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| Student Housing Damage Recovery |  | **ADMIN***(Accommodation Office)* |
| The RATIONALE What prompted you to participate in the PPR workshop? |
| **Purpose** | Damage recharges to shared housing have been contested by tenants who complain that the process is unfair or unclear/not transparent. Improved and clearer process will reduce complaints and thereby should increase student satisfaction. There were two things we wanted to get from doing a PPR session: one was to create an improved process and that’s why we chose a live and very fresh process that needed to be reviewed; and the second was to get the team familiarised with the process review techniques and methodology so that it could apply to other processes going forward. |
| **Stakes** | The recharge process was taking a disproportionate amount of staff time. It was a long process arguing claims with students, where we had to go through all sorts of paper trails and inspection reports from previous times in the year to produce evidence and look where students had warnings about damages.The Accommodation Office is a very process driven part of the organisation. A lot of what we do is tied up with legislation and codes of practice, which we have to factor into our thinking and the way we work. Other than students' experience domestically (i.e. outside of academic activity), we have direct involvement with the well-being services and pastoral elements of student life and have processes of referrals. So process review is important to us in other areas too, such as our 'out of hours' support and 'next of kin' information. |
| **Objectives** | * Formulate a robust and transparent process that it not subject to complaints based on technicalities
* Improve efficiency and effectiveness in recovering money for damages caused by tenants thereby supporting property owner relationships and reducing University financial outgoings
* Examine existing process, consider where weaknesses are, identify ways to overcome weaknesses that still provide a good student (customer) experience.
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| The PROBLEM What was the issue, challenge, opportunity the review focused on? |
| **Context** | The team do a lot of inspections in a very short space of time and there has always existed a potential for data to get confused and mixed up as we had no clear audit line. We had a situation because the nature of our business is that we have to do property inspections within a set time frame: we evaluate the condition of the property; where there are damages, we then have to recharge to students (obviously because if they caused the damage they have to pay for it) and deal with any appeals.The best way we can respond to changes in our environment is by looking at what we do, reassessing it and making sure it’s still fit for purpose, so in that sense, we knew the process review would be really helpful. |
| **Need** | Over the years, we receive many complaints from students saying "*it wasn’t me, it’s not fair, you can’t prove it was me*", all sorts of things, and then they would argue about the cost of repairs, replacement of the furniture and so forth. So we spent a disproportional amount of time arguing backwards and forwards with tenants about what they owed and why. It became very apparent that the process we were using worked for us, but it didn't work for the students in the same way. So we decided we needed to look at the process that we have, look at the problems and the complaints that we get from students and see if we can work it through to the core problems to achieve a better experience for both sides of the party. |
| **Participants** | Accommodation team staff responsible for shared housing service provision, which included a senior housing officer, 2 housing officers, one of our administrators who is responsible for participation in these processes and one of the other halls officers who was there to learn from the process and apply that to another area our operation. |
| The SOLUTION What did participating in the process review achieve for you? |
| **Key understandings** | What we kept in mind was that what we weren’t doing was making a new process; what we were doing was taking a process, stripping it back to the core elements that we have to keep in and then looking at putting new parts of that maybe better for both the students and for us. What we were able to do is take the existing whole process as we were using it and map it out, and then use all sorts of techniques to actually capture what we did and what we didn't do equally, and where the gaps were. That helped us then *reassemble* the process in a more coherent way that works for everybody.As a team, after the initial PPR, it’s got easier and easier to suggest changes and talk about them in a kind of open way that’s productive. |
| **Intended outcomes** | * Creating a consistent and coherent method of recording everything for each property
* Confidence as individuals to apply the new methods to what they did in practice
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| **Light bulb moments** | The kind of eureka moment was the idea of the clipboard with the date and the property name on. It was something that was so simple and so obvious, but no one had thought of it before. The idea kind of materialised in that process, that was the advantage of mapping it out actually on paper and looking at it in the cold light of day and then superimposing on that the customer's perspective (that has been fed back to us through their experiences). It became very apparent where the gaps were. Once you identified the gaps, you can very quickly think of ways of resolving them.  |
| **PPR techniques** | One of the benefits of having a whole team assembled there is you can do a quick brainstorm on the problem and what can we do to fix it; you have everybody in the room bouncing ideas around. But it’s only because of the actual process of putting it all down in a coherent way that everybody could look at it and analyse the facts.The PPR approach is structured it in such a way that it flowed. We never reached a point where we didn't know where we were going or what we doing next; it was kind of logical and progressed sensibly through the whole workshop. So if you follow it properly, it's very coherent: he moral support, the bouncing around of ideas, I think different viewpoints coming into play, all contribute to that process more effectively.Writing things down on big pieces of paper may seem very old-fashioned, some might think, but in this particular instance it worked really well. It’s a bit old school, but we did a lot of stuff on flipchart and post-it notes that we then tape together to make big long tapestries. By capturing information and processes in that way we were then able to bring it back to the office after the workshop, so when we did the write up afterwards we had everything we done on the day visible. We work very pictorially in this team: we like diagrams, we like flowcharts, and by capturing it in the way we did on these big pieces of paper, we used post-it notes and bits and pieces like that. So when we left the workshop, we had all our data and captured information that we could then a) not forget because it was all written down we have it, and b) distil it into a smaller document obviously electronically and we could then cross-reference against the original workshop stuff to make sure we’d captured everything and not missed anything.  |
| **Actions / next steps** | It wasn’t challenging to implement the changes we came up with from the workshop. But we recognised that people get busy, they get stressed and occasionally they may revert to taking shortcuts and not completing the process as thoroughly as we need them to. So having it all flowcharted provided the aide memoir to say we’ve been through this process, this is what agreed we going to do, so let’s do it in this way. |
| The RESULT What are the tangible outcomes & impact? |
| **Immediate changes** | What we set up immediately as a result of that workshop was a case file for each individual property where damages or recharges had to be made, into which all of the communications, correspondence and photographs relating to that were collated. It sounds like the very obvious thing to do anyway, but we never used to do it that way before, because you’re dealing with both properties or just with individuals as sometimes it would be just an individual’s room rather than a particular property. |
| **Improvements made** | What came out the review were methods that made the process much easier to manage so we could (a) keep track of claims, b) have an audit line, and c) just have a quick 'go-to' place to save people going backwards and forwards all the time. One of the things we picked out was that we needed better methods of recording damages, so that our evidence was more credible and less contestable. For instance, when we photograph damage, the member of staff doing that photograph would now use a clipboard with the day's date and the property number, so that it was clear in the photograph when and where it was taken. This was if the damage was contested, we can forward that photograph back to the person. The other thing was to adjust the timings so we were getting the charges communicated to people more rapidly; and then looking at the appeals process and how that could work more efficiently too. What happened after the workshop, we implemented what we’d been through, we’d mapped out the new process, we put everything in place to start off in that particular cycle, but then we reviewed it again a year later and we were able to apply further changes and improvements.  |
| **Evidence of benefits** | There were quite a few different outcomes from the actual unpicking of the process that we were immediately able to implement, as above. These arose mainly from level of detail we were able to drill down into and analyse through the PPR session, it highlighted the root of the problem. For instance, we already were taking photographs of the damage, but one of the issues we were having was that students were disputing it was their house or their room, and with the new methods, we were able to make our case more reliably.Going through a participative workshop meant the staff were directly involved in the process review as well and understand why we do it. Rather than them seeing it as more work, they now understand why we do and what the benefits are. For individuals, the direct and immediate consequence was it gave them confidence to go out and actually take what we did in the workshop and then start applying it. But there was also the demystification of reviewing processes. Tracking of customer feedback gave us a clear way to produce measureable data about improvements. The baseline always is whether we would win a challenge in court and that’s one of the reasons why we have to review processes regularly to make sure that they are still current and that they meet requirements of legislation as well as our own internal processes. On the latter, for this particular process, the one thing that we were able to do is stop wasting so much staff time on it, which is a measureable thing. By saving staff time on that process, it means that they can do other activities or tasks. |
| **Unintended & unexpected** | A clear unexpected outcome was how the process review revealed the idea of using a clipboard with the date and property number written on it, as a means to confirm where and when. However, this also served to help the housing inspectors keep up to speed with what they have done for each property, because we process a lot of data in a very short space of time. It very much helped everyone, on the ground and in the office, to keep a track of everything. |
| **Longer term impact indicators** | The metrics we used to evaluate process improvement were relating to the efficiency of dealing with student damages and recharges, which includes the number of challenges or complaints, speed of appeals and collection of monies. The process we reviewed was specifically chosen because it seemed a disproportionate amount of challenges we receive from students and a lengthy appeal process. We can track those numbers very easily to get some very direct measurements and comparisons. What we saw was a significant decrease from one year to the next in the volume of challenges and then after the refinement a further decrease. The improvements made the collection of outstanding monies was similarly also more efficient, because there were less grounds for people to be able to challenge them on. When a student received a bill for damages, although they were able to contest it, there were either fewer appeals as our process is clearer, or we've been able to provide them with the evidence more rapidly and therefore they have paid it far more quickly than previous statistics show.The biggest impact overall is realising the benefit of reviewing processes in a structured way, because we’ve applied that to other processes. It’s not that everything we do is broken or needs fixing, but it’s good practice just to look at a process periodically and say is that still as it needs to be.  |
| Lessons learned - what experience has been gained? |
| **Prior experience** | I personally have already done some process reviews in the past for various different thing so what I wanted to do was to get the team on board with the actual methodology of taking the process in a structured way, unpicking it, looking at whether it was fit for purpose and if possible how it could improve and because I have experience of that and I’m aware of process reviews through my own studies and qualifications that I’ve taken over the years, I thought it would be a good opportunity for the team to become familiarized with it and we use that particular example because that was a very current of live process that needed to be done. |
| **Participative experience** | My team enjoyed doing something constructive together in a kind of learning kind of way. It’s more than just getting out of the office, it’s getting out of the office to do something as a team. For example we go out once a year we do some voluntary work as a team, that’s another example. The team are a very disparate bunch of people; they all come from different walks of life, different age groups, different perspectives on things. Some are more financially driven, some are more pastorally driven. So it's a good mixture and that helped with interesting and stimulating and productive input. None of my team are shy however they do have manners and they do appreciate other people input even if they chop to bits afterwards, they will at least listen to it. |
| **Personal skills / application to other processes** | Before we went into the workshop, the team were unclear and unsure what this process review was all about, what it was for, why they were doing it. The immediate effect is that when you talk about process review now to my team, they don’t hold their hands up in despair or anything like that anymore, they understand why we do it and what the benefits are.When we reviewed the process again a year later, it was a very much quicker process because the team were all very familiar with it and could unpick and reassemble the process as the experience of implementing those changes was still fresh in their minds. Since they'd been observing the impact of those changes as they went along, there were some very very quick wins that we could implement just to refine it further.Since then, the team have done reviews on other processes, such as our risk assessment processes and our checking for insurances and Legionella compliance. So there are three other processes that were reviewed and updated as a direct result of the team members' ability to do PPRs. I didn’t have to take any part in that, once they learned the techniques and approach, they just cracked on and did it.  |
| **Success tips** | * Having a documented, visible flow chart for what the new process was, helped everyone to remember the new or modified steps. Because there were some people in the team that have been doing things for long time, so as a manager it’s important to help them stay mindful of the new processes and make sure that they are being applied consistently, like a set of instructions. This also makes it easy for anybody new coming into the team, who haven’t been through the process review to be able to pick it up very quickly and do it in the way that we wanted.
* Participative process reviews are worth following properly, as they are very different and produce a different outcome to the more formal management techniques you can use, which are cold and very dry. Because the team are actively involved in participating and it was a very live issue, the learning is more enjoyable; it resonated more, it was absorbed more easily, and the team were quite enthused and buoyed up by going through the process in this facilitated way.
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