

# Customer Involvement Statement

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Whitefriars Housing Group

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# Our Customer Involvement Statement

## Introduction

This statement sets out the framework for the involvement of our Customers, the definition of which is given later in this document.

The statement will be reviewed at least every three years, coinciding with our policy review cycle. Actions to achieve its strategic aims will be reviewed and updated each year. Both the review of this statement and its annual action plan will be undertaken with our customers.

This statement contains new commitments and challenges for the organisation. It commits it to driving its service access, customer care, service delivery and development around its customers needs and aspirations through a much clearer insight into their profile, views and service experience.

It recognises also that this will take time and a further cultural 'shift' which has possible implications upon resources and delivery structures which will need to be managed.

Involvement has the commitment of our Board and is a key priority within the Corporate Work Plan. This statement has been approved and adopted at Board level. It will be summarised for communication to customers through leaflets, our web site, our Talk2us and Routes to Involvement initiatives and direct interaction between our staff and customers.

## **Our focus for involvement**

Our main aim for involvement remains the understanding and engagement of individuals and groups of our customers to strengthen us as a customer focussed business and, performance as a landlord, by making it more focussed on customer and community needs. In particular in seeking feedback/views on services and enabling the contribution of ideas on how our policy and services should change to increase appropriateness, efficiency and value for money and, our identification with customers issues.

Although involvement in service delivery continues to be our main focus, we recognise that involvement is also for and about communities and the individuals that live there. Some of the activities and support we offer aim to drive the regeneration and sustainability of communities

It also helps us to represent the views and interests of our customers to other service providers to get them to look at their service priorities, and performance, in service delivery or neighbourhoods. We will do this mainly through partnership forums including the Local Strategic Partnership; service related forums e.g. those relating to community safety; initiatives such as Your Neighbourhood Matters; and local operational networks.

## **Why we work with our Customers**

We work with our customers to achieve the following

- To understand the profile of our customer base to inform our service development

- to know what our customers want and that we understand the importance they place on and, satisfaction they have with our services
- to understand and learn from their experience as service users to inform continuous improvement and responsiveness of those services
- to enable customers as individuals, groups and communities to have more influence over decisions, when and if they want it. (This does not mean that individuals and groups which may not be representative of wider views and interests can unreasonably influence policy and service responses).
- to develop our services so they becomes more appropriate to customers needs and are more efficiently delivered with in a best value framework
- to help in the monitoring of service delivery
- to support the implementation of service changes or undertaking of works
- to offer opportunities for personal development
- support the development of communities
- where the services provided need the full engagement of other agencies to deliver a more complete service , and where properly researched opinions can add leverage to our position with other agencies of influence and responsibility, in the interests of our customers.

To do this we have a range of activities and processes in place, which we will continue to review at regular intervals. These are communicated in widely

published information documents, our web site, magazine, and our Talk2us trailer at community events/shopping areas. We also proactively promote through opportunities such as surveys.

We recognise that customer involvement develops lines of accountability to our customers. It is good for customers, us and communities. Our customers and their communities get to have a say in what is happening to their homes, the areas they live in, and the services they receive. We gain voluntary input to solutions and, commitment to lasting improvements to our services. We can understand what is important to our customers and respond to that. *But to achieve this more fully we recognise that we need to empower and equip our staff to do so whilst at the same time giving clear routes through which the issues which they cannot deal with are picked up and addressed. This requires ownership and action by managers, and is to become a key performance requirement across the business.*

## Developing this statement

Over the last five years major changes have taken place to our customer involvement approaches. This includes a new strategy and policy and the adoption of the Housing Corporations' Residents Involvement Policy. To arrive at this position well documented consultation has taken place. That consultation has directly shaped our current position and approaches.

In order to review this statement we have worked with a group of customers whose additional priorities for us include the following:

- become more 'user friendly', an organisation that is proactive and offers a more personal service

- that is less reliant on 'print' and more on face to face or telephone contacts
- an organisation with a 'face' for individual tenants and within communities
- an organisation that involves its customers in the process of service delivery through timely and effective information.
- one where more staff take ownership of the problems
- less formal, with a more grass roots web site and magazine
- that works within joined up multi agency service delivery arrangements at local level

These issues have been taken up in actions within the framework for responding to the outcomes of STATUS, within the 2008 refresh re launch of customer care, communication and involvement and, service improvement plans.

## Our Customers

These are all of the people who use the services we provide or are affected by our approach and performance in managing the estates, where we are the main landlord.

Our customer base continues to become more diverse giving rise to challenges for service delivery and also challenging the appropriateness of some of the services we provide and how we provide them. Broadening our involvement

opportunities to maximize our engagement with groups who may be somewhat harder to reach and correspondingly for whom we may be harder to reach will continue to be a priority over the life of this statement. *We will develop a specific strategy for the further involvement of so called hard to reach customers and support our area based teams to develop more extensive and effective estate based involvement approaches.*

Some of our customers have a defined relationship with us as landlord and tenant or leaseholder. This means that they will be involved in different ways and over different issues than the general community or those who may wish to become our tenants in the future.

Our drive to gather better information on the demography of our customer base, our plans to collate and use other profiling data and analysis of views by customer segment is starting to give us a better level of evidence on which to base both involvement and service evolution. *We plan to investigate the level of avoidable contact or failure demand to target specific service improvement activities and to look at the developing principle within the sector of Customer insight to drive future improvements customer focus and services.*

## **A flexible approach to customer involvement**

### **Our Routes to Involvement**

With customers we have developed our Routes to Involvement initiative which offers opportunities for involvement at strategic level, through tenant board membership, to local levels through street rep schemes; estate/block

agreements; estate inspections and feedback through our extensive survey programme.

We will continue to develop the wide range of opportunities that the routes initiative offers, assessing the effectiveness through our impact assessment framework. We will amend opportunities to increase impact and will cease to offer opportunities that deliver low levels of impact against the resources needed to sustain them, provided we are satisfied that they genuinely do not work in the local context and that the failing is not related to our skill and commitment to develop the effectiveness of the opportunity.

*We will also review opportunities and the balance of those opportunities in the light of feedback from customers on preferred methods of engagement including reflecting the results of STATUS survey 2007.*

## **Making it work - a partnership with Customers**

Effective involvement relies substantially on partnership working. This does not mean that customers or our employees cannot question what is being said or assumed. Questioning and constructive challenge are part of identifying and finding solutions, and working together. It also needs to reflect what is realistically achievable, including what can be afforded.

The way in which it is done is very important and may determine what is achieved.

We have agreed standards to help make sure that we work together in the best way. These apply to our employees and customers who are, or become,

involved. The standards are available in our resource pack and will be communicated through each structured involvement opportunity and the knowledge library and customer involvement activity with teams, to staff .

A more detailed Code of Conduct, relating to Residents Association meetings appears in the Residents Association resource pack and forms the basis for these standards.

## What makes customer involvement work?

We recognise and will support the following good practice points to make sure that involvement is supported and is as effective as it can be. This includes:

- **Good and timely planning** - Fail to plan, plan to fail is a well known saying equally applicable to our efforts to involve customers. We recognise that good quality involvement is dependent upon a number of factors including that it is considered and undertaken when reviewing services or planning other changes; sufficient time allowed for it to be meaningful and productive and; the right methods or combinations of methods used to engage as effectively as possible. *We will continue with efforts to ensure we improve planning and delivery of customer involvement across the organisation.*
- **Positive attitude** - to work, we know that our employees must be clear about the benefits that customer involvement can bring to their jobs. *We will support them to develop their understanding of the benefits and their role in that through training and other engagement and, profiling of expectations and actions using other methods.*

- **Clear standards** - this includes things like standards that groups must achieve to be recognised by us; standards of behaviour by us and customers and overall standards for customer involvement itself. *We will continue to promote the use of Codes of Conduct and rewrite and re launch our Resource pack for residents groups setting out the standards and the expectations to produce a productive working relationship. We will pursue with the City Council the development of a protocol to define agree standards and roles in working with community based groups.*
- **Good information** - the building block of involvement. This includes all of our communications including letters, leaflets, HOME magazine, our annual report. It also includes actions to help customers who chose to become more involved do so by giving the information they need to understand a subject or approach. It can also include giving clear information at Residents and other group meetings. *We have re branded and re launched our involvement opportunities 'Routes to Involvement' and will continue to promote the use of plain language in letters and publications for customers. We will target a review of communications approaches and opportunities using the skills of our PR and Media contractor in the customer priority areas of repairs, ASB and estate 'profile'.*
- **Advice, support and development** - as well as information, the back up of access to good independent advice and support can help. Our own Customer Involvement Team can help but we recognise that they will not be seen as independent. All Residents Groups can be members of TPAS, (Tenant Participation Advisory Service). This is only one of the external support organisations. *We will signpost and help groups access other sources of support. We will also offer a wider range of training opportunities, either through our membership of the Learning Equals Partnership;*

*internal delivery or through city based partnerships. We will work with involved customers to promote the benefits of training.*

- Performance - It is important to know how customer involvement is influencing what we do. It should be seen as important as balancing the books, (good financial) or risk management. It should be a way of working that is automatically built into any project/policy proposal or should in itself give rise to such a project or policy change. *We plan to introduce performance measures for involvement and to refine the process and expectations on those undertaking involvement activity to assess the impact of involvement and in particular to advise the customer of how their views will be taken into account, where asked for and given.*

## Resources for involvement

The association will continue to employ a dedicated team to develop customer involvement and to support the integration across all service areas through the development of understanding that customer focus and involvement is the job of all employees.

A specific budget has been set aside to support involvement and aspects of other budgets e.g. corporate communications further support this.

From within that budget resources are available to directly support individual customers and groups to facilitate their involvement.

## Assessing the impact

Progress with the actions to support the implementation of this statement; achievement of its overall objectives and, the annual actions plans will be informed by the annual impact assessments and supported by our Service Improvement Plans and team action plans. These contain actions to continuously improve the extent and quality of involvement of customers in our key service areas. In turn these reflect regulatory requirements and most importantly the views of customers obtained through our involvement opportunities.

Each year we will look at the difference that involving our customers has made to our service and, the standards of those services. We will also look at the impact involvement has had on individual participating customers, groups, and communities. *We will introduce a revised approach to impact assessment in 2008/9 to achieve a more focussed and value for money based approach. We anticipate that this will be embedded over a 2 year period.*

All customers who have been directly involved with us will be asked to contribute to this and we will aim to tell them individually the overall difference made. Customers generally will be told through our magazine.

In doing this we need to recognise that some approaches take time and skill to enable maturity and productiveness of approaches. An example already identified is the Customer Service Improvement Groups, *CSIG's, where differential levels of impact are evident from 2006 and 07 impact assessments. This is attributable to a number of factors which will be considered in the 2008 review.*

We have and will continue to report this to customers and the Board, and agree with them both plans to improve customer involvement approaches. This may include recommendations to change some approaches or to end some initiatives that are proving unpopular, unproductive or where the costs of the approach outweigh the measured impact.

This statement responds to the requirements of the Housing Corporation. This document will be approved at board level and will be used within the business to communicate our strategic intentions and commitments on the involvement of our customers. A more accessible document for customers will be produced.