

Customer Access Strategy 2008 – 2012



Homes for Haringey



Working with residents
to provide quality
housing services and decent homes

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Introduction

Homes for Haringey is the ALMO (Arms Length Management Organisation) formed in April 2006 to manage Haringey Council's 21,000 rented and leasehold homes.

We were inspected by the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate in May 2007 and achieved a two star rating. The Audit Commission said we 'provide a good housing service to tenants and leaseholders in Haringey, and have promising prospects for further improvement'.

One key area was Access and Customer Care. In the official report, the inspectors said we:

- have a strong approach to customer services and provide polite and prompt services which meet the needs of highly diverse communities.
- provide high quality service information which is available in a range of community languages and have an excellent website.
- provide a very strong service in some areas including access and customer care.

We were pleased with these comments, but we want to do better. Our Customer Access Strategy will help us do so.

What we mean by 'Customer Access Strategy'

Our customers are Haringey Council tenants and leaseholders. Our Customer Access Strategy sets out what we plan to do make sure that customers can contact us or access our services as and when they need to.

We looked at why, when, and how customers contact us, and how much it costs. We asked customers what works well and what could be improved. We also considered what similar organisations are doing as well as policy and recommendations from central government.

This strategy tells you what we found out; where we need to improve; and how we propose to do so. We will be able to make some improvements quickly but other changes will take time. We plan to have everything in place within four to five years.

Our Customer Access Strategy supports:

- Our mission: to work with residents to provide quality housing services and decent homes.
- Our aims: deliver excellent services and deliver value for money.
- Our values: customers are at the heart of everything we do; getting it right first time; treating everyone with equal respect.

Our Approach

To improve the ways that customers access our services we had to know what needed to be changed. We spent six months consulting with residents and staff as well as researching best practice and government recommendations.

- We consulted with tenants and leaseholders through resident groups, including the Residents' Consultative Forum, tenants in Sheltered Housing schemes, and a questionnaire in Homes Zone and on our website.
- We discussed customer access with members of staff from all parts of our service.
- We looked at the standards of access and customer care that the Audit Commission expects from a three star ALMO and at the services offered by the best-performing ALMOs.
- We reviewed what central government is telling us to do particularly:

The Varney Report, which promotes putting the customer at the heart of service. It suggests that organisations offer access to services all day, every day, and, whenever possible, customer enquiries should be resolved at the first contact. It is also keen to see self-service and online services available but stresses that organisations need to find the right balance for their customers.

Customer Insight in Public Services, which recommends that organisations get to know the particular needs of their customers and communities and tailor services accordingly.

Framework for Channel Strategies, which advises analysing the methods our customers use to contact us, the cost of each method, increasing choice and improving access, but ultimately moving (where possible) to cheaper methods (for example, online and self-service).

New National Performance Indicator (NI14) on avoidable contact, which is a new target likely to be introduced by the government. This will require us to report on how many times customers contact us, and how many times the same customer contacts us more than once about the same issue (this is called avoidable contact).

Guidance for Local Authorities on Translation of Publications (released December 7, 2007), which promotes a commonsense approach to translation. It says that translated information should be provided for customers who need it but learning English should be encouraged and supported.

Our research and consultation showed that we should focus on three themes to improve our customer access.

In this document, we set out:

- what our research told us
- what we aim to achieve over the next four to five years
- what we will do in 2008/09.

Our aims

To improve customer access, we aim to:

1. tailor our service to the needs of residents
2. reduce avoidable contact (solve problems in one go)
3. increase choices for how and when customers can access our services and make it easier to contact us using new and cheaper routes.

Aim 1: tailor our service to the needs of residents

Resident groups said:

- Homes for Haringey doesn't always deal with calls effectively – there is 'too much passing around'.
- Homes for Haringey should try to employ more multi-lingual staff in the call centre to deal with residents who speak other languages.
- Specific information about areas and estates, for example the day of rubbish collection, should be on our website.
- Homes for Haringey should continue to promote English courses for speakers of other languages.
- The quality of the service Homes for Haringey provides is inconsistent.

Other findings:

'Customer insight is a business activity, more than a research activity' - Customer Insight Forum. This means that we should make good use of the information we collect from residents.

What we intend to do by 2012

- Review how we work and make processes simpler.
- Use mobile technology (for example, hand-held computers) to help staff deal better with enquiries when they are away from the office. This applies particularly to our caretaking and repairs staff.
- Make much better use of the information residents share with us to meet local and individual needs and preferences.
- Work effectively with other organisations and partners to deliver a joined up service.
- Review our Translation and Interpreting policy in line with government guidelines.
- Make sure all our staff are polite, friendly and well trained.
- Make it easy for residents to give us feedback (complaints, compliments and suggestions).

In 2008/09 we will:

- start looking at the main reasons why customers contact us and investigate how we can make these services more customer-focused.
- change what information we collect and use to manage our repairs service to reflect what's most important to our residents, for example, appointments made and kept; jobs completed right first time.
- extend our text message service so residents will receive a message to let them know when our repairs staff are on their way.
- ensure our reception points are fully accessible.
- Continue to improve our web site: develop and add estate-based information.
- check how well we are using information about tenants' individual needs and see where we need to improve.
- continue to provide a translations and interpreting service when residents need it.
- actively promote the learning of English.
- review our customer care training and use customer feedback to improve it.
- consult with residents on our Customer Feedback Scheme and reach out to under-represented groups to encourage feedback.

Aim 2: Reduce avoidable contact (solve problems in one go)

This means that we aim to reduce the number of times that a customer has to contact us more than once about the same issue to get it sorted out.

Comments from resident groups

- Residents sometimes have to call more than once to resolve issues – 'one call should sort it out'.
- Some stated Homes for Haringey doesn't always finish repairs jobs and residents have to call to ask them to return.
- Homes for Haringey should provide a clear and complete customer record or a reference number for each enquiry.
- Homes for Haringey should work harder to get it right first time.
- Many residents said that their queries had been resolved at the first contact.

Other Findings:

'Avoidable contact' is now high on central government's agenda. We will soon be measured on the number of avoidable contacts we have.

What we intend to do by 2012

- Have a system in place for capturing all enquiries so we can:
 - track enquiries regardless of which team or person was contacted. (This will provide a complete history of each customer's contact with us.)
 - identify cases in which residents have had to contact us more than once about the same issue and use this information to learn what we can do better
- Make sure our contractors work to the same standards.
- Have a system in place for customers to track progress of their enquiries online.
- Have fewer 'avoidable contacts' (against 2008 figures).

In 2008/09 we aim to:

- develop a dedicated Repairs Call Centre with specialist staff. By doing this we believe we will be able to improve how well we diagnose repairs and get it right first time more of the time.
- continue to analyse the reasons why residents have had to contact us more than once (where we currently have information) and take steps to reduce this.
- start developing an IT system that will enable us to quickly capture and track all tenant and leaseholder enquiries whether they contact us by telephone, by email or over the internet, in writing, or in person.

Aim 3: increase choices for how and when customers can access our services and make it easier to contact us using new and cheaper routes.

Comments from residents

- The Homes for Haringey freephone number isn't free to use if called from a mobile phone.
- Residents whose first language is not English and those who have complex queries prefer face-to-face contact.
- The call centre should be open Saturday morning.
- Some residents were unaware our Call Centre is open until 8pm on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.
- Residents can only report repairs out-of-hours if they have access to the internet.
- Customer experience of using email to contact us has been inconsistent.
- Two out of three residents prefer to contact us by phone.
- Many residents did not realise the cost of providing a face to face service.
- One in three residents believes the only way to resolve a query is by talking to someone over the phone or face-to-face.
- One in ten residents has access to a computer; some are not confident using online services.
- Few residents believe we should extend customer services centre opening times.

Other findings

'The public sector needs to get better at identifying what individual channels can offer, which will in turn incentivise citizens to use the channel most appropriate for their needs. These channels need to be thought of as offering an integrated service, rather than being reviewed individually.' (David Varney)

What we intend to do by 2012

- Make sure residents can talk to someone face-to-face when they need to, but work with them to reduce this over time. This also links to our sustainability strategy which says we want to reduce the need for residents and staff to make journeys around the borough.
- Make it easier for residents to use cheaper ways of contacting us, especially online services. By spending less on the ways customers contact us we can spend more on delivering services and making improvements. We aim to have 33% of leaseholders and 20% of tenants using online services by 2012.
- Make better use of text messaging. (More of our customers have mobile phones than use email.)
- Continue to look at good practice and emerging technology and adopt those that will help make it easier and more cost effective for customers to do business with us.
- Demonstrate that online and self-service options work well and can be quicker than other ways of contacting us.
- Promote availability of opportunities to learn to use a computer and, where possible, we will help build capacity too.

In 2008/09 we aim to:

- continue to provide face-to-face access via Customer Service Centres and Broadwater Farm Neighbourhood Office.
- establish who will deliver our front-line customer service in the future.
- publish a freephone number and a standard local phone number. We will not waste money reprinting existing leaflets and forms, but we will include the new phone number when we revise them.
- extend the hours for booking repairs over the telephone (8am – 8pm Monday to Friday and 9am – 12 noon on Saturday mornings by May 2008, and 24 hours a day by March 2009).
- run a 'do it online' campaign to promote our online services.
- promote existing opportunities for developing customers' computer skills.
- put a computer in one Sheltered Housing scheme and show residents how to use it to contact us or access our online services. (If this is successful we will extend it to all Sheltered Housing schemes.)
- improve the way we manage customer emails so we can guarantee a timely response.

Reading list:

- Service Transformation – a better service for citizens and businesses, a better deal for the taxpayer (David Varney, 2006) http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/4/F/pbr06_varney_review.pdf
- Establishing an Effective Customer Insight Capability in Public Sector Organisations (Cabinet Office, Customer Insight Forum, 2007) http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/upload/assets/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/publications/delivery_council/pdf/emerging_principles.pdf
- Framework for Channel Strategies (Cabinet Office 2001) <http://www.govtalk.gov.uk/documents/channels.pdf>
- National Indicators – Annex C1: Stronger and Safer Communities (CLG (November 2007) <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/doc/552140>
- Guidance for Local Authorities on Translation of Publications (CLG, December 2007) <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/translationguidance>
- KLOE 30: Access and Customer Care in housing Services (Audit Commission, July 2007) http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/kloe/downloads/0707_accessandcustomercareJuly07.pdf

Appendices:

- Appendix A: Summary of consultation feedback
- Appendix B: Survey results
- Appendix C: Equalities Impact Assessment