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CUSTOMER SERVICES POLICY

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Introduction

Longhurst Group is committed to providing high quality, responsive and flexible services that meet the needs of our customers, and which have excellent customer service at their core.

We define excellent customer service as being *responsive, providing clear and regular updates, taking ownership and treating people as individuals by recognising their needs*.

Longhurst Group believes that creating a customer centric culture is fundamental to delivering high quality customer experiences. We believe this is the responsibility of every colleague across Longhurst Group and we will work together to achieve this important goal.

This policy covers anyone who contacts us or uses our services. Examples include general needs customers, care and support (resident), care and support (non-resident), leaseholders (retirement living and general), shared owners, homeowners, as well as prospective customers.

PART TWO

Policy

Intent

At Longhurst Group our aim is to deliver high quality customer-focused services to our customers. Our aspiration is to offer the best services and homes possible. For Longhurst Group it's about the way we create relationships with our customers and improve lives.

Principles

Legislation and Regulations: The following legislation and regulations affect our approach to customer services:

The Regulatory Consumer Standards place obligations on registered housing providers in relation to customer services. In particular the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment standard requires us to provide choices, information and communication appropriate to the diverse needs of our customers; have a clear, simple and accessible approach to complaints; understand and respond to our customers' needs; treat our customers with fairness and respect; and work with tenants to establish service standards and local offers for service delivery.

The White Paper published in November 2020 sets out a desire to instil a customer services culture within social housing, whilst highlighting that customer experience remains an area for improvement. It also considered the relationship between customers and landlords to ensure issues are resolved promptly and fairly and voices are heard.

The White paper is introducing a new charter for social housing residents which sets out what every social housing resident should be able to expect. This will be backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved customer standards for social housing tenants.

Alongside this the Together with Tenants Charter sets out what customers can and should expect from their landlord. The Charter commitments are (1) *relationships* – landlords will treat all customers with respect in all of their interactions (2) *communication* – customers will receive clear, accessible and timely information on the issues that matter to them (3) *voice and influence* – to seek the views and use this feedback to inform decisions (4) *accountability* – customers to independently scrutinise and hold their landlord to account (5) *quality* – customers can expect their homes to be good quality, well maintained, safe and well managed (6) *when things go wrong* – simple and accessible routes for making complaints and seeking redress.

Scope

This policy covers anyone who contacts us or uses our services. Across Longhurst Group we provide homes and a wide range of services to a diverse customer base across a dispersed geographical area. Examples include general needs customers, care and support (resident), care and support (non-resident), leaseholders (retirement living and general), shared owners, homeowners, as well as prospective customers.

Policy Details

Access to Services

We will take steps to ensure services are accessible and take account of customers' preferences, needs and circumstances. We will continually seek ways to broaden the current methods by which customers contact us, including new technologies that are available, to enhance the customer experience.

Where customers have special requirements, we will make suitable arrangements. For clarification, special requirements may be measures that result from a protected characteristic under equality legislation (such as a person who needs information in large print or different language) or may result from some other factor (such as a person who needs an appointment outside of school collection times).

Our Guiding Principles

Our guiding principles put customer service at the heart of Longhurst Group. These principles strongly support our Improving Lives 2025 strategy.

- Colleagues will deliver a first-class customer service
- We will ensure colleagues are provided with the tools, training and technology they need to ensure they can give their best every day
- We will offer choice to customers so they can contact us in ways they prefer and always aim to resolve customer contact at the first point
- We will make our digital services easy to use so they become the channel of choice
- We will embrace equality and diversity and make sure our services are accessible to everyone and all viewpoints are considered
- We will make sure every customer contact counts to help improve our customers' lives
- We will continue to develop our insight so we have a clear understanding of our existing and future customers so the right services can be delivered
- We will engage with our customers and use their feedback to improve and shape our services and future direction

Service Standards

Our Customer Charter sets achievable and measurable service standards to ensure consistency and customer care excellence across Longhurst Group.

This includes services provided by Longhurst Group and our main contractors.

We will work with our partner contractors to ensure their service standards reflect those set within our Customer Charter, so customers receive the same level of service provision.

Our trained customer mystery shoppers will test our service delivery and behaviours and report back their findings.

Our service standards will be accessible to customers and will be reviewed every 2 years, or sooner, if there are significant changes in service delivery. We will engage with customers and gain all viewpoints as part of the review process.

We will also develop systems for monitoring our performance against these standards and publish our performance.

Communication

We understand regular communication is a priority for customers. We believe communication creates better relationships, builds confidence, prevents and resolves problems and increases engagement. We will communicate with our customers in a variety of way to ensure that everyone is able to access information and is kept informed. We will reinforce the importance of communication as part of our customer centric culture.

We will work with individuals requesting information in another format, discussing their specific needs to enable us to assist in the most appropriate way (which may include large print, interpreter etc.).

Customer Insight

Customer insight can inform all aspects of service delivery, whether it is driving or informing strategic planning or day to day performance, with the overall aim of increasing positive outcomes for customers and improving value for money. Insight puts customers at the heart of service delivery, helping to understand who our customers are, what they do, what their aspirations are and what motivates their behaviour.

We will improve our customer insight by continually monitoring and updating the quality of our customer data and providing training for colleagues on good quality record keeping.

Continuous Improvement

We are committed to improving the services we provide to customers. We will:

- ensure customers are aware of our complaints service and use feedback to identify service improvements
- engage with customers and ensure all viewpoints are considered
- routinely collect feedback on our service delivery and carry out customer perception surveys
- set targets and publish performance; including how we have used feedback to improve our services
- compare our performance and learn from high performing organisations
- update our customer profiling information (customer golden record)

- encourage customer scrutiny in our service delivery

Respect for Colleagues

We treat our customers with respect and expect our customers to extend the same courtesy to our team. We do not accept abusive language or behaviour towards members of our team and will take appropriate action on the rare occasions where this occurs. There is a separate managing unacceptable actions procedure for colleagues and contractors to follow.

Training, Learning and Development

We will ensure that all colleagues are aware of this policy and will provide mandatory training to ensure all colleagues have the skills and knowledge to provide customers with a high-quality service. We recognise that personal learning and development is ongoing and needs to incorporate the changing environment we work in.

We will work closely with our contractors to make sure high-quality customer care training is delivered.

We will offer involved customers training opportunities to ensure they are equipped with the skills and expertise to monitor performance and targets set within our customer services policy.

Equality and Diversity

All colleagues will comply with our equality, diversity and inclusion policy in all aspects of their work.

This policy provides an approach to customer services that takes into account our diverse customer base. We will continue to encourage diversity in our engagement work to make sure we gain broader feedback and consider all viewpoints.

We will provide assistance to customers who required additional support and assistance to access our services. We have put measures in place to overcome any barriers that customers may have.

Roles and Responsibilities

Strategic responsibility for customer services is held by Executive Director of Housing and the Head of Customer Services. Although, we recognise this is an organisational wide policy.

Operational responsibility for customer services is held by the Leadership team.

All colleagues are responsible for providing high quality services to customers so joint working across Longhurst Group is key our success.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Review

Performance reports will be discussed at relevant key strategic and operational forums within Longhurst Group and with our Customer Forum.

Success will be measured via key performance indicators, some examples include:

- customer satisfaction levels
- our overall service
- how easy we are to deal with
- how we listen and act upon feedback
- complaints handling and outcome

We will also regularly monitor customer satisfaction for each key transaction.

There is an extensive suite of performance indicators for our complaints handling service. This is detailed within our complaints policy.

Other key performance indicators include:

- % of first-time resolution
- % of customer interactions (on-line and off-line)
- % of service standards meeting our set targets
- % of call handling indicators meeting our set targets

An update report on customer services (including customer satisfaction) will be provided to the Group Board every three months.

An annual impact report will be produced detailing the outcomes and outputs from our customer engagement work. This will be presented to our Customer Forum.

Quarterly reports will be published highlighting customer satisfaction feedback and examples of how we've used this feedback (including complaints) to aid service improvement. This information will be published on our website and customer magazine.

In addition, performance is also reviewed:

- At Group Board
- By the Directors Group and Leadership team (Housing Directorate)
- At relevant contractor meetings
- At the Customer Forum meetings

This policy will be reviewed three yearly incorporating colleague and customer feedback. In addition, it will be reviewed:

- Following information suggesting that the policy is not effective, or
- Following the introduction of relevant new legislation, regulations or guidance.

PART THREE

Appendices

- A. Policy Approval Control
- B. Policy Development Plan