt with the 'Reporting a Neighbourhood / Noise Nuisance' enquiry. Only half of staff encouraged shoppers to report the nuisance case over the telephone. A quarter of shoppers did report staff asked them to keep a record of the time and dates the nuisance incidents occurred. Few (13%) were told to contact Environmental Health and were given the contact number.
- 6.14** On average shoppers were not advised correctly by staff on the Requesting a Tenant Repair enquiry, with only 33% of shoppers being told that Island does not carry that type of repair. The verbatim comments illustrate that a number of shoppers were offered repair appointments.

Recommendations

7. To improve performance in service delivery we would recommend:

- Publishing highlights of the Mystery Shopping Results on Island Homes' for staff and residents
- Developing and agreeing a service improvement plan with housing managers and agree future action plan and incentives to improve staff performance
- Reminding staff of the corporate standards, either through staff appraisals, printing & distributing greeting cards, reminders by senior management or through the intranet.
- Revising service standards to reflect use of new technology. For instance, the standard for how quickly to answer calls should be revised to reflect how long it takes for customers to speak to an operator.
- To revise and develop clear standards on answering housing management queries so that staff and residents are clear on what level of service is expected from the organisation.

8. Training is an effective way to address gaps in staff knowledge and improve performance, as well as updating existing staff and inducting new staff on commonly asked housing management questions. Training could include:

- A compulsory yearly multiple choice online quiz to keep staff knowledge levels 'topped up'
 - Quarterly & bi-annual housing management ½ day training / refresher sessions
9. To continually monitor staff performance and service delivery, we recommend that further Mystery Shopper exercises be undertaken at 6 to 12 month intervals.