

Do You Care?

How you can adopt an innovative approach to vulnerability training for staff

Produced by **Barnet Homes**
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Foreword by Mandy Dunstan

Operational Asset Manager for Barnet Homes

At Barnet Homes we believe that Decent Homes is not just about good asset management or project management; it's about providing our customers with a home and neighbourhood in which they can be proud to live.

That requires us to respond to the varying needs of residents, regardless of ethnicity, language, age, disability or sexual orientation.

We and our partners need to recognise that many of our customers are vulnerable. That may be due to ill health, or there could be a multitude of other reasons why people may be uncomfortable with work being carried out in their home.

Our "Do you care?" project is a national first, inspired by our desire that we provide residents with extra care, extra thought and extra consideration.

I know of many staff training packages covering equality and diversity, but there are no packages that look at aspects of vulnerability. That is why I decided to create and hold our own training event, which could be filmed and reproduced on DVD for future induction training.

The event was about making staff more aware of how they can overcome issues, so that they can carry out work in a respectful and understanding manner in residents' homes while they are present.

This guide tells you what we did and how you too might create your own vulnerability training. I hope you find it useful.

Mandy

Introduction

Barnet Homes' "Do you care?" project was a national first, a unique training event for our staff and contractors that used actors to dramatise situations they may face.

The aim is to look at vulnerability – with all of its different guises – from a social landlord's perspective. It encourages staff and contractors' operatives to be more aware of their working style, adapt their working practices, and in some cases to alert support agencies to problems they witness.

The project culminated in a conference attended by around 200 staff from Barnet Homes, its contractors and sub-contractors, together with the production of a DVD training package.

The innovative and interactive style of "Do you care?" was chosen to resonate with staff and develop their understanding of the challenges faced by vulnerable tenants.

"I can honestly say that this event has left its mark. I would rate it as one of the memorable events I have attended and still think back to the drama."

Janet Shelley, Training Manager,
United House

The Context

What do we mean by "vulnerable"?

Vulnerability extends beyond traditional stereotypes, such as a woman in a wheelchair or an elderly person. There can be many reasons why someone might appear to be acting unreasonably when work is carried out in their home.

Perhaps that behaviour stems solely from the person not being very well? Perhaps there are some more deep-seated issues?

Being sensitive to vulnerability issues is about thinking twice before judging someone and trying to see things from the customers' perspective.

The challenge for Barnet Homes

In Barnet we face significant issues with vulnerability among our tenants:

- At least one third of Barnet Homes' tenants have a long-term illness or disability
- Two thirds of our tenants are on housing benefit
- A high proportion of tenants have English as a second language

This makes it particularly important that staff know how to react when working in the homes of vulnerable tenants, whether it be for religious, cultural, health or lifestyle reasons.

Another big challenge is not only to raise vulnerability awareness with our own staff, but critically with those of our contractors and their sub-contractors who spend more time in tenants' homes.

Although the Resident Liaison officers working for the contractors may be trained on vulnerability issues and best practice, this is unlikely to be the case for those at the end of the supply chain, such as electricians or plumbers. Other problems include stretched resources, high staff turnover, unfamiliarity with policies and staff being brought in to work at short notice.

In summary, it is difficult for any organisation

involving third parties to control standards and ensure that staff know how to deal with inappropriate behaviour.

For that reason, Barnet Homes wants to encourage more sharing of information and working as a partnership. If a residence is identified as a vulnerable residence, this should be discussed with operators going to work there. Similarly, if the operators notice (previously unknown) vulnerability in a residence, they need to flag it to the rest of the organisation.

But how do we raise awareness of vulnerability among those people who are supposed to detect it? While there is an abundance of guidance for dealing with diversity, we could find no off-the-shelf training solution available for vulnerability.

That is why we set about creating our 'Do you care?' programme.

The challenge for contractors

Some residents are reluctant to allow contractors into their home to carry out works, perceiving this as an intrusion into their personal space.

Contractors frequently cite "no access" as an impediment to them carrying out work. This can simply indicate that they are not being given access to the property; on other occasions it can mean they cannot complete

works because of other obstacles, such as squalor.

The national challenge

Changes in national legislation mean that Barnet Homes is required to introduce a "working with vulnerability" policy in its set of policies and procedures.

The increasing national emphasis on helping vulnerable people to live independently in the community has also required many changes to our processes.

At the same time, waiting lists for social housing have increased. The priority is to house people with greater needs, whether these be financial, family-orientated or related to mental health.

This places more social responsibility on housing services to support the needs of people being rehabilitated into society, such as people with mental health problems or people with previous convictions.

As a social landlord, Barnet Homes has a duty to raise awareness of vulnerability and encourage best practice among its staff and contractors.



Planning “Do You Care?”

Our primary objective was to create a training programme that would engage our staff, contractors and sub-contractors and aid their understanding of vulnerability issues.

We wanted to move away from traditional written guides and protocols to a far more interactive training event, with actors portraying “real life” situations that staff and contractors’ operatives may face during their work.

Early on in the process, we created a project group formed from our staff and partners to:

- recruit a drama company and a production company for the DVD
- agree a financial contribution from each partner
- research vulnerability issues and develop the dramatised scenarios
- organise a venue for 200 people and the event itself.

The conference day was called “Do you care?” The point is that although partners realise that part of their job remit is customer care, they need to ensure that the subcontractors they use also see their job as equally people-focused.

It is not just up to a resident liaison manager; everyone can make a difference. As a contractor put it: “It’s about respect. We all deserve it – people who have work to do and the vulnerable residents whose homes they are working in.”

The Brief

Barnet Homes gave the following brief to our selected theatre company, MaST:

The aims of ‘Do You Care?’ are:

1. To raise the issue of vulnerable residents.
2. To be challenging, even ‘controversial’.
3. To confirm that the organisation has a duty of care for each resident and that this can only be achieved if everyone who goes into a home is aware of signs of real or potential difficulties and reports these back.

4. To raise awareness that these difficulties could include: children in danger, mental health difficulties, inability to look after themselves or their home.
5. To raise understanding that the organisation has a strategy for these situations and policies to support them.

The delegates should not feel reprimanded. The aim is to move their service from good to great. Note that a lot of participants will arrive at the event thinking “What’s the point? I don’t have the time for this.”



“I thought it was excellent – the dramas were excellent. They had really done their homework, the plays were spot on, and what we actually experience on a daily basis.”

Linda Hooper, Senior Resident Liaison Officer, United House

“It has made me much more aware of the diverse needs of those we work with and for, and not to make assumptions.”

Jonathan Gibbs, Project Manager for Connaught



The conference

The “Do You Care?” conference on 5 November 2008 was attended by more than 160 representatives from Barnet Homes and its contractors – Balfour Beatty, Connaught, Apollo London, VHL Heating and United House.

The MaST Film and Theatre Team, fronted by former Brookside actor Louis Emerick, delivered the training, playing out a range of scenarios that staff may face during their work.

Attendees were asked to put themselves in the shoes of tenants and discuss how they could modify their work and actions in a range of different situations.

Using drama made the training more relevant and exciting, and also helped to challenge perceptions and behaviour more than conventional training methods.

Value for money

The event was good value for money. Not only were 160 staff trained simultaneously, the event was filmed to be produced as a learning and development DVD for contractors and for our staff training and induction. Each partner contributed towards the costs.

Scenarios

Problems with access

We may identify that work needs to be carried out in a particular property, but contractors cannot get hold of the tenant. Alternatively, the tenant is saying they want the work done but keeps making excuses to prevent access.

What in the first instance is reported as a “no access” case can have many factors behind it.

A real life case, which was initially tagged as “no access”, involved a resident who had been raped three times, including once by a subcontractor. She now feared contractors and wouldn’t let people into her home to carry out the necessary work.

The solution involved taking extra measures to make the tenant feel safe. Arrangements were made that her mother would be there with her during the work, a liaison officer was there in the morning to introduce her to the subcontractors, and extra operatives were on site to ensure the tenant was safe and that there were no misunderstandings.

After access

We looked at possible situations our contractors might encounter when accessing a property.

They might:

1. Observe signs of vulnerability that they have a social responsibility to report. The conference aims to help people recognise a need and route it to the right person. (This could be contractor to RLO manager, housing officer to support network and specialist services such as social services.)
2. Be faced with emotionally driven behaviour from the resident, such as rudeness. If not dealt with appropriately, that behaviour can cause knock-on effects for future visits. *“Often, as soon as we start working in their homes, you can literally see the resident’s stress factor kick in. How do you then go the extra mile to complete the work rather than simply walking away?”*



Squalor and hoarding

From time to time staff may come across people who are living in squalor, or who may have hoarded items to such an extent there is no possible way the subcontractors can access rooms sufficiently. Not only can this prevent completion of the work, it can also pose serious health and safety risks for the residents themselves.

The solution is to report this to the Neighbourhood Housing Officer. They will then visit to establish the extent of the problem, as well as start the process of getting the resident accustomed to the fact that their belongings

will have to be cleared and the property cleaned. A referral to Housing 21 can then be made for the clearance to take place. Liaison with relevant health professionals such as a community psychiatric nurse or social worker is also recommended, as this process can often be extremely stressful to the resident.

Safeguarding children and adults

Contractors are advised to leave a property if a child is alone at the property or comes home alone. This policy safeguards vulnerability on both sides, since it guards against allegations.

If there are any signs that a child may be living on their own, contractors should report it to social services. Telling signs could be that the child looks neglected or uses a lot of adult language (such as sexual expressions).

Signs of elderly abuse should also be reported directly to social services.

Substance Abuse

A contractor walked into a drug exchange and got attacked. Another member of staff walked into a property full of syringes.

Once this kind of vulnerability has been established, the correct procedure is to have a risk assessment visit carried out before sending out contractors with protective clothing.

Communications

Staff should be conscious of the impact their choice of words can have on a vulnerable person. Words like “I’m not going to fix this if you behave like that...” may be particularly provocative if you are dealing with a vulnerable person.

And what about language difficulties? Does the resident need an interpreter present, or a family member who can interpret for the subcontractors? Deaf and blind people have special requirements, as do elderly residents suffering from dementia who forget what has been organised or get frightened at the prospect of what is going to take place.



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Thanks also go to theatre company MaST and filming company Rice N Peas, which helped our staff increase their skills and confidence and embrace the spirit of vulnerability.

“A great day. Couldn’t have been improved. Our operatives come across difficult situations when they are just going out to do a job – this training prepares them for the unexpected and lets them know what to do and who to tell.”

Steve Berryman, Reactive Manager,
Connaught