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# Housing Solutions

entry for

The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead  
Community and Business Excellence Awards 2008

Category

Customer Focus Award



# Housing Solutions

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Housing Solutions is a not-for-profit company dedicated to providing affordable homes and high quality services tailored to meet the needs of its customers.

We offer affordable homes to rent, shared ownership schemes, homes for older people and specialist accommodation for people who need support and care to live within the community.

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## What our customers say

"I called the Customer Contact Centre at 15.49 today to ask for an emergency key safe to be fixed to the outside of a flat. The job was completed at 16.40 How's that for excellent service!"

"Thank you to Charan who carried out my gas service. He was very professional and left my house spotless."

"A great weight off my shoulders. The painting needed doing and at my age, 84, I could never have done it myself."

"Thank you for my new home. I feel very blessed to have somewhere safe and secure for my daughter to grow up."

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# Customer Service Strategy

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Putting customers first has been our watchword ever since we were established in 1995. It's a fundamental part of what we are, and we remain focused on improving the lives of our customers in everything we do. That is vital if we are to help build strong and vibrant communities for them to live in.

## Choice

We never forget that most of our customers don't have a choice when they come to us. They cannot afford to rent or buy a house on the open market. So a key factor in our customer service strategy is giving them back some element of choice, and a means of influencing their circumstances.

## Listening

First and foremost, we listen to what our customers have to say. We act on the feedback we receive. And we give customers many opportunities to get involved in our work, and to help shape the homes and services we provide for them.

## Committed staff

Our staff are fully committed to providing the best possible service – as evidenced by the results of our latest staff survey in 2007. This showed that:

- 86% of staff believe that part of their job is to look for ways of improving customer service;
- 92% of staff said that we take customer service seriously;
- 87% of staff say that the quality of service to our customers is improving;
- 85% of staff say we act on customer feedback
- 85% of staff say that we listen to our customers rather than telling them what they need.

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## What our customers say:

"I am delighted with the work carried out at my house today by Ken. He is a very nice tradesman. He noticed that my cupboards were not square, so he lined them all up and fitted the new cupboard."

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# Our customers

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## Our customers are:

- Our residents – the thousands of families and individuals for whom we provide homes. Our core responsibility is to meet their needs for affordable and specialist housing;
- Our business partners - who work with us to help us meet the housing needs of the people we serve.

## Customer Contact

### Telephone

Most of our customers prefer to get in touch with us by telephone. More than 80% did so last year. Our Customer Contact Centre takes more than 7,000 calls each month, and answers almost 90% within 10 seconds. That's up from 85% in 2006/7.

### Face to face

Hundreds of customers visit our offices in Maidenhead to talk to us about their housing needs or problems, or simply to pay their rent. This year we recognised that many of our customers could not easily visit us, so we

bought a mobile office so now we can regularly visit all the neighbourhoods where we have homes, making our staff more accessible to our customers. The office is run by staff from our rents, housing and maintenance teams, with representatives of other agencies with whom we work.

### Community events

We operate a programme of community events in all the areas in which we work. This gives our customers a chance to meet staff and give us their views on our services. And it helps us to help them with any problems they might have.

### Internet

A growing number of customers are contacting us via the internet. They can log repairs on the internet and pay their rent. Our website has a large text and Read Aloud facility. For people who are unable to use a mouse, it can easily be navigated using a tab key. We have just launched a new community website, designed by residents for residents, as part of our efforts to encourage more of our customers to get involved with our work.

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## What our customers say

*"On behalf of all the residents at the flats, thank you so very much for the beautiful new courtyard. It is beyond our wildest dreams. It will be so nice in the summer to sit out surrounded by lovely plants and bushes."*

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# Responding to our customers needs

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## Contacting us

When customers told us that sometimes they found it difficult to contact us during normal office hours, we looked at what we could do to make it easier for them to talk to us.

We invited customers to a Service Forum to give us their views and suggestions on how we could improve their access to us.

Together we came up with proposals for extending the opening hours of our Customer Contact Centre. Our customers said that we should open at 8 am and close at 7 pm, to

allow people working during the day to contact us before or after work. And they suggested to us that one of our Housing Officers should be on call during these extended opening times to deal with any specialist neighbourhood problems.

We were happy to provide this additional service. The extended opening hours – from 8 am to 7 pm - were introduced in May.

## Satisfaction

This year, customer satisfaction with call handling is currently 97%.

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## What our customers say

"Thanks for the authorisation for the planting of shrubs in front of my living room. I am thrilled with so many flowering shrubs and look forward to seeing them in full colour in the summer"

"It's nice to have someone to call when help is needed. I am very grateful to you all especially for your kind words."

"Alan was so sympathetic and caring with my parents - we were all very impressed that he went that extra mile."

"Diana was courteous, helpful and took time to ensure my mother's queries were answered clearly. Diana is an excellent example of focused and attentive service."

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# Responding to our customers needs

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## **Improving our repairs service**

Each year we carry out more than 13,000 repairs in our customers' homes. Repairs are prioritised so that the most urgent work gets done first.

We changed the way we prioritise these repairs in April 2008 in response to feedback from our customers. The feedback corresponded with a fall in levels of satisfaction with the time customers had to wait for repairs to be completed.

### **Consultation**

Before we considered changes we invited customers to a Service Forum to discuss their repair priorities. They told us they wanted faster response times for emergency repairs, such as heating and hot water breakdown. They said they wanted more repairs classed as emergencies, so that they could be completed more quickly.

In consultation with our customers, we came up with proposals to reduce the response time for all emergency repairs from 24 hours to just four hours, and we agreed what repairs would fall into this classification. We agreed that all other repairs would be dealt with within a 21 day period, rather than 31 days. All our residents were then invited to vote on the proposed changes. They voted in favour, and the new priorities were introduced in April 2008.

The changes were the most significant we

have ever made to our repair priorities and provide customers with:

- A four hour response time for emergency repairs;
- A 21 day response time for all routine repairs.

## **Delivering the changes**

Meeting our customers request for a faster repairs presented us with a significant operational challenge – how to deliver the improved service.

To achieve this we introduced a new pay structure for our maintenance team. This moved from being 100% based on productivity to a salary with 15% based on performance to help us achieve what our customers wanted.

The 15% bonus is made up of a 5% for completing repairs on their first visit to a customer's home, a 5% for achieving customer satisfaction and 5% for productivity.

This system was a significant operational change but necessary to support the new priority structure and our focus on customer service.

### **Satisfaction**

Following the changes, we have reduced the average time for completing all repairs from seven to six days. Customer satisfaction with the repairs service has risen again, to 94%.

# Responding to our customers needs

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## Services shaped by our customers

In partnership with our residents, we have launched a new blueprint for customer involvement, designed to get more of our customers involved in every aspect of our business and ensure that our homes and services meet their needs.

In the past year, the number of residents who work with us helping to shape our services has nearly trebled – up from 156 to 450.

The launch of the new blueprint has led to:

- the creation of a new and more representative Residents Association. This group represents the interests of all residents, and works to make sure that the resident viewpoint is taken into consideration in everything we do. Three members of the Resident Association are members of the

Housing Solutions Board.

- a greater range of opportunities for our customers to be involved in our work - from simply filling in surveys to helping us review our services.

As a result we now have customers involved in our Best Value Reviews of services, they attend monthly meetings of our Asset Management Department and sit on selection panels helping us choose new contractors and looking at ways of achieving value for money. They have helped us choose new contractors for grounds maintenance, electrical upgrades, new door installations and material supply.

This greater involvement has produced a whole raft of service improvements, all designed in partnership with our customers.

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## What our customers say

*"I am writing to thank Georgia and Nigel for their response to my request to remove dumped rubbish and overgrown bushes by my house. I was very surprised but extremely pleased when the team arrived the very next morning, they worked very hard and cleared all the walkway. I am sending you both my heartfelt thanks for a job very efficiently and tidily carried out. All done."*

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# Overcoming problems

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## Home MOT

We faced the challenge of how to deal with a minority of our customers who were making very heavy use of our repairs service. On average, people use the repair service four times a year.

But these customers were using it up to 40 times a year – ten times the average.

To try to reduce the number of times these customers called on the repairs service, we introduced a Home MOT scheme. The idea was to enable us to provide a more cost effective and quicker repairs service for all our customers.

Customers who signed up to this scheme received a visit from our maintenance team. They checked the condition of properties and carried out any necessary repairs. If, during the following 12 months, the customer did not use the routine repair service, then we would

credit their rent account with £100. We already run DIY workshops which offer all our residents the opportunity to learn some very basic DIY skills.

However, we have found that many of the customers who use the service most frequently are single parents who have no understanding of very basic DIY skills, or they are disabled people who need greater help to live independently.

## Extra help

In the short term, our solution to the problem has helped; but longer term we are looking at ways of providing extra help for these vulnerable groups, maybe by visiting them every three months to carry out routine jobs to keep their properties in good condition.

The introduction of our Home MOT has been cited as best practice by the Chartered Institute of Housing.

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## What our customers say

*"Without your input we would still be struggling to get a Lifeline alarm for our lady and her move would have been delayed considerably."*

*"A big and friendly thank you for all involved in putting the central heating in at my home. It was a delight to have such friendly and helpful guys making this as unstressful as possible."*

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# Keeping the focus on our customers

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Two years ago, we embarked on a series of initiatives designed to cement the place of our customers at the heart of everything we do.

It started with the launch of our largest and most comprehensive three year customer service training programme, aimed at raising awareness of excellence in Customer Service throughout the organisation.

This was followed by the introduction of a new blueprint for customer involvement. These two initiatives have produced major changes in the way we operate, deliver our service and work with our customers.

We have introduced lots of new ways for our customers to get involved with our work and we have seen the numbers working with us increase three fold.

We have changed the way we evaluate our services and design changes to them. Customer consultation is now central to this and before we consider any changes, we talk to our customers.

If we are undertaking a major review of a service, or introducing a new service, we go

through a customer consultation process and will also recruit customers to work with us to ensure that changes meet their needs.

This process is now built into our Service Improvement Plans right across the organisation.

In the last year, as a result of this greater customer involvement and feedback, we have introduced:

- new repair priorities with a quicker response for emergency repairs;
- extended opening hours for our Customer Contact Centre;
- improved recycling facilities at flats;
- free compost bins for all customers;
- a home MOT for the most frequent users of our repairs service;
- a new system for our trades team to make call back appointments if they cannot complete a repair on the first visit;
- a text messaging service to confirm repair appointments;
- a new system for paying decorating allowances;
- major changes in the way we get empty properties ready for new residents, designed to improve the quality of the homes.

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## What our customers say

*"Lee has been to my house to do work on two occasions, he is polite and kind and nothing is too much bother for him - he deserves a pat on the back."*

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# Measuring the success of Customer Service

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As a not-for-profit organisation we measure success in terms of:

- high levels of customer satisfaction. Our statistics show that:
  - 90% of our customers are happy with their homes;
  - 96% of customers say our staff are helpful;
- continuous improvement in customer service to meet the changing needs of our customers;
- customers who have the homes and support services they require.

Every aspect of our customer service is measured on a monthly basis by key performance indicators. When services fail to hit their customer targets, staff will take action to find out why and look at how we can improve the service. This will always include consultation with our customers. We carry out quarterly mini-surveys, so that we have a constantly updated picture of satisfaction across key areas of customer service. We routinely send out satisfaction

surveys to residents when they have used one of our services.

## **Getting things right**

These surveys act as an early warning system, alerting us if our customer service standards or levels of customer satisfaction slip. We want to know when things are going wrong so that we can work with our customers to put them right.

## **Customers priorities**

Every two years, we carry out a Resident Satisfaction Survey with more than half our customers being asked to give their views on their home and the services we provide.

We also ask them what their priorities are in terms of home and neighbourhood improvements.

All this information is used to put together our Corporate Objectives. So what our customers say they want, and their levels of satisfaction, dictate our future plans.

Only by doing this can we genuinely meet the needs of our customers.

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## What our customers say

*"Please thank your tradesman - he was brilliant. He was very caring to my daughter, who has aspergers syndrome."*

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