

Excellent Customer Services Strategy

Foreword

We want our customers to have a positive experience regardless of who they are, where they live, or how and when they choose to interact with us.

In 2021 we agreed our objectives to improve our Customer Experience; to listen to what customers tell us is important to them and use it to shape our services, to provide opportunities and support for our customers to thrive and achieve, to enable and encourage digitally capable customers to transact and engage with us online and be a 'customer first' organisation, putting them at the heart of what we do.

Looking back through our Residents' annual reports for the last four years you can see how we quickly responded to the rapidly changing economic pressures, and by working with our residents we have successfully delivered against our plans;

- We now have in place monthly customer feedback and an active group of involved residents who are helping us shape our service improvement plans.
- Our revised communities offer delivered in 2024 4,809 support interventions and £458k directly benefiting our residents (compared to 709 support interventions in 2019).
- Whilst we have not progressed as far as we hoped in developing our online services we have improved the website experience and improved the wi-fi and digital support to our retirement accommodation.
- We now have the ability to use our data and customer insight, which is informing our asset management strategy priorities, with how we proactively tackle risks from damp and mould, fuel poverty and supporting customers to move to more suitable home.
- Our improved data and reporting mean we now have 'one view' of both a property and a customer and, when combined with the use of our customer insight, we can better understand our customers' priorities

Our strategic plan to 2029/30 has the ambition that by 2030 our customers;

- Will have a positive experience regardless of who they are, where they live or how and when they choose to interact with us.
- Will feel we listen and act on their views.
- Will feel proud of the homes they live in.

This supporting strategy is crucial to achieving these ambitions.

In preparing this strategy we have considered our current performance and our operating context.

Our performance

1. Satisfaction

We use an external company to ask around 250 residents each quarter how they feel about West Kent as a landlord. These questions are based on the Regulator of Social Housing's Tenant Satisfaction Measures. Looking back on 2024/25, customer satisfaction with our services is in a good place, with overall customer satisfaction for our customers in rented homes at 74.5%, and for our homeowners we are delivering better than other housing associations at 58.5%.

The Regulator for Social Housing publishes annually the Tenant Satisfaction Measures for landlords. The latest available information 2023/24 shows that West Kent is performing well across most areas.

We also carry out monthly transactional surveys with the target of achieving General Needs customer satisfaction of at least 4.5 out of 5. For 2024/25 we achieved 4.5 and feedback together with the 568 compliments we received tell us that our customers value the positive, friendly customer service they receive when they contact us.

When we receive a low score we contact our customer to understand how we can make things right, and their feedback, together with insight from complaints received, tells us areas we should improve upon. Our complaints annual report for 2024/25 showed that for the 565 complaints in 2024/25, the majority related to repairs (260) and grounds maintenance (66).

2. Tailoring our services

By improving our customer insight we know that roughly one in three of our customers are or have a member of their household considered to be vulnerable or live with a disability. We now have an Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion framework, have put in place a new vulnerability policy, and rolled out dignity and respect training to our colleagues and key contractors to support this. We have also in the last year rolled out a complex case process - by managing cases in this way we are able to prevent complaints and provide the resident with one point of contact during a difficult time and ensure teams work collaboratively to solve customer issues.

In the last three years we have increased the number of homes we manage, so that we now have over 1,000 leaseholders and shared owners. In this new strategy we will consider how we tailor our services for this group of customers.

With the cost-of-living crisis our customers became increasingly focused on their rent and service charges providing value for money for them and delivering the services that they want. We want to provide value for money for our customers, delivering services that reflect local priorities where we can, whilst ensuring that we recover the costs we incur in providing these services.

3. Areas identified to improve

Our lowest levels of satisfaction are for our;

- approach to anti-social behaviour (62% Q1 2025/26)
- handling of complaints (42% Q1 2025/26)

In following up with customers with low satisfaction scores or who have made a complaint, they say they get frustrated:

- with the length of time it takes to complete a repair;
- with how we keep them informed of what is happening next; and
- if the actions carried out afterwards don't happen in the time or manner that was discussed.

Operating context

2024 saw the launch of the new regulatory consumer standards and increasing powers for both the Social Housing Regulator and the Housing Ombudsman.

Across the sector we are seeing increasing:

- levels of complaints, including those which are then referred to the Housing Ombudsman;
- levels of damp and mould cases and disrepair claims leading to increased property maintenance costs and a need for moving households that are overcrowded;
- reports of anti-social behaviour of the most serious kind, and violence towards housing association staff; and
- levels of hardship for customers, combined with a potential changes to Welfare Benefits system.

The Grenfell Tower report, published in September 2024, came with implications for landlord decision making and accountability, together with calls for the professionalisation of the sector.

The reduction in external agency support and the scarcity of social housing within Kent have increased the complexity of the people nominated to us for housing.

Overall we are seeing increasing pressure on our colleagues and our services. As well as an increase in customer demand and expectations, this complexity creates additional challenges for how we deliver services, often requiring greater intervention than previously, using more employee time and resources.

During the life of this strategy we need to realise the benefits from our recent investments in new technology. By simplifying or automating more routine work our colleagues can provide more of the expert support an increasing number of our customers need.

Our Guiding Principles

Our services

We will be open and honest with customers and manage their expectations, acknowledging that we need to tailor our services to meet customers' needs. We will be clear about our responsibilities and those of our customers. We will provide a consistent and high-quality experience for customers of all tenures, across all channels, keeping customers updated and informed when they have an ongoing interaction with us, using their preferred method wherever possible.

We aim to deliver a right first time service. We will continuously review how we deliver value for money whilst adapting to changes in demand for our services.

We will involve customers in the design of policies that affect them directly and in the scrutiny of the delivery of our services.

Learning from Complaints

We recognise that we don't always get things right and we want our complaints process to be fair, open, and easy to use so that customers feel respected, included, and heard. We will be accountable for our services and take ownership for putting things right when they go wrong.

We aim to continually learn from our mistakes, and use our customer insight data effectively to improve our service delivery. We publish annually our report on complaints handling performance.

Our people will be professional and well trained, with the right skills and tools to carry out their work effectively, resolving customer queries promptly, and recognising when a different intervention is required.

Tailoring our services

Our services will be inclusive and accessible. We will listen to what our customers are telling us with empathy and compassion and maintain an open mind. We will take account of customer's individual needs and vulnerabilities, and tailor our services and communication accordingly.

We see this as a constant learning exercise - we will continue to monitor our residents as their needs change and our resident profile changes.

Our values run through the heart of everything we do and underpin this strategy. They guide employees to take sound decisions for the customer and the business. We will continue to embed a values-driven culture by updating and embedding our 'Making the Difference' toolkit for all colleagues, to achieve an organisation wide, customer centric mindset.

Improving our online offer

Our customer survey tells us that 62% of our customers are digitally confident and are likely to embrace a digital service. We want to improve our online services so that our digitally capable customers are able to self-serve their enquiries and transactions through our website and customer portal. For those who prefer to speak to someone direct, we want to be able to resolve 80% of queries at first point of contact with our Customer Services Team. We will provide a consistent, high quality experience across all the ways residents contact us.

Improving our digital offer will not be at the expense of being able to telephone or message our customer services team. We anticipate that these initiatives will free up colleague time to spend with customers who need one-to-one support.

We remain passionate about delivering excellent services in a friendly, solution-focused way. We want our customers to feel valued, respected and listened to, and to have their say in the decisions we make.

Our Objectives

To deliver on this strategy we will focus on the following objectives and measures for success.

Objective 1

We will be clear about the services our customer can expect from us and how these are delivered.

Our measures of success will be

- General Needs customer satisfaction of at least 4.5 out of 5; and TSM TP01 improved from 76% to 82%
- Shared owners' customer satisfaction of at least 4.2 out of 5; and TP01 improved from 57% to 63%
- TSM 03 Time taken to complete your repair – improve from 74.6% to > 75%
- TSM 07 Kept informed - improve from 76% to >79%

Key outcomes will be

- working with customers to update our service standards so that for each service area there is a clear set of service standards that can be understood at a-glance and through which they can hold us to account.
- establishing a clear service offer for shared owners and how we manage leasehold agreements.

Objective 2

We will learn from complaints to improve services.

Our measures of success will be

- TSM 09 Complaints handling - improve from 37% to >42%
- TSM 12 Approach to ASB – improve from 58.2% to > [65%]
- Reduction in % of complaints escalated to stage 2 to < [23%]

Key outcomes will be

- embedding the complex case process, ensuring customers always have a single point of contact.
- delivering a refreshed 'making the difference' cultural programme for our staff, ensuring the customer is at the heart of decision making.
- Introducing oversight of lessons learnt by the Resident Scrutiny Panel.

Objective 3

We will enhance our use of data and customer insight to predict future service demand and how we might tailor our service offer to reflect specific needs.

Our measures of success will be

- TSM 08 Fairly and with respect - improve from 80.3% to >83%
- TSM 06 Listens and acts to improve from 63% to >68%
- An increasingly professionally trained workforce with colleagues with a relevant professional qualification rising from 39% to 90% by 2030.

Key outcomes will be

- embedding our vulnerability policy and dignity and respect training for our staff.
- training colleagues on tailoring services to customers' needs.
- working with involved residents to consider how each interaction works best for customers (taking account of their needs, expectations and circumstances) to deliver a service that is as effective and low effort as possible for them.
- using our customer insight and property repairs data to identify when we should be pro-actively visiting the customer to ensure they are living safely in their home.

Objective 4

We will make best use of technology, empowering our customers to engage and transact with us online when they choose to.

Our measures of success will be

- Easy to deal with > 82% [Q1 2025/26 acuity report]
- Achieving a channel shift of 20% of contacts moving to online self-serve by [xxx]
- Resolving 80% of queries at first point of contact with our Customer Services Team

Key outcomes will be

- Increasing the information available on our customer portal including how to book and track a repair online, and updating tenancy details. Publish our planned investment programme for homes over the next three years and updates on our progress against this.
- Using technology to allow customers to share information about the problem and help diagnose the repair job needed and keep customers updated.
- Enhance our use of data segmentation, research, and analytics to understand when a customer contacts us we know how to offer to adapt our service when additional support is necessary.
- Developing an approach to address barriers to digital inclusion including access, skills, motivation and trust.

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