

CERTIFICATION HELPS HOUSING ASSOCIATION PROVIDE **BETTER SERVICE** TO VULNERABLE PEOPLE

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Sapphire Independent Housing is proud to provide quality accommodation and support to a diverse client group across London and Hertfordshire.

Originally established in 1969, when Sapphire registered as a housing provider through the London Irish Centre, Sapphire purchased its first supported scheme in 1974, based in Kilburn, north London and became known as Irish Centre Hostels. The Association and the services it provided, steadily grew with the Association becoming known as Irish Centre Housing in 1995. They finally rebranded, in 2014 as Sapphire Independent Housing, to more accurately reflect the organisation as it is today.

Sapphire is a modern and diverse housing association offering a mixed-tenure portfolio that provides support and services to vulnerable people across four London boroughs and South Hertfordshire. Schemes include temporary supported and general needs hostel accommodation for homeless single people and a hostel for homeless families. Sapphire also provides self-contained general needs accommodation for single people and a small number of general needs family units.

The average stay in Sapphire's supported and short-term accommodation is between 18 months and two years, with their self-contained general needs units providing lifelong tenure. Residents are from a diverse range of backgrounds, from vulnerable single people with support needs; such as addictions, mental health issues and victims of domestic abuse and vulnerable single parents and families with small children who have become homeless. Many of Sapphire's general needs residents, also have a history of homelessness. The focus is on helping all residents to move on to and maintain independent living.

The Association has always striven for continuous improvement in order to keep providing the best services for its customers across a diverse range of locations and services. A key element in providing a first-rate service is the Association's focus on recruitment and development of its employees, earning it Investors in People Gold accreditation.



WHY SAPPHIRE INDEPENDENT HOUSING SOUGHT CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE CERTIFICATION

Sapphire's Operations Director Bukky McGlynn, with the full support of the Executive Management Team, wanted to achieve Customer Service Excellence certification for two very different reasons. She felt that Sapphire's high-performance record and the excellent work already taking place, both individually and within specific teams, across the Association deserved formal recognition. However, there was also an awareness that pursuing formal recognition, via independent certification, would help to empower individuals and teams, providing additional ownership and authority, resulting in even greater customer focus.

Alongside these objectives, Bukky was acutely aware that it was mostly larger housing associations that had achieved CSE certification and she wanted to raise the bar in terms of standards for smaller providers in general, not only Sapphire.

A more specific issue was that of customer complaints, which, apart from attracting nervousness from managers, were being handled informally. This resulted in the lack of a clear process or mechanism for learning from complaints.

The decision to achieve certification was made entirely proactively, with neither councils, regulators nor other stakeholders having suggested it.

“It's not just about the stamp, it's also about the journey.”

WHY SGS?

Bukky McGlynn had worked with SGS United Kingdom Ltd on a Customer Service Excellence certification whilst working for a county council, and had been impressed with the positive impact on the team and culture.

IMPLEMENTING CSE: THE PROCESS

Bukky describes the process best when she says: *“It's not just about the stamp, it's also about the journey.”*

The Sapphire team was supportive, if not a little puzzled, as the delivery of excellent customer service was already high on their agenda, albeit in disparate ways in head office and across the various locations.

The main challenges were capturing and compiling all of the required material and evidence for the submission, and physically getting all of the relevant personnel together in the same place, at the same time – the latter made difficult by geography and shift patterns. To achieve this, project groups were formed, representing progress in itself, as cross-scheme working to date had been minimal.

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Bukky recalls: *“We were already doing well, but found ways to make things even better – and continue to do so – thanks to our journey maps. Everything centred around our customers, with everyone affirming their understanding of their role in making that happen in a way that was homogenised across the organisation.”*

Bukky says about SGS: *“We found them to be responsive, open and easy to deal with. I could always get in touch with them with queries and any worries. Not only that, but I believe they are genuinely interested in what we do, it doesn’t seem as if it’s just a job to them.”*

Housing Operations Manager Louise Graham was closely involved in the process and is leading the year two re-certification project. Louise has been working closely with the project team, since their assessment and certification in 2016, to ensure the Association continues to review and improve their customer service processes. She is acutely aware that any certification is about moving forward and looking for ways to continuously improve. The current focus areas are analysis of their complaints processes to ensure Sapphire is using lessons learned to improve services, formalising and consolidating service levels agreements across the Association and exploring their resident’s experiences when they join any of their services.

HOW THE CERTIFICATION HAS BENEFITTED THE ORGANISATION

Everyone at Sapphire has been involved with the Customer Service Excellence journey on some level. Members of staff who were not directly involved in the initial assessment have still felt the benefit of the Association’s involvement in the Customer Service Excellence customer certification journey. Processes such as how Sapphire receive and learn from complaints, to how they communicate with their residents, stakeholders and each other have been explored in greater depth to ensure Sapphire understands about all their

customers’ needs. Sapphire’s focus has always been to value their residents and help them improve their life chances, and Customer Service Excellence certification has provided them with an enhanced focus ensuring they deliver an even greater customer-first culture. The certification process has helped Sapphire take greater ownership and accountability of their customer service focus through greater involvement, empowerment, consultation, regular house meetings and structured liaison groups. Through these, customers now feel they have an even greater voice, that it is not only heard but is also acted upon.

Complaints are now regarded positively as a driver to continuous improvement, with escalation more effective and formal feedback provided to customers.

Residents are encouraged to participate in activities outside their direct location which is regarded as an important part of getting back on their feet and achieving independent living.

The project groups have remained pivotal in promoting the service quality culture and cross-fertilisation of ideas. Staff members are newly enthusiastic, volunteering to lead and participate in projects and initiatives. Additional training needs have been identified for staff, with plans for future training for residents in mystery shopping and inspections. Customer Service Excellence certification plaques at head office and the hostels, as well as the Customer Service Excellence hallmark on their website and letterhead serve as a visual reminder that excellent customer service is a key focus for Sapphire and customer interactions represent invaluable opportunities to make a difference.

The Association has used Customer Service Excellence certification as a tool to grow the Association, applying the ethos of service excellence, in tenders alongside its Investor in People accreditation, and other credentials to provide assurance that Sapphire is an excellent choice of provider.

Sapphire’s Customer Service Excellence project team feels the Association has gained enormously from its involvement with Customer Service Excellence, not only from gaining the certification but also from the practices involved in the

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE CERTIFICATION

The government standard for Customer Service Excellence focuses on an organisation’s delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism and staff attitude and requires a comprehensive insight into the customer.

A driver of continuous improvement, Customer Service Excellence requires that sound processes are in place to measure customer satisfaction within the service delivered.

Customer Service Excellence certification assessment from SGS helps organisations deliver the best possible customer service within budget limitations.

assessment process. They feel it would benefit organisations, in any sector, who may be considering Customer Service Excellence certification. As Bukky states: *“If you’re an organisation of our size, don’t be intimidated about doing it. You might feel you can’t achieve it as you’re so small, but we are living proof that you can. Involve everybody. Keep it relative to what you do and don’t turn it into an academic exercise. Above all, don’t see it as certification for its own sake, but as a tool that will help the whole organisation and its customers.”*

ABOUT SGS

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We provide competitive advantage, drive sustainability and deliver trust. At SGS, we are continually pushing ourselves to deliver innovative services and solutions that help our customers move their businesses forward.

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