

# **CUSTOMER ACCESS STRATEGY**

## **2009-2012**

***Working in partnership with customers  
to provide places where people  
want to live***

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## **Foreword by David Cowans, Group Chief Executive**

Places for People's Customer Access Strategy aims to deliver excellent services to our customers by offering a range of easy, convenient and modern ways to access the service. We believe our customers should have freedom of choice when accessing our services. We are committed to make sure that whichever way customers choose to contact us, they receive the same level of service and that their experience is a good one.

We will continue to involve our customers in the development and delivery of services to ensure that we are accessible and it suits the different needs and lifestyles of our diverse community nationally.

We have service improvement plans to make sure we continue to deliver a good quality of service in the future.

We treat our customers with courtesy and respect at all times and expect the same in return.

## **Introduction**

It is important to us that we offer a wide range of choice so that our customers can decide how best to access our services to meet their individual needs, lifestyle and preferences.

In 2008 Places for People carried out an Access to Services Review with it's customers and the results of the review has led to the creation of an access checklist. We have consulted with our National Customer Forum and staff customer communications focus group to develop this strategy to show how we will deliver our services now and in the future. In developing this strategy we have considered what our customers have told us is important to them and how they prefer to access our services.

We looked at why, when and how customers contact us, we asked them what works well and what could be improved. We also asked them what elements of accessing the service are the most important to them. We also considered what other organisations are doing as well as recommendations from central government.

This strategy tells you what we found out, where we need to improve and how we propose to do this. We will be able to make some improvements quickly but other changes will take a little longer. This strategy shows our priorities for the next 3 years.

**The Places for People's group Vision is to "Create neighbourhoods of choice."** From this vision a key aim is to **meet our CUSTOMERS' aspirations and deliver excellent operational performance.**

## **OUR CUSTOMERS**

Following our STATUS survey carried out in 2007, the profile of our customers was identified as being:

- Two thirds were female.
- Just under two fifths of respondents aged over 60.
- 17% have access to the internet.
- 9% of respondents came from communities other than White – British.
- Just over a quarter of respondents had a long-term illness or disability, while 9% said that someone else in the household suffered from this.
- Just over a third were wholly retired from work.
- Just under a quarter were in full or part-time employment.
- Over a quarter of respondents had been a customer of Places for People for over 10 years while 23% had been customers for less than two years.

## **KEY STATISTICS FROM CUSTOMER FEEDBACK**

We have listened to what customers told us in our STATUS survey and planned our access around preferred methods of contact. The housing we manage covers a large geographical area with dispersed stock and it is evident from the statistics below that customers' preferred method of contact is the telephone. We are also developing our IT solutions, as although the numbers of customers with access to the internet is small in 2007, we know that this is increasing and is something that we should invest in for the future.

Customers said:

- Overall their satisfaction was strong with 76% saying they were either very or fairly satisfied.
- Overall satisfaction with the home was high at 89%.
- Satisfaction with the neighbourhood was strong at 83%.
- 78% - would recommend places for People to a friend.
- 93% of customers preferred to phone Places for People.
- Only 3% visited one of the Places for People offices.
- Just over half of respondents would prefer Places for People to communicate with them in writing.

## **AIMS OF THE STRATEGY**

To improve customer access, we aim to:

- Make it easy and simple for all customers
- Increase choices for how and when customers can access our services
- Get things right first time
- Improve our efficiencies and creating better value for money for our customers
- Tailor our service to meet the needs of the customer making reasonable adjustments where necessary.

We aim to tailor our services to meet the needs and aspirations of our customers. We want our customers to be involved with Places for People in a way that they prefer.

This strategy has four main access areas:-

- Customer Contact Centre
- Local offices
- Neighbourhood
- Internet

## **CUSTOMER CONTACT CENTRE (VERBAL)**

In our 2007 Status survey, 93% of customers contacted us by phone. The aim of our customer contact centre is to get things right first time. We operate a 24 hour, 365 days a year service to our customers via our Customer Contact Centre. We receive on average, 40,000 calls a month relating to a range of issues such as repairs, rent, finding a new home, support needs, community safety and other general enquiries.

If customers contact us and English is not their first language, we can use the Big Word service to communicate with them.

Places for People staff receive customer service training called Step Forward. This gives staff advice on how to make sure that customers receive a fair and equal service.

The top 3 types of enquiries received relate to:

- Repairs
- Housing/accommodation
- Rent

Regular scrutiny exercises and mystery shopping are undertaken by our customers to:

- Monitor the quality of information being given to our customers

- Ensuring the enquiry is dealt with effectively
- Monitor satisfaction with the service
- Ensure the professionalism of the agent

We are continuing to improve our call handling performance and following a recent review the customer contact centre are working hard to transform the services to make sure we provide a modern, efficient, value for money service that meets the needs of our customers well into the future.

In 2009/10 we intend to:

- Review our telephone protocols, including use of answerphones and out of office hours messages.
- Use technology to capture all customer contact
- Introduce a customer feedback team to more effectively log and monitoring complaints, compliments and suggestions
- Introduce a revised customer service training package or staff 'Step Forward'
- Test call back service to help reduce speed of answering

What we intend to do by 2012

- Review how we work and make processes simpler
- Use technology to Improve our repairs appointments system
- Make much better use of information customers share with us to meet their individual needs
- Make sure our staff are polite, friendly and well trained and implement the principles of 'Step Forward'
- Make it easy for customers to give us feedback (complaints, compliments and suggestions for improvement)
- Work to deliver better joined up services with internal suppliers eg. PMD

## **LOCAL AREA OFFICES (PHYSICAL)**

In our 2007 STATUS survey, we were told that only 3% of customers visited our offices. This prompted a review of the efficiencies which could be made by re-structuring our office network.

Local offices which have remained open following the initial review are fully accessible to everyone, are Disability Discrimination Act 1995 compliant and provide a first line customer service for:

Each office open to the public will provide customers with:-

- A full range of up to date advice and information leaflets which are available in different formats, e.g. audio tape, easy read and other languages

- A private interview room
- Full contact details for individual members of staff
- A free-phone service connected to our customer contact centre
- An induction loop for customers who have hearing difficulties
- Easy access to the Big Word, an interpretation service
- The opportunity for customers to meet dedicated housing staff
- A full range of housing Management Services

Places for People have 3 operational central “hubs” providing first class customer service. These are located in each of the business units, one in the South, one in the East & one in the West. Within each of these hubs are specialist teams working to provide an effective and efficient housing management service to our customers. .

### **Operational Hubs**

- **South – Operational Hub is in London**
- **East – Operational Hub is in Leeds**
- **West – Operational Hub is in Preston**

Customers can access our services through a variety of ways and have access to local offices. Contact details for each local office can be obtained via our website or by contacting either the Customer Contact Centre or one of the Operational Hubs. We also have a number of small offices within some of our larger estates which are open to the public at locally published times.

In 2009/10 we intend to:

- Review our provider for translation services
- Review our office locations in Manchester, Bristol, the North East of England and the South Coast
- Upgrade telephone equipment e.g. Hull
- Give staff remote access to our housing management database whilst working on estates which will provide customers with a better level of service.
- Introduce a new involvement structure giving customers greater choice for getting involved and shaping services

What we intend to do by 2012

- Review all office locations and monitor service usage to deliver better joined up services with 3<sup>rd</sup> party partners
- Review our delivery of services in neighbourhoods

## **ACCESSING OUR SERVICE IN YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD (PHYSICAL)**

In order to provide a wide number of options on accessing our service, we provide the option of face-to-face contact in a customer's home and/or in their neighbourhood. We know that many of our customers value this form of contact and that in some instances this method of contact enables us to be in a better position to get things right first time – for some people, repairs or situations can be more easily shown or explained in person than over the phone.

We provide a service locally through:

- Personal visits, including Home Check
- Estate walkabouts
- Meetings with residents groups, both informal and with those groups operating within our customer involvement structure
- Estate based surgeries

We are both reactive and proactive with regard to personal visits. A personal visit can be made when we receive a request to discuss:

- Reports of anti-social behaviour
- Tenancy related queries
- Site services, estate or neighbourhood queries and issues
- General housing advice

In 2009, we began a new programme of Home Check - or Tenancy Audit – visits. One of the aims of these visits is to improve the details we need to ensure that our services can be tailored to the customers needs.

The Home Check visit also enables us to:

- Inspect the condition of the property and its gardens
- Get things right first time - our employees have access via mobile phones to other areas of the service to ensure that we can deal with a range of issues in one visit
- Contact those customers who find it difficult to contact us through other methods
- Promote other, cheaper methods of contacting us - such as by telephone, email and by using the website

We carry out estate walkabouts on all of our schemes/estates where properties are grouped together.

We support and encourage customer involvement in our service and provide a number of ways for customers to access this. Locally, this will be in the form of a Residents Association. The regional Customer Experience Panels and Customer Forums may also offer the opportunity for customers to access us in their local area.

In some areas, where the location and demand combine to make this happen, we hold regular surgeries. An example might be for the Neighbourhood Officer to make use – and be available for contact - of a neighbouring community centre at a given time every fortnight.

In 2009/10 we intend to:

- Complete the first year of our three-year programme of Home Check visits
- Provide Neighbourhood Officers with mobile IT solutions to access relevant data for customers and to better deal with enquiries when away from the office
- Use of technology to capture all customer contact.
- Develop better relationships with other local organisations and partners to deliver a more holistic service

What we intend to do by 2012

- Complete our programme of Tenancy Audits
- Develop service improvement plans following customer feedback from our STATUS survey being carried out in 2010
- Capture and use customer research to inform our business plans

### **WRITTEN ACCESS (REMOTE)**

Customers may choose to access services in a number of ways including letter, complaint or compliment form, fax, email and internet access. We will respond to all enquiries in accordance with the following service standards:

- Acknowledge written correspondence within 2 working days
- Aim to provide a full response within 10 working days
- Make sure replies do not contain jargon and can be easily understood.
- Give responses in large print, different languages, audio tape or in different formats where customers ask us to.
- Use translation services for those customers where English isn't their first language.

We will provide a variety of customer information booklets available from all access points.

We always try to resolve complaints informally and straight away, but if this is not possible the complaints process follows two stages.

Sometimes complaint investigations and responses may take more time than expected. When this happens, people are notified of the delay.

Our complaints procedure is constantly kept under review to improve the process and deliver a quick and effective resolution to complaints. We aim to keep dissatisfaction to a minimum but when things go wrong, we aim to rectify the situation at the earliest opportunity and learn from complaints to improve services further.

In 2009/10 we intend to:

- Establish a centralised customer feedback team
- Implement a revised complaints policy
- Monitor the customer satisfaction surveys

What we intend to do by 2012

- Respond to customer feedback from the new process
- Improve customer satisfaction overall with the complaints handling process
- Use Tenant Inspectors to review the service.
- Carry out mystery shopping exercised and use the results to improve performance.

## **INTERNET (ELECTRONIC)**

The aim of Group's web site is to promote a range of homes to buy and rent and enable customers to access services and information.

### **Accessibility**

The Group aims to deliver web services which are easy to use and navigate, easy to read and understand and which are accessible to as many visitors as possible.

As a minimum the user will be able to:

- change text size through the browser
- toggle between high visibility and normal view
- use Browse Aloud to read web pages

The Group's site is being built to World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

### **Existing online services**

The online services currently available include:

- Paying bills
- Reporting home repairs
- Information on homes to buy and rent
- Information on other services

- Contact information (telephone, e-mail and postal)
- Customer information
- Performance information
- News
- Email

### **What we intend to do by 2012**

The Group wants to increase its online web services. To do this is undertaking a review of its current web strategy. Services which could be delivered in the future may include:

- Provide customers with on-line statements
- Enable customers the facility to book appointments
- Investigate the introduction of a virtual community
- Develop access to other web services
- Introduce neighbourhood plans for customers to find out what is planned/happening locally

### **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY**

We have carried out an Impact Assessment on this strategy to ensure equality and diversity compliance.

Our equality and diversity strategy will lead to:

- Positively embracing diversity in everything that we do
- Treating people as unique individuals with different needs.
- Continually improving services for all

### **SERVICE STANDARDS**

Places for People have a set of service standards for all elements of our service. These service standards are set in partnership with our customers and are monitored and reviewed on an annual basis with our National Customer Forum and by carrying out mystery shopping activities.

Targets are set along with our other performance indicators and reports to senior management are delivered on a quarterly basis to ensure compliance and required action given where needed.

There is a customer leaflet detailing these standards and how we use them to ensure we are delivering on our promises.

### **ACTION PLAN**

Our Customer Access Strategy action plan is reviewed every six months by the Customer Services Directorate. The action plan is monitored at our Place Management Meetings.