

## Wellingborough Homes (WH) Customer Scrutiny Panel (CSP) Customer Care and Communications

This review is part of the Scrutiny Programme for 2018 as agreed with the Customer Scrutiny Panel (CSP) and Customer Assembly due to the results of the star survey.

Our belief is that all customers have the right to good customer service and care every time they come into contact with WH. This is where customers will first experience customer care and good communication.

CSP for this report consisted of Nicky Blakey and Sharon Medlin.

(Due to illness and personal circumstances Lucy Moorcroft, Stephen Patis and Derek Underwood have not participated).

The Scrutiny Panel carried out this project between Jan and May 2018

### Scope:

- How Wellingborough Homes (WH) communicates with its customers to keep customers informed of the things that matter to them
- How WH deliver customer care specifically in relation to customer contacts and complaints

### Objective:

The purpose of this scrutiny is to identify ways in which we can improve customer satisfaction particularly in the areas of listening to views and acting on them and keeping customers informed. This information will feed into the formation of a new WH customer offer.

Our recommendations are based desktop research, interviews and internal evidence provided by WH.

### Internal documents:

- WH STAR survey results
- WH Lets talk online survey results
- WH Customer Service Standard
- WH mystery shopping reports & data
- WH complaints and feedback policy and procedure & relating data
- Copies of WH annual report and 'Well Informed' magazines

### External documents and evidence:

- Information provided by East Midlands Tenant Participation Forum
- Desktop research including policies, procedures and website information from PA Housing, Phoenix Community Housing, Grand Union Housing, Home Group, Futures, Clarion, North Star, Soha, BPHA, Orbit, Winchester Housing

Interviews, interactions and focus groups with WH staff and customers:

- Customer focus group (17 Customers attended)
- 51 Customers informally asked views on 'Well Informed'
- 117 Dissatisfied STAR customers contacted
- 50 Dissatisfied STAR customers surveyed
- Visits to WH Customer Service Team to see how they operate
- Interviews with WH Customer Services Manager, Head of Housing and Support Services, Business Improvement Manager
- Customer Service Standard Digital Panel Survey (7 responses)

In order to keep things simple in a wide subject area we decided to answer the determining questions with context and link to our recommendations.

### **1. How does WH currently communicate with customers? What currently works well and what doesn't?**

It is evident from our focus groups, STAR survey results, Mystery Shopping reports and verbal communication with customers and WH staff that the current systems of how WH communicates with its customers is very hit and miss especially when it comes to any follow up to customer enquiries, repairs and complaints.

In our workshops with customers when we asked why customers are dissatisfied with WH all the answers relate to communication and care; keeping customers informed, listening to customers views, poor communication and a feeling of confusion with what WH will do and won't do for its customers.

A selection of comments we received from our focus groups can be seen below:

- When WH say they are going to respond do so in a timely manner
- Website is not clear and you can't find anything
- A system needs to be put into place so we can track communications between customers and WH
- Follow up on complaints
- If WH employees leave make sure somebody takes on the work load
- Customers to be told who their NHO's are
- To make it clear whose responsibility something is: NORSE, WH & Council
- No customers had been asked if their details were correct
- Make the website simple
- Sometimes face to face communication is the only time people ever leave the house
- Take responsibility and individuals held to account

We asked how could WH improve this and most answers were around improving customer care and communication;

When asked what could make you a satisfied customer the replies we received were:

- Keep to appointment times, Keep me in the loop
- Stop falling on empty promises
- More certainty in responses
- Let me know why decisions have been made
- Personal contact from NHO
- A simple phone call
- Stop giving mixed messages
- Improve communication
- Staff could be more customer focussed

It was also felt that WH communications are very corporate at the moment, social media and the customer magazine 'Well Informed' tend to be corporately focussed or about how many homes we are building. We believe that customers views are either not taken into account at all or this is done on a very light touch. From speaking with customers we believe that 'Well Informed' is not currently popular in its present format or content and we have made recommendations that we hope will change this and encourage more customers to read.

## **2. What do our customers want to know about WH, the services we offer and why do they want to know this?**

Customer really want to know about their home and services that affect their home such as repairs and this is evidenced in the results from the 'Let's talk online' survey. Customers also want to know about what's happening in their community and the people who live in it including what's going on in their neighbourhood, benefits advice, training opportunities, information about local deals and discounts and information on charity events.

Examples of customer comments included:

- Repairs information and communication including when a repair goes wrong
- Upgrades to the properties
- Information on rent
- Support, Advice and signposting for customers in hardship and changes to welfare and benefits
- Things happening in their area that may affect their travel to/from work, environmental works in their area e.g. garages are rebuilt or roads dug up
- Fly tipping
- Events that are happening in their area

## **3. How can WH improve its customer communication?**

In order to make WH communications more focussed towards the customer, we would like WH to agree the following:

***Recommendation 1: In all communications to customers WH to consider; how does this impact on individual customers? Concentrate communications on what 'makes a difference' to customers, their homes and communities.***

Customer Involvement is very light touch on communications at the moment. The previous Customer Assembly Chair attended the Communications Panel but left in June 2017. No customers are currently involved in producing, monitoring or evaluating any of WH external communications and messages which is probably the reason why it is not currently customer focussed or very appealing to customers. Based on these findings we have decided to make this the focus of our second recommendation.

***Recommendation 2: Ensure cross sections of customers are able to test communication messages including Well Informed e.g. Develop a diverse customer led communications panel that meets regularly with improved representation from customers and is monitored through the Involvement Framework.***

Also from the data gathered from the 'Let's talk online' survey and STAR our customers want to know about local issues that happen in their communities. We feel WH need to take advantage of existing methods including social media or look to consult customers on new ways of building link with customers and communities building links between themselves on local issues that matter to them.

***Recommendation 3: Explore how to build links between customers and communicate with customers at a local level on things that 'matter to them' using an evidence based approach to what works for other HA's e.g. Yarlington.***

#### **4. How do customers want to receive information and how can WH achieve this within the context of digital transformation and multiple barriers that many customers may have?**

The most up to date information we looked at for this question was the Let's Talk Online Survey from 2017. 112 customers were engaged and out of this cohort:

- 95% said they used the internet daily
- 84% said they accessed the internet using a mobile phone as their preferred method
- On a weekly basis - 89% send & receive emails, 77% read articles, 75% use instant messages, 66% check bank details and 62% post messages on forums or social media

Despite the positive information above we feel that social housing becoming more and more for people with complex needs and disabilities. WH having many customers with additional needs and we know from the 2013 STAR survey results that the largest number of customers who do not access the internet are over 65.

We are happy with the idea of WH moving to a more digital way of working as it will save money and the services are better suited for many customers but we also need

to consider WH older customers and those with additional needs and offer support and tailor services so they are accessible.

***Recommendation 4: Consult customers on changes to website to ensure it is accessible and as customer friendly as possible including for those with additional needs e.g. providing solutions to barrier such as signposting to apps that help with reading for those who are visually impaired***

The training Academy does an excellent job of improving customers digital skills engaging 400 customers over the last 2 years. The community Involvement team are also going out to the Independent Living Skills to provide digital support and engage on access to the internet and internet safety.

Based on verbal communications with customers 'Well informed' is not currently liked by customers, very few people read it or are interested in its corporate content and we do not feel it represents the customers with VFM. It also does not fit with TTOF and the future of where WH wants to be in terms of digital communications.

***Recommendation 5: Pilot 'Well Informed' being digital at the next possible opportunity. Send postcards with link pointing towards online or digital version and offer request only paper copies. Monitor the take up of paper copies and numbers accessing digital 'Well Informed' to inform future issues and communication methods.***

## **5. How does WH perform against its Customer Service Standard? Are there areas for improvement and how can WH achieve this?**

The CI team sent the CS standard to the Digital Panel 9 mixed anonymous responses were received. Questions posed and unfiltered individual comments around the standard are as follows:

What suggestions do you have to make CS standard more useful to WH customers?

The negative individual comments were:

- People do not ring WH any more because of the level of rudeness
- The whole customer standard needs overhauling
- Customer service staff need retraining
- WH fail to meet standards on a regular basis
- Why doesn't it work
- Are the standards being followed by all parties

Positive comments:

- No problems
- The standards are good

All responses from the Digital Panel stated that it was easy to understand it is that WH do not perform well against it.

We then looked at many other HA and council customer communication policies and customer service standards and we feel that WH current documents are not a good example of best practice. We do feel that the CS standard needs reviewing which we will come onto later but after visiting customer service and speaking to staff our main concern is with staff performing against the standard and firstly improving diagnosing and dealing with complaints.

***Recommendation 6: Review, publish and promote complaints policy in simple plain English. Ensure policy takes into account how customers want to be contacted and kept informed. All staff should be trained on new policy.***

We also felt that there was no positive communication to customers around communication or customer care. How will customers know if we do not tell them when we do well? How can we raise the profile of WH communication and customer care?

***Recommendation 7: Promote positive customer service / care and performance against the standard e.g. Mystery Shopping results and CS performance. Promote through a variety of ways including social media and monitor through this involvement framework. We would also like to see WH explore gaining a Customer Service Accreditation?***

Many customers that we spoke to were amazed that they were not given numbers when reporting a repair, ASB or another query and felt that this would greatly improve the customer experience. Many issues are around customers not being kept updated and communicated and were having to chase issues already raised with no reference numbers operatives have to scroll through notes to look at cases.

Orchard is also not being used to its full capacity and we understand it can provide reference numbers. We feel this would also be an opportunity missed if customers were not involved in monitoring this in some way.

***Recommendation 8: Create a measure to monitor contacts where customers are chasing a service and monitor through involvement framework. Use customer reference numbers on all contacts to allow customers and WH to track effectively***

## **6. Which areas of the WH Customer Service Standard should be amended?**

Results from the Digital Panel and through customer focus groups say that the CS standard easy to understand and fit for purpose at present but as we move through TTOF it will need to be revisited. The priority is to get complaints policy and procedure sorted.

***Recommendation 9: Review CS standard when new technology is being used e.g. when live web chat or customer portal is launched allow longer time to answer phones. We would like the existing CS standard to be made more visible on the website and promoted more so customers know what it is and understand how it works? Promote through staff at walkabouts and Thompson Court and through social media.***

***Recommendation 10: Add 'Can you please provide me with your preferred contact details' to the professional standards and ensure we are collecting up to date circumstance information on customers on a regular basis and contact customers accordingly . Use social media to ask customers; 'Have you updated your details recently? Let us know what the best way to contact you is?'***

Scott Fitzsimmons Chair of the Customer Assembly has made the following comments:

Over the last year the Customer Assembly have been monitoring the performance of Wellingborough Homes and two of the areas we felt needed addressing were; Customer Complaints and satisfaction with complaints handling were we feel there have been issues in performance which have not been addressed.

CA has also looked at and monitored progress against Mystery Shopping reports and although we have seen an improvement in customer care from the beginning of the year we still feel that WH needs to be more customer focused in their approach and the CSP recommendations will be a big help in achieving this. It will also encourage more customers to become involved with WH involvement which is another benefit.

The CA believes that all customers have the right to good customer service and care every time they come into contact with WH.

We believe Customers should be at the heart of WH communication because it will improve the relationships and trust between the Customer, WH and WH Staff.

The CA would also like to thank Sharon Medlin and Nikki Blakey for their hard work in this recent Scrutiny project and report.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> April 2018 the recommendations of this report were agreed unanimously by the CA.

***We have also been informed that Dave Lockerman and Nikki Glazebrook have discussed the draft report with Sophie Rogers and she has accepted and responded to the recommendations.***