

Policy

Title: **Customer Care**

Date of Issue: January 2011

Issue Number: 2

Date of next review: January 2014

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Service Area applies to: All Service Areas

Approved By: Lead Member for Housing Services

Electronic Storage: ShareIt / Published Documents

Translations available on request by phoning 0151 510 5000 or via email at info@haltonhousing.org

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Introduction

The Trust is committed to providing a high quality housing service in a professional, efficient and effective way to all of its customers.

An expression of this commitment can be seen in the work the Trust has commissioned and resourced to “Improve the Customer Experience”, known as the ICE Programme.

As part of this review, it is intended that this policy will be revised to compliment a 12 month Customer Care Strategy that has been produced to cover the development of the ICE Programme. The Trust will be looking to actively involve customers over the life of this 12 month strategy to shape a subsequent, longer term Customer Care Strategy. This policy will be updated to take account of any changes or new approaches to customer care that are contained in this longer term strategy as required.

Aims / Objectives

This policy defines the Trust’s approach to customer care and lays down minimum standards for it.

The aims of the policy are:

- To make the Trust’s services as accessible as possible. Customers should receive the same high quality services however they access them.
- To deliver services to customers consistently and in a way that suits their particular preferences. Services, employees and information should be available in the time, place and method that our customers want, and over longer periods of time where required.
- To strive to achieve in practice what the Trust states in its strapline – “delivering quality and excellence for all”.

The objectives of this policy are:

- To provide clear guidelines for employees on standards relating to customer care that they need to work to.
- To set clear standards that have been developed with its customers.
- To act as one of the tools that will enable customer scrutiny panels to assess the standard of service being delivered by the Trust.

Scope

The Trust appreciates that this policy will apply to all of its dealings with customers and encompasses all of its service areas

Policy Statement

Definition

For the purposes of this policy, “customers” can include tenants, leaseholders, licensees, prospective customers such as applicants for housing, external agencies, partners and any other persons or organisations wishing to access the Trust's services.

Values

The Trust believes that its Customer Care Policy should be based on the following values :-

- Treating customers with courtesy, honesty and respect;
- Treating customers fairly on the basis of need and not discriminating against anyone on the basis of age, disability, gender (including transgender), race, sexual orientation, religion and beliefs, or financial exclusion;
- Working in partnership with customers to provide the services they need;
- Involving customers in decisions and giving them enough information to make informed choices;
- Making sure that customers feel able to complain about the standard of service they receive and are not victimised because they complain.

Requirements of a customer-focused service

In order to provide the best possible customer care, the Trust views the following to be the main requirements of a successful customer-focused service:-

- ensuring that customer focus is maintained throughout all levels of the Trust's activities and is integrated into training plans;
- ensuring that any service user – whether a rent or service charge payer to the Trust, as well as those who have other interests in the organisation – receives an efficient and satisfactory service;
- involving the customer, listening to and considering their views regarding the provision of services generally and decisions being made;
- understanding customers and meeting their needs whenever possible;
- providing clear and concise information and explanations to customers;
- being accessible to customers.

The Trust will look to meet the above requirements in a number of ways. Some of these are covered by means of general standards which are set out in the Service

Standards section below. The Trust also reserves the right to compliment these by the use of more specific service standards relating to a particular service area where this is felt to be necessary.

Redress

If a customer feels that any of the standards referred to in this policy and any associated documents have not been met, they can complain using the Trust's Enquiries, Complaints and Compliments Policy and Procedure.

Responsibility

The Executive Director of Customer Services will be responsible for the successful implementation of this policy. This will include making sure that all Trust employees are aware of the contents of this policy and have been trained in its implementation.

Service Standards

Employees

The Trust will expect all employees to:

- Be prompt, polite, friendly and helpful and to deal with customers fairly and impartially.
- Aim to provide the same high standard of service to customers wherever they live in the Borough.
- Aim to get queries right first time.
- Have access to information and be willing to listen, giving their full attention to the customer.
- Aim to respond effectively and sensitively to the feelings and needs of the customer, taking into account the needs of all the diverse groups of people served by the Trust.
- Carry official identity cards/name badges at all times.
- All employees are expected to treat tenants, other customers and each other with courtesy and respect at all times. Discrimination of any kind will not be tolerated.
- Occasionally the Trust will have to deal with difficult customers. In such circumstances, employees are expected to maintain high standards of professionalism and fairness. Rudeness to customers is not acceptable in any circumstances.

Telephones/ICT

- Telephone calls are to be answered as quickly as possible and within 4 rings wherever possible, and in any event within 10 seconds
- A corporate greeting will be used when answering any telephone call.

- Where the requested officer is not available, the employee taking the call will either divert the caller to another officer who can assist, or take details for the requested officer to contact the customer on return.
- If a delay is likely in processing the call, an offer to call the customer back will be made.
- A standard message will be used when any phone has been switched to the Voicemail facility and the employee will contact the customer within 24 hours if a message is left.
- An alternative message will be used if the Voicemail facility is to be left on for more than 1 day on any individual phone, e.g. because of annual leave etc.
- If the telephone enquiry can't be dealt with straight away and customer is not on the phone, a written response to the enquiry will be made within 5 working days

Written Correspondence/Emails

- Letters and emails will be responded to within 10 working days. If for any reason a response is likely to take longer, a holding reply will be sent to the customer giving the reason why and a revised response date.
- Requests for forms or general information are to be dealt with within 3 working days (except where the request is covered by Freedom of Information Act when this would be dealt with under the statutory 20 day period).
- All correspondence from the Trust is to be clear and easy to understand, using plain language and avoiding jargon. It will tell the customer who is dealing with their enquiry and how to contact them.
- Correspondence from the Trust will be translated into different languages on request.
- All information will be made available in large print, Braille or on audio on request.
- For incoming emails, the 'Out of Office' Assistant facility will be used with an appropriate message and alternative contact details if an employee is to be unavailable for more than 1 working day.

Offices

All offices will:

- Have opening hours clearly displayed.
- Give an emergency contact number for when the office is closed.
- Be clean, tidy, warm and friendly.
- Have up to date advice, information and posters that are clear and easy to understand.
- Provide a 'One Stop' direct service approach to customers on all aspects of the Trust's work.
- Be accessible to people with disabilities.

Visitors to Offices

Anyone visiting a Trust office should expect:

- To be acknowledged on arrival and greeted by an identifiable member of staff.

- To be seen within 5 minutes if they have an appointment.
- To be attended to within 5 minutes in any event.
- To be given private interviews on request (subject to employee availability).
- To be offered help to fill in forms if needed.

Appointments including Home Visits

Any appointments will be offered within the following framework:

- All appointments with customers are to be made for a mutually convenient time and date.
- Appointments with specific officers will be made on request.
- If an appointment can't be made or a wait for an appointment is unavoidable the customer will be notified as soon as possible and an apology given, and suitable alternative arrangements made where required.
- Home visits are to be offered to customers if this is their preference or they are unable to attend office due to illness or disability.
- Identification will always be shown to the customer on any home visit.
- Calling cards are to be left on any 'no access' visits, giving details of who called and when and how to contact.

Interviews and Meetings

At all interviews with customers:

- Employees are to be well prepared, having relevant information and/or records to hand.
- Suitable venues are to be made available for all meetings or interviews with customers, ensuring that any discussions of a sensitive nature cannot be overheard.
- Every effort will be made to accommodate requests for same sex interviews if this is the customer's preference and suitable employees are available.
- Officers are to provide any help within their power, including offering to contact other agencies and providing information on other options
- Where language difficulties are a problem, a translation or interpreting service will be provided for those whose first language is not English.
- Notes are to be taken and records kept with a written account of issues raised, as well as any recommendations made, any action to be taken and/or timescales agreed with the customer.

Confidentiality

- All interviews, correspondence and personal information provided by customers will be treated in the strictest confidence and in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998, Freedom of Information Act 2002 and any other relevant legislation.

Performance Measures / Monitoring

A large proportion of the performance indicators developed by the Trust look to measure and monitor performance around a variety of customer care issues. These have been produced at both strategic and operational levels, and are regularly reviewed at Board, Senior Management Team and Departmental levels.

A small number of these PIs have to be included in the Trust's annual Regulatory and Statistical Return (RSR).

Consultation arrangements

The Trust has used and will continue to use a variety of options to inform its approach to customer care.

For example:

- the feedback from the numerous customer consultation events carried out as part of the baseline review of the Trust's services by Penningtons Choices in 2009 has shaped the revision of this policy.
- the ongoing work and customer involvement of the ICE Programme.
- information received from the regular STATUS and other surveys carried out by the Trust.
- any relevant feedback received from the recently created customer scrutiny panels.

This policy has been considered by the Customer Forum and their views and comments have been incorporated into it accordingly.

Benchmark Analysis

The Trust has reviewed the policies of a number of other registered providers in this area. The Trust's policy is comparable to the registered providers that it has consulted.

The policy has also been reviewed to take account of current good practice in this area, from such areas as Housemark's Compendium of Good Practice in Customer Services.

Regulatory and/or Legal Compliance

The current regulator for registered providers in England – the Tenants Services Authority (TSA) – issued various standards for compliance that came into force in April 2010.

One of these was the 'Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard'. This standard sets out the following 'Required Outcomes' in three main areas which all have some impact on this policy:

“1 Customer service, choice and complaints

Registered providers shall:

- *provide choices, information and communication that is appropriate to the diverse needs of their tenants in the delivery of all standards;*
- *have an approach to complaints that is clear, simple and accessible that ensures that complaints are resolved promptly, politely and fairly.*

2 Involvement and empowerment

Registered providers shall support co-regulation with their tenants by:

- *offering all tenants a wide range of opportunities to be involved in the management of their housing, including the ability to influence strategic priorities, the formulation of housing-related policies and the delivery of housing-related services;*
- *consulting with their tenants and acting reasonably in providing them with opportunities to agree local offers for service delivery;*
- *providing tenants with a range of opportunities to influence how providers meet all the TSA's standards and to scrutinise performance against all standards and in the development of the annual report;*
- *providing support to tenants to build their capacity to be more effectively involved.*

3 Understanding and responding to the diverse needs of tenants

Registered providers shall:

- *treat all tenants with fairness and respect;*
- *demonstrate that they understand the different needs of their tenants, including in relation to the seven equality strands and tenants with additional support needs.”*

It is envisaged at present that these standards will continue to stay in force once the current regulatory functions of the TSA pass over to the Homes and Communities Agency.

The Trust will continue to be mindful of and look to comply with the requirements of this and any other related standard as it implements this policy.

KLOEs affected

With the announcement that the Audit Commission's housing inspection framework is to cease with effect from April 2011, a full assessment against each of the KLOEs has not been undertaken.

However the policy outcomes will feed into the Trust's ongoing update of its self assessment documents as well as the input to our Service Improvement Framework.

This Policy covers all the key areas of the Trust's business activities.

Diversity Considerations

An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out in respect of the policy in January 2011.

It concluded that:

- The policy is not directly or indirectly discriminatory
- The policy doesn't require any increases to equality of opportunity by permitting or requiring positive action or action to redress disadvantages

Links to Strategies, Procedures and Associated Documents

Customer Satisfaction Policy
Customer Involvement Strategy & Policy
Customer Satisfaction Measurement Strategy
Customer Satisfaction Feedback Framework
Benchmarking Policy
Data Protection Policy
Diversity Policy
Enquiries, Compliments and Complaints Policy & Procedure
ICT Policies

Business Impact

Customer involvement plays a key role in the Trust's business planning process, and by implication this will include customer care to ensure that such involvement is handled in the most appropriate manner.

In the Trust's current Corporate Plan (2009 – 12), four themes were identified which formed the basis against which resources were to be allocated. It states in the plan that these themes will be reflected as forming the basis for the budget and business planning process.

All corporate priorities listed under the first of these themes, "Customer Culture", show the importance of customer involvement and an appropriate customer care approach that will make such involvement meaningful.

These priorities are:

- Understanding our customers (current and future) and tailoring services to meet their individual needs and aspiration.
- Working with our people to embed a clear customer culture across all aspects of our work.
- Delivering services against a clear set of service standards.
- Enhancing the role for customers at all levels, to shape and determine the services they receive.

Successful implementation of this policy will contribute to the Trust's achievement of these priorities and will ensure that the best possible and efficient service is provided for its customers.