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Mystery customers on the case

Whitefriars Housing Groups' customers are proving to be super sleuths after completing a second innovative inspection of its customer service.

In January last year, 11 customers came forward to help the not-for-profit group improve its service. The team looked at a range of services from a customer point of view.

By popping into local offices on the pretence of being just an everyday customer, the auditors were able to provide Whitefriars with a crucial insight into the delivery of frontline services.

Mystery shopping has proved to be so successful that another bunch of detectives have been recruited. This has meant more undercover office visits and phone calls to area housing offices by an even larger group of customer auditors.

Super spy Lienne Dixon said: "I got involved because I wanted to improve the standard of services provided to customers and I believe I'm doing that. Being part of the project has really made a difference to my life. I have received lots of training and being a volunteer auditor looks good on my CV. I hope to use this experience to help me find a job in the near future."

For a trial run, the team went on a dummy run at a local retail park, checking out disabled access, health and safety in the stores and customer service. They then embarked on a city-wide audit of the Whitefriars offices.

Their results now are being collated by the auditors and will be presented to the Whitefriars Executive Management Team as well as to area office staff.

Some of the changes made since the original audit included new name badges for all staff, a new dress code in the local offices and some physical improvements to the offices. All were introduced as a direct result of recommendations made by customer mystery shoppers.

Fellow community detective Vera Gisbourne had this to say: "I just wanted to make a difference and have enjoyed every minute. Not only have I seen first-hand the improvements to the service as a result of something I've been involved with, but I've also met some great people. I didn't think I could do it when I first got involved but I'm quite pleased with myself now. My confidence has really grown."

The success of the mystery shoppers means the team, who are paid all out-of-pocket expenses, may soon be in demand by other housing associations across the UK which need an investigation into how well they are doing.

Sue Howarth, customer involvement officer at Whitefriars, said: "The project has proven to be a roaring success and both parties get a lot out of it. Different departments within Whitefriars have already approached the auditors to inspect their service and the auditors have recently tested a new complaints procedure.

"We've run the project a bit differently this time, with the more experienced auditors acting as mentors to the new recruits. This has worked very well. We now have a pool of trained and experienced customer auditors that offer a key service to our organisation and who are part of our programme of continuous improvement. Other housing associations may well want to benefit from the skills and insight of our customer auditors.

"Our auditors have not only done a fantastic job, they have thoroughly enjoyed it and this is great news."

The initial results from the second mystery shopping exercise look positive and the auditors' report will outline any recommendations from this that need to be made.

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**For further information please contact Nikki Cheung at The Bridge Group on
024 7630 6666 or n.cheung@bridge-group.co.uk**