

It's not an easy option, but it's worthwhile – go ahead, enjoy the challenges and rewards it brings

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the network

About the author

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Having retired two years ago from her post of Chief Administrator at a busy golf club, Ann is now kept busy babysitting her two grandchildren and engaging in her many hobbies. She likes to keep her brain active so is thoroughly enjoying the new challenges that becoming a resident inspector presents.



Introduction

The recent review of regulation makes it quite clear that although the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) is going, residents scrutinising and holding their landlords to account is an idea which is here to stay. That is very welcome news because in our experience, empowering residents unlocks a reservoir of knowledge, energy and enthusiasm which, if properly harnessed, results in real service improvements and better value for money. It also brings tremendous personal benefits to the individuals concerned, giving them skills which will transfer to the workplace or to other parts of their lives and the fulfilment which comes from knowing that you have made a positive difference to something you care about.

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There are many ways in which residents can take an active role in driving service improvement but probably the most demanding, stimulating and rewarding route is to train as a resident inspector.

We began developing the HQN three-stage training programme for resident inspectors in August 2008, working closely with Metropolitan Housing Partnership’s (MHP’s) policy and performance team, well before the concept became an element of the evolving regulatory framework. From the outset we were impressed by the extraordinary commitment shown by the first group of trainees and by the speed at which they grasped the principles of housing inspection (we initially used a methodology based on the way the Audit Commission conducts short notice inspections, which is now evolving to include validation of local offers) and learned to apply them to various service areas. Their reports were solidly evidence-based, identified strengths and weaknesses as well as value for money issues, and recommended realistic changes to the services they had inspected. The residents earned the respect of the housing professionals for the way they approached and conducted the task, and as a result their reports were not just left to gather dust but were turned into improvement plans.

The training which we put the resident inspectors through was rigorous; we expected a great deal of them and did not cut them any slack simply because they were volunteers. The personal account of Ann Trentham which follows will give you an idea of the energy, enthusiasm and ability that the resident inspection programme has tapped into and used to the mutual benefit of residents and landlords.

MHP has been a real innovator, but there is no reason to think that MHP residents are unique. There are plenty more potential resident inspectors out there; they just need to be given an opportunity!

The personal journey of a resident inspector

Ann Trentham, resident volunteer with MHP

I became a resident inspector with Metropolitan Housing almost by chance. Nearly two years ago now, I saw an advertisement in their magazine for mystery shoppers and phoned up to find out more. Instead I was directed to a 'new, exciting' (but very vaguely described) alternative project. My curiosity and interest were immediately aroused – I had retired from a busy job and although I was enjoying my hobbies and grandchildren, I felt that I was 'losing my edge'. My pace of life was slower and my mind was slowing down accordingly!

“An initial trial and training day tended to polarise my feelings, swinging me first one way, then another”

An initial trial and training day tended to polarise my feelings, swinging me first one way, then another. I was appalled by the price of my return rail ticket and realised immediately that training me and the other potential inspectors was going to be an expensive business. I wondered whether I was prepared to work hard enough to justify the cost. Facilitators from HQN and MHP spent that first morning explaining the project – resident inspections were planned on the basis of the then draft Audit Commission's short notice inspection methodology and scrutiny was to take place within an organisation over a period of two days, speaking to anyone requested from frontline staff to the managing director and chair of the board.

Also during that morning session we were required to introduce ourselves and explain our motives for being there. This was uncomfortable – reasons ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous, from those who wanted to change the world in one fell swoop to those who, with a kind of spurious curiosity, wanted to see how 'the other half lived' (admittedly somewhere in the middle there were some good, genuine people with realistic aims!). I was last and by the time it came to my turn I snapped: "I'm Ann. I'm a grandmother. I don't have any altruistic motives. I thought it sounded fun." By this time I was really getting into the acronyms and thought of myself as a GOW (Grumpy Old Woman!) for the rest of the morning. As I'd not done any volunteering before in the area of housing, all initials had to be explained to me and the trainers were very good at explaining everything step by step. KLOEs (key lines of enquiry) were also mentioned at this stage but it was to be many weeks before I finally made friends with such things as KLOEs and began to see them as useful tools rather than fearsome masters.

Anyway, by lunchtime on that first day I was ready to escape. If I had not been aware of that expensive train ticket I might have 'done a runner' at that point, but I felt I owed it to them to stay for the rest of the day. **I am so glad I did!** The afternoon was

brilliant – we did training exercises in twos and threes – scrutiny of phone response times followed by mock interviews in which the facilitators played the role of harassed staff trying to justify their poor figures. I loved this; I found the charts easy to understand, worked well with my partner and really got my teeth into the questioning. I was hooked from this point on.

After mutual feedback at the end of the day I was accepted as a trainee. Things progressed rapidly from that point, and following a day spent learning about access and customer care, a group of us were ready to undertake our first inspection. The chosen MHP business subsidiary was made aware of our purposes and knew that we were ‘in training’. On that first inspection HQN trainers took the roles of lead inspectors and metaphorically held our hands every step of the way. During the two-day inspection they made sure we were prepared with searching questions and took time after interviews to discuss key points of discovery with us. Nevertheless, even with all this support it was sometimes a daunting experience (but also exhilarating!). My feelings spiralled between ‘What on earth am I doing here, questioning the managing director and chair of the board?’ to a steely determination to ask ever more pertinent questions. By the end of the first day, as a team we were bewildered and wondering if we’d learnt anything: by the end of the second day we knew we’d learnt so much that we felt we would never be able to organise it logically. We gave informal feedback to the organisation then staggered out, amazed that we had already completed our first inspection.

A moderation day followed and at this early stage we were again greatly supported by our trainers. A PowerPoint presentation was prepared and a date for its delivery planned. The words ‘evidence, evidence, evidence’ were indelibly tattooed on our brains and our hearts. No glib statements were allowed: we had to be able to back up everything we said.

After the presentation we promised a written report within ten working days. I think it was at this point that I realised that there was not going to be a fair division of labour in this volunteering business. Inspectors have different home commitments, different skills and different ideas about how much time and effort they are willing to put in. Also, as in any other walk of life, those who show a readiness to do the most work can easily be left to do it. I also realised how important support from trainers and the inspection team can be, because you will not necessarily get support from family and friends. Your nearest and dearest may worry that you are over-taxing yourself, and should you dare to appear less than totally enthusiastic at any point, almost everyone is apt to say: “Well, why do you do it? You’re only a volunteer!”

“I realised that there was not going to be a fair division of labour in this volunteering business”

To briefly return to the training process, which continued to be thorough, responsive to personal needs and supportive, we were soon considered ready to carry out a second inspection, again in access and customer care. This time we had much more say in deciding which staff members we needed to see and appointed a lead inspector from among our team. On this second inspection our trainers took more of a 'back seat' both during the inspection itself and during subsequent feedback, moderation, presentation and report preparation. Following each of these first two stages of training we had each received a certificate, and the third and final stage then necessitated that the team plan and organise an inspection themselves (but again with subtle background support available if required). A gas safety and asbestos management training day took place and then the team contacted the organisation with proposed schedules of interviews. This time HQN was not present during the inspection, but a member of their staff did facilitate the moderation day. After this we received a final framed certificate at a celebration luncheon. We were fully fledged resident inspectors.

"I love what I am doing, it has certainly given me back the edge I lost after retirement"

It sounds like hard work, so at this juncture I had better tell you why I continue. I **love** what I am doing, it has certainly given me back the edge I lost after retirement and it gives me a tremendous 'buzz'. The buzz of knowing I can do this, the buzz of seeing that the organisation is truly accountable to its residents and the buzz of making a difference. I have a new insight into the workings of my housing association and a sense of status and confidence. I have widened my horizons and made a positive impact on people's lives. I have found the whole process very interesting. I have learnt new facts and skills, not least becoming a team player, which I have never found easy. Members of teams are switched around on a mix-and-match basis, and a team usually consists of two to four members so you get a chance to work with different people with very different styles of their own. Originally small numbers of inspectors sometimes made availability difficult, but this situation is being eased by a new intake of trainees. As well as being mentored through the three stages as a group, new individuals can also be paired up on occasion with a more experienced resident inspector.

When I read an action plan that has come about as a result of our inspection (the organisation is required to produce a SMART plan within six weeks), I am thrilled to think we may have improved people's lives. The business is reacting proactively to our suggestions rather than simply reactively to residents' complaints. The organisation I work for has throughout made it clear to me and my colleagues how much it values our contribution. I am particularly proud of the changes that came about as a result of one of our earlier inspections.

We had found significant discrepancies between the ethos of the organisation as described by directors and managers, and what actually happened out on the estates where people lived. As a result of our inspection, meetings were held with neighbourhood officers where it was determined what the levels one through to four should actually mean on an estate inspection; residents were also informed of these standards and new estate inspectors appointed. The area we had seen and other similar ones were tidied up and specific instructions were given about the cleaning and maintenance of communal areas. Notices displaying these schedules made the organisation directly accountable to its residents. The managing director was delighted with our findings as they gave even more weight to the changes he wished to implement. Every inspection is different but each brings its own rewards – for us as initiators of change, for local residents and for the housing association itself.

“Spend time getting the right people and then value them”

What would I say to anyone thinking of undertaking a similar venture, either as an organisation or as a volunteer? To potential resident inspectors, I would reiterate that I am very glad that I got involved so if you get the chance, go to a taster day and try it for yourself. If you do go ahead ask for all the training and help you need and then have confidence in your own abilities. A volunteer needs to be more professional than the professionals in order to be taken seriously, so always be smart, focused and polite – give 100% all the time. It will widen your horizons and I want you to feel the ‘buzz’ for yourself – it’s such a great feeling that I get quite evangelical about this! To service providers, I would say spend time getting the right people and then value them: that way it will be more satisfying for everyone and you will reduce your ‘drop-out’ rate. ‘Sell it’ to your colleagues from the beginning: you need to take everyone in your organisation along with you. Provide good training and lots of support; in the early stages trainees may be far more ‘needy’ than you had bargained for – I was; I needed a lot of reassurance. This scheme is certainly not an easy option, but it is worthwhile and I would urge you to go ahead and enjoy the challenges and rewards it brings.

With thanks to Pat Goldfeather of Metropolitan Housing Partnership who has mentored and mothered us throughout, and Sue Farrant and Gill Stead of HQN who were always there for us.

Finally

If Ann's eloquent and authentic account of her experience does not inspire you to give it a try in your organisation, I don't know what will! As she says, this is not an easy option (and there are other, less demanding ways in which residents can contribute to service improvement), but the rewards are huge.

You will find more information about the training programme and some pictures of MHP's first resident inspection trainees in action in a case study which is on the HQN website. MHP is always happy to share its experience with other landlords, contact Pat Goldfeather at Pat.Goldfeather@mht.co.uk