

# Delivering Excellence in Housing Customer Services

## Developing Communication and Engagement Tools to Improve Customer Experience

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## To Cover

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- Developing strategies to deliver **customer service** through a **growing number of channels**
- Advice for housing providers on **building a customer service advisory group**
- Training staff to **support vulnerable tenants**: key tips and advice

## Setting the scene. This has always been important, but why so much more now?

- **Statutory Consultation** requirements dating back to the 1980 Housing Act (into 1985 Housing Act as 'Principal Act' for Secure Tenancies)
- **CCT** – Mid 1990s
- Concept of the **customer** and **Customer Care** – Mid 1990s onward
- **Tenant Participation Compacts** – late 1990s
- **Best Value** – late 1990s/2000s

So, nothing new, but . . .

# Now

- **Post Grenfell**
- *Listening*
- *Respect*
- **Complaints** – including strengthened role of the Housing Ombudsman
- **Safety** – including Resident Engagement
- **Decent Homes Plus**
- Return of **Consumer Regulation**

# Overcoming the common barriers to communicating with tenants

- **Contacting tenants and getting a response** – the solution? **Multiple lines of communication** (Welles, 2020). For example, might include telephone calls, email, text Apps (such as WhatsApp), social media bulletins, or traditional post.
- **Language barriers** can also be an issue with for tenants who speak English as a second language (Youde, 2020) – the solution? Free **translation services** to better communicate with tenants and use jargon-free English (West Dunbartonshire Council, 2014). Examples might include *Google Translate* or dedicated translation Apps, or a telephone translation service.
- **Facilitating tenant engagement** can also be problematic – the solution? Foster commitment to tenant engagement across the **whole organisation** and have a clear strategy (Local Government Association, n.d.)

# Developing strategies to deliver customer service through a growing number of channels

- **Digital technologies** through which customer service can be provided, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Somani, 2020)
- **Social media platforms** such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, but this is **not appropriate for all tenants**, multiple channels must be used, so all tenants have a viable communication option
- **Internet-based telecommunications** systems such as *FaceTime* or *WhatsApp*, but some **tenants might not have access** or the skills to use such technologies — and so other means of communication are required.
- **Telephone calls** - Contacting customer services should be as easy as possible for all tenants. Multiple options for doing this for everyone. Important for tenants to understand what **communication options are available**, so that they can make contact easily as and when required.

# Advice for housing providers on building a customer service advisory group

- **Creating a customer service advisory group** help to empower residents and get more involved in strategic and day-to-day housing matters (George, 2020). Tenants are best positioned to know what is best
- Such groups can help to gain trust from residents, and customer satisfaction can be measured via e.g. surveys (Nurse, 2019). **In person and online**, depending upon the user and the demographic
- **Social media** can also again be utilised in order to create such advisory groups, and during COVID-19 lockdowns, video conferencing applications such as *Google Meet* or *FaceTime* was used to conduct meetings
- Such a group can be made up of both professionals and housing residents, who can **represent the needs of the residents**. Provides a useful mix of professionals combined with those with experience of living on the estate in question — thus providing both experience and knowledge

# Training staff to support vulnerable tenants: key tips and advice

- It is important to provide **additional support for tenants who have vulnerabilities**, (Almond Housing Association, 2017). There may be a disproportionate number of **physical and mental health issues, along with financial difficulties**
- Smirl (2017) states that: *“Vulnerable populations are considered to be those who have multiple barriers to achieving or maintaining housing due to challenges such as poverty, health and mental health issues, trauma, newcomer settlement challenges, and disability, amongst others”* (p. 1). It is therefore important to make sure that **staff are aware** of such definitions, so that they can identify vulnerable people, and take **appropriate steps** to help them

# Training staff to support vulnerable tenants: key tips and advice

- Training staff to support vulnerable tenants is therefore of paramount importance, so that they can both **identify and react**, and provide solutions. Such training needs to be **on-going**.
- **Supporting vulnerable tenants** has been a particular challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic. Face-to-face meetings had to be closed down, and other forms of support needed to be provided (Glen Oaks Housing Association, n.d.). As such, support staff need to be increasingly flexible in their approaches, as many tenants might also **feel isolated** and suffer from increasing mental health problems.
- Non-face-to-face support for vulnerable tenants include phone calls to check on the welfare of tenants, making **referrals to support agencies**, organising meal delivery services (Glen Oaks Housing Association, n.d.). People might otherwise be left extremely isolated and vulnerable.
- Frontline staff should have **training to identify** any potential mental health issues so that they can make referrals to relevant healthcare professionals, who have the knowledge and skills necessary to work sensitively with people with mental health conditions (Community Housing Cymru, 2016).

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