



Mystery Shopper Guide



This guide is dedicated to all the residents who took part in the pilot project

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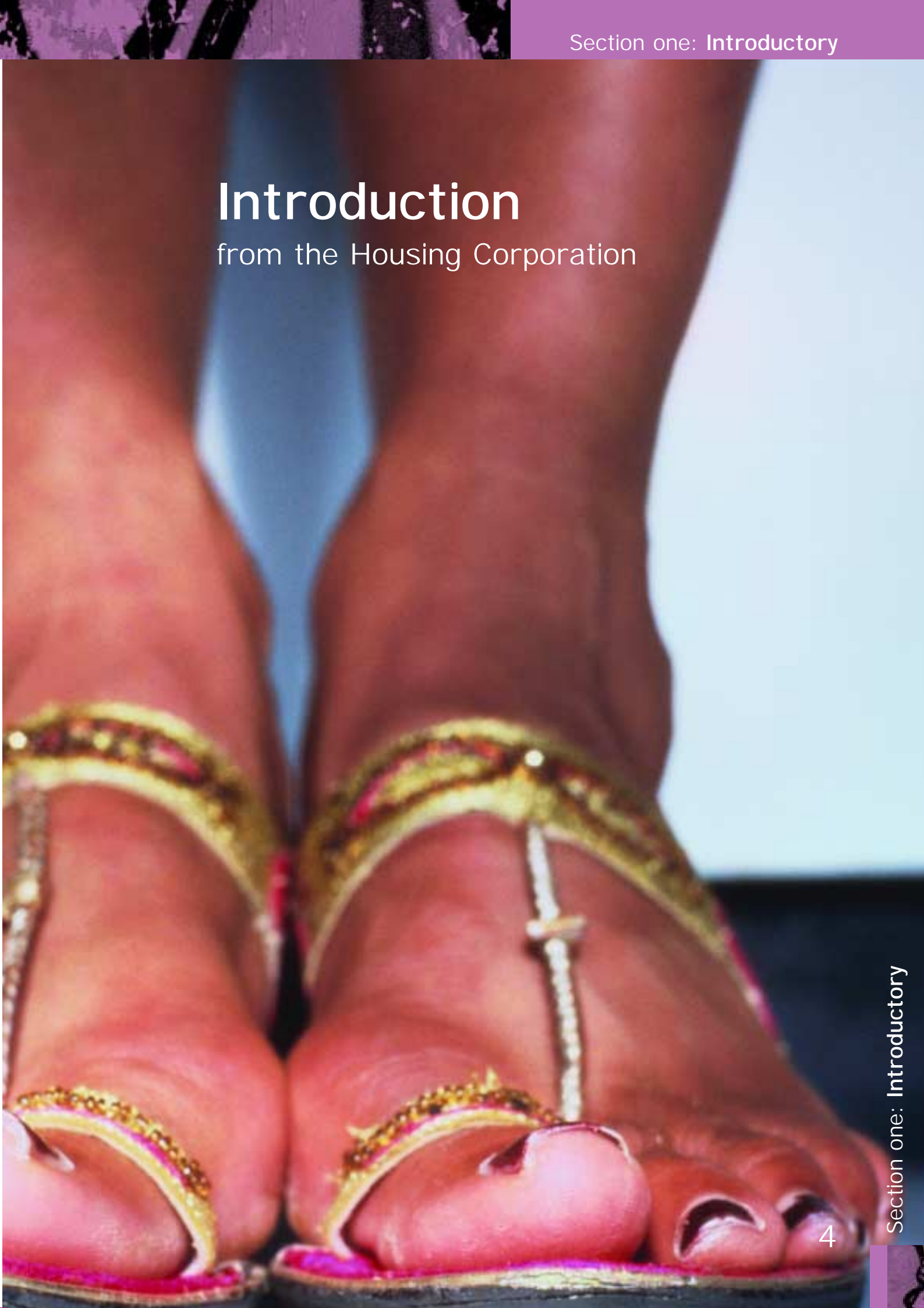
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Introduction

from the Housing Corporation



Introduction

This guide arises out of an important experiment conducted by Solon Community Network and Stadium and West Yorkshire Housing Associations. They ran two mystery shopper projects, one using housing association residents as mystery shoppers, the other using professional market researchers provided by Opinion Research Corporation International (ORC). The residents were trained and briefed by Solon. The aim was to establish the good practice issues

surrounding the involvement of residents in Mystery Shopping, and to establish whether relying on residents affected the results. The pattern of scoring turned out to be much the same for both groups – but residents tended to mark more harshly than professionals. Using residents, then, does not appear to affect the overall analysis, but it may throw a dash of cold water in the face of the commissioning body.

The guide is concise and readable, and will help other associations who wish to work with tenants and residents in Mystery Shopping initiatives.

The Corporation was especially interested in this experiment because, like many others engaged in social policy, we are keen to see end users more closely involved in the design and delivery of research. In association with Communities Scotland, Welsh Assembly Government, the Charity

Commission, the Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Home Office, we have commissioned good practice guidance on the involvement of users in research from the Centre for Local Economic Studies, and this mystery shopper exercise is feeding into that study.



Many housing associations are finding that Mystery Shopping gives them a better understanding of the face they show the public. It helps them see themselves as their tenants, residents and applicants see them. It is a technique borrowed from the private sector which has worked successfully in housing. Mystery Shopping is becoming established as part of the armoury of techniques through which housing associations test their performance on service delivery. It can complement tenants' satisfaction surveys, providing insights into the experience that lies behind responses in particular areas, and helping to test whether staff training or management initiatives have had a practical impact on the ground.

The value of the exercise can be strengthened by inviting housing association tenants and residents to pose as mystery shoppers as well as or instead of professional market researchers. It helps associations to engage with their consumers from the outset, it can provide interesting new insights, and the training can give useful presentation skills to those residents who participate.

David Cheesman

Housing Corporation



Mystery Shopping

What is Mystery Shopping?

Mystery Shopping is an extremely powerful way to test service standards, and is a form of market research which assesses services wholly from the point of view of the customer.

- Mystery Shopping is where individuals are trained to observe, experience and evaluate the customer service process of an organisation
- They do this by posing as a customer and undertaking a series of agreed tasks, which monitor the service delivery and the effectiveness of staff training
- Each shop is followed by an evaluation, usually in the form of a questionnaire
- Through the questionnaire, they report on their experiences in a detailed and objective way.

What is the purpose of the mystery customer research?

The purpose of mystery customer research is to provide management information to the organisation. This is intended to assist the organisation to focus on customer service improvements by providing them with information on the quality of their current service.

Commonly used in the private sector to test service standards, the technique helps to develop a service culture within the organisation. Mystery Shopping can be used to assess how front line staff are delivering new services. For example if a Registered Social Landlord launches a new initiative, are staff aware of it and are they advising customers correctly? Mystery Shopping is most commonly used to assess adherence to customer service standards and can also be used to assess the success of staff training.





Why use residents as mystery shoppers?

Many organisations, including Registered Social Landlords, use professional mystery shopper companies to test their service standards. Few social landlords to date, however, have developed programmes using their own residents as mystery shoppers.

Developing residents as mystery shoppers is relevant because of its obvious links to the Inspection Regime and Best Value. Over time, it should become a key component in the genuine assessment of service standards and customer care leading to continuous improvement.

- Residents can bring a real understanding of how the association's customers feel
- Asking residents to directly test the customer services they receive is enormously empowering for them
- The skills and confidence that the mystery shopper training gives residents can assist them into employment
- Associations can reach out to residents who do not normally get involved in the association's tenant participation or community initiatives, especially residents from the black, minority and ethnic communities
- Using residents as mystery shopper embodies the principles of Best Value and continuous improvement
- Through observation and evaluation by the association's own residents, the overall quality of service can be raised for all customers.

Background

In 1999, Solon Community Network (Solon), working with Stadium Housing Association, started developing a programme to train and monitor residents as mystery shoppers. Solon quickly discovered this was a more complex project than we had originally anticipated, but excited by our original pilot and the challenges it presented, we were keen to develop the concept further.

In December 2001 Solon secured grant funding from the Housing Corporation and match funding from Stadium Housing Association, to pilot a mystery shopper project and develop a Good Practice Guide Using Residents as Mystery Shoppers.

The aims of the project:

1. Establish and share Mystery Shopping good practice
2. Pilot a mystery shopper project with two housing associations using residents as mystery shoppers
3. Run a control project with the same scenarios using professional mystery shoppers, so that the results could be compared
4. Draft a best practice guide for use by social landlords

The project team

Solon managed the project and ran the pilot scheme in partnership with ORC International, Stadium Housing Association and West Yorkshire Housing Association.

Solon Community Network

Solon is an Independent Resident Participation Consultancy working across the United Kingdom. They provide professional Independent Advisor and Tenant Participation consultancy services to residents and landlords as well as promoting greater resident involvement and community development in urban regeneration. Their aim is to make sure that people can have a say about what happens in their neighbourhood.

ORC Research Corporation International

ORC International, founded in 1938, is a premier provider of market research to both the private and public sector. With extensive experience of running professional mystery shopper programmes within the social housing sector, they have run one of the UK's largest public sector Mystery Shopping programmes on behalf of Jobcentre Plus. They have also recently developed a Mystery Shopping syndicate for nine registered social landlords and are keen to establish and share good practice within the public sector.

Stadium Housing Association

Stadium Housing Association owns and manages over 80,000 homes across London. They are committed to providing quality services with local accountability, which will bring real improvements to the lives of their residents. Their urban regeneration programme is focussed on delivering sustainable communities in partnership with residents, local community groups and other housing providers.

West Yorkshire Housing Association

West Yorkshire Housing Association owns and manages 900 homes in West Yorkshire, comprising rented, shared ownership and supported housing. It is a locally based association, which aims to meet the needs of single people, families, older people and people with support needs. The association is committed to putting its tenants and service users first and strives for excellence. It is a member of the North East BME Forum, which carried out a mystery shopper study using residents as mystery shoppers to determine how well the associations performed in providing services to their BME residents.

Basic Methodology

- Project management by Solon Community Network
- Using the expertise of ORC international and Solon, the project team designed and developed the scenarios and questionnaires
- Solon recruited and signed up residents for training
- Solon trained residents of both Stadium and West Yorkshire Housing Associations. Residents each carried out shops for their own organisation, but not for each others
- ORC International used identical scenarios and questionnaires to carry out shops with the same two housing associations, employing professional mystery shoppers to carry out the research
- All the survey results from both resident and professional mystery shoppers were returned to ORC International who fed them into a database to produce the final reports and analysis
- The pilots were closely monitored and the findings and the material developed throughout the project form the basis of this Best Practice Guide.

Equal Opportunities, Diversity & Monitoring

Housing associations have a diverse client base in terms of race, ethnicity, language, religion, age, disability and gender. Good equal opportunities equates to a good customer service and vice versa.

Mystery Shopping can play a powerful role in:

- monitoring equal access to services
- assessing the quality of services delivered to a diverse group of residents
- ensuring a unified commitment to equal opportunities across the organisation
- highlighting any organisational arrangements or staff conduct which leads to or perpetuates discrimination and exclusion
- assessing the needs of different residents

Case study of Good Practice

North East BME Housing Forum mystery shopper study

The North East BME Housing Forum was formed in 1999 to find ways of implementing locally the commitments set out in the Housing Corporation's national BME housing strategy published in 1998.

The Forum wanted to carry out a mystery shopper exercise using tenants as mystery shoppers to determine how well the participating associations performed in providing services to their BME residents.

In particular the research was expected to assess areas of compliance such as:

- accessibility to buildings
- safety of environment
- availability of translators
- positive image of cultures
- no evidence of discrimination
- a unified commitment to equal opportunities
- overall general conduct of the staff when dealing with customers

The 'Mystery Shopper Report' produced as result of this survey highlighted the following good practice points:

- written and spoken communications should be in simple English
- reception skills are essential
- the translation skills of staff must be tested, trained and refreshed

Generally, the report highlighted the need for associations to be flexible and sensitive when trying to meet the special needs of their BME tenants. A copy of the report can be obtained from West Yorkshire Housing Association.

Diversity when recruiting tenants

For this project Solon was keen to recruit a diverse range of residents who reflected the customer base of the associations we worked with.

Whilst our pilot did not specifically target residents from the black and minority ethnic communities, our recruitment procedures worked well and one of the great successes of this project is undoubtedly the large number of young BME residents who took part and were successfully trained as mystery shoppers.

We therefore conclude that training residents as mystery shoppers offers a real opportunity to reach residents who do not often get involved in tenant participation initiatives and is attractive to BME residents.

In this DIY Guide we include a few scenarios used in the North East BME study and Solon is currently working on a project to develop scenarios in Bengali and other community languages so that Mystery Shopping can be further developed with minority groups.

Monitoring of residents

An Excel spread sheet was set up to provide comprehensive monitoring information about the residents taking part in the project, from the initial expression of interest to the final report

stage. This included monitoring the resident profile and tracked residents who dropped out of the project as well as those who successfully completed all the training and carried out the shops. It gave the landlord comprehensive information about the profile of the residents who did get involved and was useful in developing future recruitment procedures.

A few housing association staff expressed concern that some resident mystery shoppers might come with preconceived ideas about the service, which could impair their ability to be impartial. The application and monitoring forms developed by the project team sought to highlight past history with the association, for example if the resident had previously made a formal complaint.

The project team was aware that some residents might come with a certain amount of 'baggage' and sought to address this through both the monitoring and the training. If organisations are going to invest in training residents as mystery shoppers and act on the survey results, then they will need to have confidence in the objectivity and professionalism of those residents carrying out the shops. Close monitoring of residents participating in the project is therefore an important part of the quality control process.

Getting Started

When organising a mystery shopper project it is not always immediately obvious in which order to proceed. This is why lessons learnt about both the running order and the process during the pilot project, were invaluable.



Our inclination was to start with the recruitment of the residents, when in fact this should be left to near the end of the project. Residents recruited too early in the process will have to wait for training and to carry out their shops, and the longer the wait, the more likely they are to drop out. Many items, such as scenarios and questionnaires, need to be in place for the project to work well, and these should all be agreed before residents are signed up.

Organising your project

We have listed the following chapters in this Guide, from staff communication through to recruiting residents, in the order in which they are best carried out to cut administration time, minimise drop out of tenants and ensure a quality project. Overall a mystery shopper project using residents, will take between 3-4 months to deliver (depending on the number of shops) and set out below is an indicative mystery shopper work programme, showing the running order of various activities, with an indication of how long each activity will take.

Sample Work Programme

Item	Action	Timescale date
1.	Agree outline timetable for project, key target dates and draft work programme similar to this	1 day
2.	Advise staff they will be mystery shopped	1 day
3.	Senior staff team to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • agree scenarios and questionnaires • agree number of shops 	2 weeks
4.	Decide monitoring information required by association and sign off application form and monitoring form	1 week
5.	Agree Introductory pack	1 week
6.	Agree training dates and book venues	1 week
7.	Design flyer to go out to residents to advertise project, agree mail out date (could go out with rent statements) and get flyers printed	1 week
8.	Mail out flyers	1 day
9.	Sign up residents by phone and through completed forms, to a training session. Send out introductory pack and keep in constant contact to maintain enthusiasm	3 weeks
10.	Run 1st training session, agree calendar for shops with residents and carry out shops over following week	1 - 2 weeks
12.	Run 2nd training session, agree calendar for shops with residents and carry out shops over following week	1 - 2 weeks
13.	Continue training sessions etc until all the shops are completed	As above for each session
14.	All completed questionnaires to be sent back. Residents given vouchers when their completed questionnaires are returned.	As soon as possible after shops completed
15.	Questionnaires are checked and sent for data inputting and analysis.	3 weeks
16.	Final report is written	1 week
17.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article and report findings written up in resident's newsletter • Recommendations to improve customer care set out clearly for residents to see • See if a resident mystery shopper would be a guest speaker at resident conference 	As soon as possible after project finishes

Staff Communication

The objective of a mystery shopper project should be to provide management information on the quality of everyday service provision and customer care, in order to aid training plans and improvements in service delivery.

As a first step the organisation's own staff must be advised that their service delivery may be checked from time to time through Mystery Shopping and staff should be informed when the organisation intends to undertake a Mystery Shopping exercise. The possibility of individual staff members being identified should also be discussed and agreement reached on how this would be dealt with.

A key objective of the staff communication should be to promote understanding of the mystery customer programme and the following elements should be highlighted:

- objectives of the programme
- staff and residents will not be identified
- elements of service to be evaluated (e.g. reception service, housing management)
- proposed reporting format, structure and implications
- project quality control measures e.g. mystery shopper recruitment, training and monitoring

Staff identification

- If the organisation plans to name members of staff that are evaluated, then those staff must be told in advance (this information can be incorporated into staff contracts)
- If telephone calls are going to be recorded staff agreement must be gained in advance
- Clearance from Union or staff organisation representatives should be sought where applicable

- Disciplinary action should never be taken by the organisation based on results of a mystery shopper evaluation
- The results should be used to develop staff through coaching and training

Staff attempting to identify evaluators

Staff should be made aware that trying to identify resident mystery shoppers is not acceptable, as it will deter residents getting involved and annoy other tenants.

The organisation should aim to show employees the benefits of the technique and how to use the results to ensure that spotting evaluators becomes less important.

Legal issues

Listed here are the legal issues that currently apply to mystery customer research. This list is not exhaustive and associations can get updates from the Market Research Society website at www.mrs.org.uk.

Data protection Act 1998

The Act is split into eight data protection principles and these govern how personal data is collected and processed. Personal data is not just about data held on computer, it also relates to recorded, audio and visual images. There are specific guidelines relating to Employee research.

Mystery shopper techniques are often applied in the monitoring of employees and general public. The Data Protection act 1998 does not rule whether such monitoring is fair and reasonable (that would fall within the Human Rights Act 1998).

Where data protection is relevant is within the collection of the recorded data and employers must:

- be open about the use of mystery shoppers
- detail the specific business purpose of the monitoring
- assess the impact of the monitoring on the privacy, autonomy and other legitimate rights of staff.

Human Rights Act 1998

The Human Rights Act was introduced into UK law in October 2000. Within the Act are a number of 'articles' that detail the rights and freedom which individuals should enjoy. Article 8 details the right to respect for private and family life, home and correspondence. It is within this area that some potential conflicts arise.

For example, it could be argued that monitoring in the work place, at home or in the street, intrudes on an individual's private life and this should be considered when conducting any monitoring exercise.

The Office of the Information Commissioner has produced a draft Code of Practice on the use of personal data in employer/employee relationships, which is available from www.dataprotection.gov.uk.

Further guidelines are available from the Market Research Society at www.mrs.org.uk.

Staff Communication guidelines

Mandatory

In order to comply with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Human rights Act 1998 staff **must** be informed that their organisation is subject to, or intends to undertake mystery customer research.

The objectives and intended uses of the results of such surveys **must** be made clear to staff.

Such communication can be made in employee contracts, staff handbooks and newsletters.

Details need **not** be given on when exactly the review will take place, the aspects to be covered, or the types of mystery customer research to be used.

Recommended but optional

Inform staff of:

- typical customer care or service delivery scenario to be covered
- reporting formats and channels of communication
- basis of mystery customer research recruitment and training

Associations should consider consulting about details of their project with their Human Resources staff before proceeding.

We recommend these guidelines be followed whether the Mystery Shopping is conducted by the association's own residents or residents of another housing association.

Scenarios

The scenario sets out the scene that the mystery shopper will enact and gives the mystery shopper an initial question to ask. The scenario should be realistic and straightforward, making it easy for the mystery shopper to follow.

Six scenarios were developed to test basic service standards of Stadium and West Yorkshire Housing Associations. All the scenarios echoed routine, everyday enquiries received from tenants of most housing associations and should have been familiar to experienced staff members.

The six scenarios varied in complexity, starting with the easiest and covered:

- A. Office opening times
- B. Applying for a home after a relationship breakdown
- C. Reporting a neighbour nuisance problem
- D. Making a complaint on behalf of someone else
- E. Requesting a repair on behalf of someone else
- F. Enquiring about a transfer or mutual exchange

Mystery customer research is different from traditional forms of research, as rating scales are not generally used to assess staff performance, as these are too subjective and the mystery shopper should not be 'interviewing' the member of staff. Mystery customer research generally reviews how staff take the lead or follow established procedures in customer conversation and the staff member can base much of it around spontaneous discussion.

The validity of any study depends on the design and execution of the scenarios used. These should be:

- Relevant
- Credible
- Practical
- Safe for the mystery shopper

Relevant

To be relevant, the scenario used by the mystery shopper must be designed to test the specific service or customer care policy that is the topic of the study.

The best way to proceed is to think of the training or instructions that staff have been given on how to deal with a situation and come up with a scenario that, when delivered credibly, should result in staff delivering those desired actions. The mystery shopper can then test the actual performance of staff in the field.

Credible

To be credible the scenario should be realistic so that it mimics natural consumer behaviour and can be enacted convincingly by the mystery shopper. Whilst the mystery shoppers must be well trained and briefed, they must avoid appearing too slick or over rehearsed. Overly sophisticated scenarios can result in the staff guessing that the mystery shopper call or visit is not genuine, compromising the value of the study.

As a general rule, the scenario itself should be straightforward, so the mystery shopper can easily get to grips with it. The training should focus on how to handle follow-up questions and providing convincing 'depth' to the role.

The distribution of evaluations also needs to be credible. The amount of time taken to speak to a member of staff, and possibly the service received, might be affected by the time of day or the week when the 'shop' takes place. It is therefore important to ensure that visits and/or telephone calls are conducted at different times, in various locations and over a period of time to gain an accurate reflection of the service.

Practical

It is also important that the exercise is practical from an evaluation viewpoint. To ensure the experiences are correctly

reported the exercise needs to be kept simple, brief and appropriate. The resident mystery shoppers will have to remember their answers and observations until they are off the phone or out of sight of staff, and each scenario should therefore be limited in length and complexity.

Safe

Mystery shoppers must be safe at all times and not asked to do anything illegal or anything that puts them at physical risk or threatens their personal safety e.g. locality, disability, gender, ethnicity.

Objectivity

The questionnaires that the mystery shoppers complete should aim to be objective, with the majority of questions focusing on factual information.

The primary aim of the exercise is to document precisely what happened at the point of contact, rather than how the mystery shopper felt about the transaction. Training must emphasise objectivity, discuss examples and build consensus.

However, some subjective ratings, such as the perceived confidence of staff and mystery shoppers overall satisfaction with the way their enquiry was handled, may be useful when interpreting the results.

Questionnaires

The purpose of the questionnaire is to ensure an objective and consistent approach by mystery shoppers to reporting their research and the primary aim is to document precisely what happened at the point of contact. The challenge is to design a simple and easy to follow questionnaire which is capable of accurately reflecting a range of responses from a variety of staff.

The tick boxes in the questionnaires were each checked against the association's own procedures and service standards. For example, how had staff been trained to answer the phone? Should they mention Stadium or West Yorkshire Housing Association in the greeting and give their own name? The responses they should give were then listed with tick boxes in the questionnaire.

Layout of the questionnaires proved more difficult than expected. The main conundrum was dealing with calls that were transferred, and being clear about which staff member answered the call and which dealt with the enquiry if they were different, and at which point the call was transferred.

It is worth taking time and testing the questionnaire before you use it in a study.

Analysis and setting up a data base

ORC International set up a data base and inputted all information from both the professional and resident shops, so that all the information could be brought together for analysis.

As an organisation that carries out professional mystery shopper projects nationally, ORC International has appropriate systems and resources readily available.

Many associations may not have IT systems capable of analysing survey results and they might wish to consider using an external research company to process their questionnaires. This is relatively inexpensive and works well.

What was important when designing the questionnaire was that we understood how the information would be loaded onto the database and that the layout of the questionnaire needed to be compatible with the IT system.

If using an external research company ensure that you show the company your questionnaires in advance and they can confirm that they will be able to provide the analysis that you want in the timescale requested.

Time tabling shops

A key part of the process was to agree the number of shops that would be conducted by ORC International and the residents. When organising the shops it was important to consider the size of each association and the number of phone calls that routinely come into each on an average day.

Stadium has over 5,000 general rented tenants and receives over 270 calls a day. It was felt unlikely that an additional 144 calls over an 8 week period would be noticed.

West Yorkshire Housing Association has 900 tenants and only receives about 148 calls a day. It was felt that a sudden increase in calls covering six scenarios would attract attention and staff might realise they were being mystery shopped. The total number of phone shops conducted by ORC International and residents was set at 60, and these were carried out over a longer period of 3 months.

Taking the size of both associations into consideration the following programme of shops, using identical scenarios and questionnaires, was agreed:

Breakdown of shops

Association	No of homes and offices	ORC phone Shops	ORC personal visits	Resident phone shops	Resident personal visits	Total shops	Timeframe
Stadium HA Brent, London	5,000 homes 2 offices	60	12	60	12	144	8 weeks
West Yorkshire HA Yorkshire	600 homes 1 offices	25	5	25	5	60	Over 3 months

The aim was that residents should carry out a total of 5 shops each, comprising 4 phone shops and 1 personal visit. Solon did not apply this rule rigidly however, as we were aware that some residents might be hesitant about volunteering for the personal visits, especially if they were known to staff.

Breakdown of resident shops

Association	No of residents carrying out shops	Breakdown of shops	Vouchers
Stadium HA	10	5 telephone shops	£40 worth of vouchers
	4	4 telephone shops and 1 personal visit	£40 worth of vouchers
	2	5 telephone shops and 1 personal visit	£50 worth of vouchers
West Yorkshire HA	6	4 telephone shops and 1 personal visit	£40 worth of vouchers

Recruiting Residents

The challenge when recruiting for a mystery shopper project is how to make it attractive to residents as well as ensuring it is a positive and productive exercise for both the resident and the association.

Key factors in the recruitment process are:

- motivating residents to apply initially
- deciding what incentives you can offer
- ensuring residents return the application forms
- assessing trainee mystery shopper's ability and skills
- getting residents to the training (especially if they have to travel a fair distance)
- ensuring they complete the shops
- guaranteeing quality across the project.

It was agreed that residents involved in the normal Tenant Participation structures, such as the Tenants' Forum or Consultative Panel, would not put themselves forward as mystery shoppers. The residents who took part in the project, therefore, were not involved in any other Tenant Participation initiatives, and most had little previous contact or relationship with their landlord.

Early pilot studies showed the importance of making an initial assessment of applicants and assessing their ability to read, write and complete questionnaires before signing them up as trainee mystery shoppers.

Flyers

It was agreed that the flyers advertising the resident mystery shopper project would list the skills needed and offer incentives. Those residents who responded to the flyer would then be sent an application form and information pack. Completing and returning the application form would be the first test, giving Solon an indication of their ability to follow an instruction and complete a questionnaire correctly.

The flyers also emphasised that through this project residents would be able to assist in the improvement of service delivery, and that through observation and evaluations the overall quality of service could be raised for all residents. Monitoring revealed that raising service standards was a key motivator in getting residents interested in the project.

Staff assistance in recruiting residents

As well as circulating interesting and colourful flyers to advertise Mystery Shopping, tenant service officers were also encouraged to flag up the project to residents. Stadium and West Yorkshire both agreed to offer a £50 incentive to the staff member who assisted in recruiting the most residents to the mystery shopper project.

Outreaching specific groups

Associations with a significant BME population might want to consider holding women's only training days for Muslim groups, and should also be careful to avoid running a mystery shopper project during religious festivals and holidays.

Two tier entry system

A two tier entry system was considered. This would allow less skilled applicants an opportunity to be trained to the required standard. The basic skill required in applicants however, is a good level of literacy and spoken English, which may necessitate continuous support over a long period, and is best handled by another agency. Some residents may need an access or ESOL course.

If associations wish to carry out a mystery shopper exercise to research the service they are providing to residents who have English as a second language, or do not speak English at all, trainers will need to provide translations and interpreters.



In the event the two tier system of entry was not implemented for this pilot. It became apparent that residents, having read the promotional information and looked at the application form, had made accurate appraisals about their own skills levels and abilities to become a mystery shopper.

Vouchers and incentives

It was agreed that residents should be offered some kind of remuneration:

- as an incentive to interest them in the project
- because professional mystery shoppers are paid and residents should not be used as 'cheap labour'
- to encourage a professional attitude; 'a fair day's wage for a fair day's work'

Payment as such was not offered as this had tax implications and might affect some residents' entitlement to benefits.

The incentives must be enough to entice and reward residents, but should not exceed the cost of employing a professional mystery shopper company.

All resident mystery shoppers in the pilot were offered:

1. £40 in gift vouchers for completing 5 shops (typically 4 phone shops and 1 personal visit) and each resident could stipulate which shopping vouchers they wanted
2. Residents carrying out an additional personal visit were given an extra £10 voucher
3. £10 to cover the costs of using their own phones
4. All travel costs would be reimbursed in full
5. Childcare costs would be reimbursed
6. A stopwatch at the training day, which they could keep.

Information pack

An information pack was developed to send to residents who expressed an interest in becoming a mystery shopper. The information pack contained:

- Brief introduction to Mystery Shopping
- Skills needed
- Anonymity

- Details of payment (voucher scheme)
- How to sign up
- Application form
- Dates for training.

The introduction was intended to give a comprehensive overview of Mystery Shopping, an indication of the skills involved and the level of commitment required. It also explained that residents would need to attend a one day training session and complete 5 mystery shops before they could claim their vouchers.



Completion of the application form provided the first assessment of an applicant's commitment and suitability for training, and if the form was correctly completed and returned to Solon then the applicant naturally progressed to the next stage in the process and was then signed up for training.

Anonymity

Residents were concerned that their anonymity was maintained. It was agreed with the housing associations that the residents' identity would not be revealed to association staff, but shoppers would be encouraged to contact Stadium or West Yorkshire if they were interested in being involved in other community or TP initiatives.

Training and support of residents

Training and support are the key elements of a successful resident mystery shopper project.

The training should be carefully organised so that a work programme of 'shops' can be time-tabled with the participants at the end of each session. This should be programmed to take place as soon as possible after the training. Residents are likely to be more highly motivated and confident immediately following the training. Pilot projects showed that where there was a time-lapse of more than two weeks following the training and before the shops took place, performance deteriorated.

Overall studies showed that the shorter the time-span between the original recruitment of residents, the training and carrying out the shops, the more successful the project.

Before starting the recruitment of residents you should have agreed:

- scenarios and questionnaires
- number of shops to take place
- number of mystery shoppers needed
- Training programme with dates
- Timescale for shops to take place after each training session.

Residents were given a minimum of 3 weeks notice of the dates for training and were asked to confirm they could attend. They were then sent letters confirming the arrangements and every resident was also telephoned several times, including the day before the training to remind them of the session.



Training

Residents were trained in small groups of between 4 and 8. Training sessions were deliberately not held at the offices of the landlord but at Solon's office, a local hotel or the offices of another housing association in the area.

The main point of the training is for residents to get a real grasp of the scenarios and questionnaires, with plenty of opportunity for role play, questions and sharing experiences. A relatively small group ensures all the residents will get a chance to play out every scenario in a non-threatening environment.

A key point when organising the training days is that enough time is allowed between each session for those residents on the course to complete all their shops.

Solon had two trainers present at each session, so they could role play each scenario first, one taking the part of the mystery shopper and the other the role of the staff member, before asking residents

to join in. This worked well, and residents were clearly comfortable with the role play and joined in quite eagerly.



From the first session tenants were encouraged to comment on the scenarios and questionnaires and as a result of feedback changes were made to the questionnaires. Residents clearly identified with the scenarios and so found them easy to understand and to act out. By the afternoon, it was noticeable that residents' confidence had grown and throughout the project all the residents participated fully in the role play.

Very early pilots showed that if a resident is not able to participate in the role play, this is a key indicator that they are unlikely to carry out the shops.

Stop watches and phones

Solon purchased plastic stop watches for all the mystery shoppers from an office catalogue. These were inexpensive, fun and easy to use and went down well in the training sessions.

Desk phones and mobiles were used in the sessions, but were not 'live'. It is important that trainees get used to working with the equipment and understand how to create a work space at home. Juggling phones, stop watches, scenarios and questionnaires proved more complex than expected and residents were encouraged to prepare for each shop physically as well as mentally.

Training handouts

At the end of the training day trainees were provided with a training manual, briefing notes, and copies of the scenarios and questionnaires that they would be using to conduct their shops.

As part of the quality control exercise all residents who attended the training completed feedback/evaluation forms on the training, which assisted in ensuring consistency across the project.

Travel and child care expenses

Petty cash was available at the training event to reimburse residents' travel expenses. Residents were asked to provide bus or train tickets, or complete and sign a car mileage form.

Solon paid £6 per hour for child care, although this was not payable to a spouse or relative, and the carer's name and address had to be provided on a form, together with the hours covered.

Programming shops and providing support

The final session of the training day was organising the programme of shops with the residents.

The distribution of shops needs thought and preparation. It could be expected that the time taken to speak to a member of staff, and possibly the service received, might be affected by the time of day, week or season when the scenario takes place. It is therefore important to ensure that visits and/or telephone calls are made at the same time if the project methodology so requires (for example, benchmarking).

Solon developed a calendar and then agreed with each resident which scenarios they would use and the precise day and time they would conduct their shops. This planning exercise is vital to the success of the project. You cannot have two different residents acting out an

identical scenario with the same staff members on the same day.

All the shops and details of scenarios are then logged on to the calendar. Each resident is given their own personalised calendar to take with them when they leave, together with the appropriate scenarios and questionnaires. They are also given a stamped, addressed envelope in which to return the completed questionnaires.

In the introductory presentation at the training day, residents are advised that they will be able to phone Solon on the freephone helpline for support at any time during the process, and are actively encouraged to phone before they commence their first shop and to report back afterwards.

Residents can feel extremely confident when they leave the training session but this confidence can evaporate if there is too long a gap between the training and the first shop. The provision of telephone support is also an important element of the quality control of the project.

Important lessons

In the original, pre-pilot programme, precise times for shops were not agreed and ongoing support was not provided, with the result that no shops were carried out.

In this pilot project, following the methodology outlined above, 100% of the

shops were successfully carried out and completed as planned. Having an ongoing conversation with residents enabled us to answer queries on completing the questionnaires, ensuring we got consistency across the project.

Consider the overall size of your association, how many phone calls they normally receive in a week, and then agree the number of shops and the time-scale for completing them.

Monitoring information

Resident profiles were monitored throughout the project and the monitoring information we gathered is shown in the appendices (see also Monitoring section).

Potential for development

This pilot developed 6 basic telephone scenarios and 3 personal visit scenarios for use with resident mystery shoppers. All the scenarios enabled residents to maintain anonymity and went no further than an initial enquiry or observations in a reception area.

Developing the scenarios further

There is however, tremendous potential to develop the scenarios further.

Many resident trainees suggested requesting a repair and then monitoring to see how that was handled and if the contractor turned up on time. This type of scenario would necessitate the mystery shopper giving up their anonymity, but several residents said this would not be an issue for them. What was important was that staff were officially advised at the appropriate moment that this was a mystery shop and no 'stigma' or 'blame' was attached to the resident involved.

National pool of resident mystery shoppers

Many residents were interested in carrying out shops for other associations and many felt it would be easier than Mystery Shopping their own landlord.

Survey Analysis

Analysis of the resident and professional shops provided interesting survey data and helped highlight key areas of the procedure which needed further work and refinement.

Comparison of Methodology

The ORC International professional mystery shoppers make all their telephone shops from a call centre where the calls are recorded and a supervisor oversees their work. This ensures consistency of approach and calls can be played back for accuracy and checked by the researcher and the supervisor when questionnaires are filled in.

Solon was keen to develop the resident mystery shopper project so that residents could conduct their Mystery Shopping calls from home. This meant that residents would have to remember details of the conversation, or take notes during the call to ensure they could complete the questionnaires accurately. There was no supervisor but Solon provided ongoing support and residents were encouraged to phone in on the freephone help line before they commenced their calls. Training was also geared towards consistency of approach and accuracy when recording details.

Comparison of results

Overall, across all the shops, at all the sites, the tenant shops achieved lower scores than the equivalent professional shopper scores. This could potentially mean that tenants received a poorer service or were more critical of the service received (and might have come with higher expectations).

ORC International had weighted the questions so some scored higher than others. The analysis showed:

- The initial questionnaire was unduly complex, and there was some confusion in understanding the section setting out the number of attempts made to each office. Problems with this section lowered residents' scores, which also brought down the overall scores
- Problems with the initial questionnaire because of complex routing instructions, where questions were missed. This again resulted in lost scores, lowering the overall scores compared to the professional mystery shoppers

- Some tenant questionnaires were scored low because they had made several attempts to call the office 'quite close together' eg half an hour apart, instead of the following day
- Some residents had wholly or partially missed some of the yes/no tick boxes as they believed they had a choice whether or not they ticked them, and had not realised they had to tick a box in certain sections.

Refining the questionnaire

Solon recognised that the initial professional questionnaires used for the pilot telephone shops were extremely complex and found them difficult to follow. These had been developed for professionals sitting in a call centre with a supervisor and not for residents working at home. Changes were requested at an early stage, but as the data entry system had already been set up and there was a need for direct comparison, the existing questionnaires, slightly modified, were used.

More radical changes to the questionnaires, regarding layout, routing and clarity of directions, were made at the end of the project, based on the results of the questionnaire analysis and feedback from residents throughout the project.

It was not clear when training began that residents had to answer all the questions in some sections of the questionnaire. Following analysis of the results, changes were made to the training to emphasise this point, and a test shop, where residents phoned the Solon trainer and sent in the completed questionnaire from this shop, was added to the process.

Several attempts to call the office

As regards to making a second attempt to get through to an office after, say, half an hour, rather than wait for another day, Solon was of the opinion this was perfectly valid. It was not unreasonable, they argued, that a resident should expect to be able to get through to a site on a particular afternoon, and not have to wait until the following day.

In this instance, Solon felt the low score from residents was justified and the higher score from professional shoppers was misleading.

Consistency from professional and resident shoppers



What the comparison of the results did clearly show was that there was a consistency of assessment between the tenant and professional shoppers across the project. Across both associations, exactly the same sites received the lowest average scores and the highest average scores, and the same differential was maintained between the professional and resident shops.

Verbatim, qualitative comments

A further interesting observation by ORC International in their report referred to the verbatim comments made by residents when completing their questionnaires:

“Another observed difference between the tenant questionnaires and professional questionnaires is the detail that is sometimes given by tenants in their verbatim, qualitative comments.

A professional shopper is encouraged to make comments wherever they are asked to do so within the questionnaire, they will usually keep these relatively short and succinct – keeping their comments to a single sentence in most cases. Professional shoppers are trained to provide comments that will be useful to site managers in looking to improve service levels. As part of the market research industry they will however be aware of the data entry process that follows their mystery shop and will be aware that lengthy comments will be hard to deal with.”

ORC International go on to say that “some tenants were very thoughtful in their comments” and gave an example of this from one of the resident personal visits using the waiting list scenario:

“The staff member did not explain why they did not have a list and did not explain the procedure for getting on the list. They did not enquire about my circumstances. I felt that if I were a homeless person I would have liked more empathy and the correct information.”

ORC International concluded “this is the kind of observation that tenants might have more insight into than professional shoppers. With a vested interest in seeing service improvements some tenants (though certainly not all) are keen to offer detailed feedback and an insight into what they would have wished to receive in terms of service levels.”

Conclusion

Conclusions drawn from the analysis and comparison of results:

- 1. Missing questions pulled down the scores of resident shoppers, but this could be addressed, probably completely, through refining the questionnaire and the training.**
- 2. Overall, it did appear that residents have higher expectations and are tougher in their assessment of customer service, which is justifiable since they are the recipients of the service.**
- 3. The detailed verbatim comments given by some residents, although harder to deal with in terms of data entry, were seen as positive and a bonus, giving valuable feedback to the landlord**
- 4. It is important to be clear when using mystery shoppers, what standards are being agreed. For example, Solon felt it was unreasonable to expect a resident to wait for hours or to wait until the next day to make a second or third call, if they could not get through at the first attempt.**