

**Self assessment should be used as an ongoing quality assurance tool, rather than just a 'one-off' preparation for inspection. But is the SHR self assessment questionnaire fit for this purpose and what lessons can be learned from other self assessment tools such as Customer Service Excellence and the Public Service Improvement Framework?**

#### **Scottish Government policy**

Following publication of the Crerar Review the Scottish Government is directing various public funded services towards ongoing self evaluation and expects regulators to reduce reliance on inspection based regimes to risk assessment. This is a new area for regulators and service providers alike and the first two years of the Scottish Housing Regulator risk assessments show that the SHR is still developing and refining its approach. This means housing providers' own self assessment frameworks should be generic and flexible enough to adapt to the development of this policy area. It is also an opportunity to develop a 'robust and appropriate' self assessment framework which takes the best from a range of models available.

#### **What is self-assessment**

In the Scottish housing sector the SHR self-assessment questionnaire has typically been used as a means of preparation for inspection. With the move to risk based assessments, some local authorities and RSLs are now moving to a variety of ongoing quality assurance methods, most of which provide a core self assessment tool and some also have formal accreditation as an option.

Self assessment typically takes the form of a set of questions to identify strengths and weaknesses (or areas for improvement) and sometimes a scoring mechanism to grade each question. The critical factor is that strengths identified must be supported by clear evidence. Self assessment can be undertaken by a few individuals or many individuals across the organisation, groups of staff in different areas of the organisation or a combination of these. In any case, staff will need to be supported in generating evidence to prove compliance. The route chosen should be integrated into the organisation's current arrangements for quality assurance, but the work involved in self-assessment should not be under-estimated.

#### **Influences across the 'scrutiny partners'**

The SHR risk assessment process for RSLs focuses on financial health, development role, service quality, stock quality (essentially SHQS compliance) and governance. Audit Scotland is leading the shared risk assessment process for local government involving SHR and all other 'scrutiny partners' through its 'Reducing the Burden Action Group' (RBAG).  
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#### **The Future of Regulation**

*"The primary responsibility for demonstrating compliance and performance will rest with RSLs. The Government has accepted this principle and the drive will continue to be to develop robust performance management and outcome focused self-assessment amongst service providers. Much time is spent in my report as to how such robust self-assessment systems can be developed, recognising that self-assessment is as easy a tool to become self delusional. In areas of the public sector market and the RSL market in particular, much time needs to be and is to be devoted to develop robust and appropriate self assessment systems. It is now that time in the natural evolution of the cycle of regulation to let go and give more responsibility with consequent accountability to service providers and RSLs."*

*Professor Lorne Crerar, 21st January*

#### **Emerging Priorities from the SHR**

*Based on recent inspection reports and the SHR's recent publication 'Shaping up for improvement' these are the SHR's priorities:*

##### **Customer Focus**

- Customer care is embedded in all the housing provider does
- Involvement can be shown to have real impact on services and policies
- There is a wide range and genuine means through which tenants can participate in decision making

##### **Continuous Improvement**

- Strong links are evident between strategy, business planning, performance management and people development (the golden thread)
- An evidence and comparative based approach is used to assess strengths and weaknesses
- Customers are involved

##### **Efficiency and Value for Money**

- Business plans are sensitised through a range of scenarios
- There is awareness of running costs, and the need for VFM across the organisation
- There is a specific plan in place to improve VFM and efficiency

### **Influences - continued from page 1**

Given the joint work between Audit Scotland and other scrutiny partners it is likely that the learning from the RBAG will inform the development of the SHR's risk assessment framework over time. For local government it is interesting to note that Audit Scotland is not being prescriptive with the pathfinder local authorities on how self assessment should be undertaken. Audit Scotland appreciates that many different improvement /quality assurance systems are used and it does not wish to impose a prescribed approach. It also states the aim should be for self assessment to replace any need for central risk assessment, but that self evaluation across local government is not yet sufficiently developed to do so. This is also true in the RSL sector.

There is an increasing drive towards securing greater efficiency and value for money. In the RSL sector this is coming over loud and clear in recent SHR inspection reports (eg Bridgewater, Berwickshire, Castle Rock Edinvar and Cairn housing associations) and in the Scottish Government's recent statement on Investing in Affordable Housing - The Way Forward (25th June, 2009): the paper continually mentions that housing providers must improve and prove efficiency and VFM; that 'approved developers' must meet certain standards (to be agreed); and, that they will not be funded where the SHR has concerns over governance, service quality, stock investment or financial viability - this is where self assessment and a robust evidence base will be increasingly important to prove compliance.

### **Using self assessment as a quality system**

Most 'quality' systems now use self assessment methods as a means of promoting self evaluation - this could lead on to external accreditation but not necessarily. Whatever 'tool' or 'model' is chosen the aim should help achieve continuous improvement throughout the organisation - rather than just a form filling one-off exercise in preparation for inspection. If inspection does come the SHR is looking for evidence of continuous improvement rather than a last minute scramble to bring the evidence together.

There are a range of tools including the SHR self assessment questionnaire, Customer Service Excellence, EFQM and the related Public Service Improvement Framework (PSIF developed by the Improvement Service), Investors in People, and ISO 9001. Some of these are more holistic than others and consider organisational development as a whole rather than specific service areas. Interestingly, the Improvement Service and SHR are now discussing linkages between their two self assessment approaches to smooth the risk assessment and inspection process in the local government context, but there may also be lessons learnt through this exercise for the RSL sector. Questions to ask in choosing an approach may be:

- Which tool suits your needs or do you need to combine methods?
- What resources do you need to put in place to change from a form filling approach to a continuous improvement approach?
- How useful and up to date is your evidence base?
- How do your customers participate in assessing your strengths and weaknesses?
- What external challenge do you need whether formal accreditation or other resource?

Anna Evans Housing Consultancy has recently developed a checklist which draws out the key elements and overlaps from the SHR self assessment questionnaire, Customer Service Excellence and PSIF models for application in the Scottish social landlord context.

### **Experience in this field**

- **Self assessment support** - appraising your current position and supporting implementation including development of an evidence base.
- **Inspection support** - including mock inspection, mystery shopping, self assessment support.

### **Recent appointments**

- **Link Group** Anna has been providing Link with self assessment support - appraising the current position in relation to self assessment and the Group's evidence base and providing options for implementation.
- **Argyll and Bute Council** homeless inspection support including mock inspection and self assessment advice.

### **Anna Evans works in 3 ways:**

- Independently
- With HQN as an Associate
- With other consultancies and academic institutions

Anna Evans has 17 years experience in the affordable housing sector in local authorities, Scottish Homes, housing associations and DTZ .

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