

Report to the Board

24 March 2016



Title: Customer Service Excellence

Report of: Managing Director

Purpose of Report

1. To provide the committee with an update on the recent Customer Service Excellence annual review.

Background

2. Customer Service Excellence (CSE) is a standard which was introduced by the Government in order to ensure that services are efficient, effective, excellent, equitable and empowering. Fundamentally they expect organisations to put customers at the heart of service provision.
3. The company was most recently accredited with the CSE Standard in January 2015, and is subject to further visits for the following 2 years to ensure that we continue to maintain this standard. In our most recent assessment the company was found to be fully compliant in all areas and Compliance Plus in 5 elements.
4. The annual review assessment was carried out in January 2016 which resulted in the company achieving continued accreditation. The company continues to be fully compliant in all areas and has become compliance plus in a further 2 elements to bring out compliance plus areas up to 7, which makes us one of the most customer focused organisations in the country.

Summary

Assessment process

5. The assessment was carried out as a one day onsite visit by the assessor. A range of employees and customers were interviewed on the day and supporting evidence provided as requested.

Outcome of the assessment

6. The company was assessed as meeting the standard in all areas of the assessment. In particular, seven areas were highlighted as positive practice (compliance plus), two more than in the original assessment.

7. The assessor highlighted in the report that the achievement of the standard and the continued compliance drives learning and sends clear messages to both current and potential customers that the Gateshead Housing Company has a strong desire to achieve results and provides excellent services.
8. A copy of the report is attached at the Appendix to this report.
9. The particular areas of strength (compliance plus) highlighted were:

Customer insight

- The assessor found that we have an excellent insight into our customers and potential customers and have used these insights effectively to understand their needs.
- Our customers are profiled using a range of measures and data is analysed to consider the needs of specific subsets.
- We use this information to selectively target and support individuals to ensure they are able to sustain their tenancies.

Information and access

- Testimony from customers suggests that our employees are well respected, highly knowledgeable and very customer focused.
- Our work with partners and interactions with the wider community is a particular strength as we work with a number of organisations and community groups to improve the area of Gateshead. For example partnership arrangements with Mears result in the delivery of coordinated services to the benefit of customers, and the 'Hoops for Health' initiative provides a healthy living programme with professional sporting role models.
- We support our tenant volunteers in forming networking groups who contribute to improve the wider community.

Areas for Continuous Improvement

10. The report highlights a number of successful areas that could be built on to further enhance services:
 - Build on the work of the Service Improvement Groups to provide further opportunities for customers to influence future decisions.
 - Use real case studies to demonstrate more widely the highly effective partnership working that benefits customers.
 - Publish and promote more widely to stakeholders the service improvements arising from complaints and compliments.

Next Steps

11. This assessment visit is part of a three -year cycle to maintain the standard. The next steps are:
 - **2017** – Next annual review. Light-touch assessment to look at any changes in the company and check on any areas of partial compliance
 - **2018** – Full reassessment.

Link to values

12. This report links to the Company values of being: -

- Customer Focused
- Accountable
- Inclusive and Valuing diversity
- Passionate about what we do

Impact on tenants

13. The aim of maintaining the company's accreditation of CSE is to ensure that we continue to provide excellent customer service to our tenants and leaseholders. The criteria within the assessment provide a clear framework for ensuring that we continue to provide timely and effective services.

Risk Management Implications

14. Failure to focus on the customer has been identified as a strategic risk for the company. Maintaining Customer Service Excellence accreditation and committing to the framework associated with this ensures that we continue to work to ensure we provide good quality, timely services.

Financial Implications

15. The Head of Corporate Services confirms a budget to meet the cost of the ongoing assessment process for Customer Service Excellence. Any other costs arising during this process would be reported back to this committee.

Equality and Diversity Implications

16. The first criteria of the framework is Customer Insight and expects organisations to have an understanding of who their customers are to be able to demonstrate that the services being provided meet their needs. This is part of our overall approach to collecting and reporting profile information.

Value for Money Implications

17. There are no direct value for money implications arising from this report.

Health Implications

18. There are no direct health implications arising from this report.

Environmental Implications

19. There are no direct environmental implications arising from this report.

Consultation carried out

20. Working groups of employees, tenants and leaseholders supported the company through the assessment process.

Recommendation

21. The Board is asked to note the outcome of the Customer Service Excellence accreditation visit.

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EXCELLENCE**



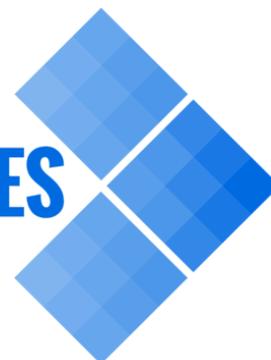
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Organisation / Service Assessed: Gateshead Housing Company

Prepared by Registered Assessor: Rob Mottram

Report Type: Annual Review – Year 1

ASSESSMENT SERVICES
WE CARE... WE ASSESS... WE ADD VALUE



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1. Key Information

Assessor Name	ROB MOTTRAM
Assessment Type	ANNUAL REVIEW YEAR 1
Project Number	PN101512
Client ID	C16207
Visit Date	22 ND JANUARY 2016

2. Introduction and Background

Acknowledgement needs to be given to the staff involved in the process for their high level of professionalism and commitment to providing the evidence required and overview for this assessment and previous assessments.

The application for continuous accreditation to the Customer Service Excellence standard is supported at the highest level of the organization where senior managers remain committed to providing the highest possible customer service, with staff teams acting as excellent ambassadors for Customer Service. During the assessment it was clear that there continues to be a considerable commitment to the standard and a strong desire to continually improve practice, leading to improved journeys for customers of the service. Senior managers see the Customer Service Excellence standard as being embedded in practice and the overall approach taken by the service, ensuring high quality service is provided to customers, a commitment to consistency and as a driver of continuous improvement. The achievement of the standard and the continued compliance drives learning and sends clear messages to both current and potential customers that the Gateshead Housing Company has a strong desire to achieve results and give a better service. Customer satisfactions levels are very high with the Gateshead Housing Company and that the organisation strives to involve customers in the development and design of services. This was evidenced during the assessment and in the verbal feedback provided to the assessor by customers whilst on site.

Following completion of the assessment, brief feedback was provided to the service, in its continued compliance against all elements of the Customer Service Excellence criteria and that the Assessor would make a positive recommendation to Assessment Services Ltd. A number of customers & partners were spoken to during the assessment and they were positive about the high quality service they receive, the knowledge of the staff which they deal with; the speed of responses received following queries being raised and the staff employed within the department being highly customer focused.

3. Methodology

Discussions were held between the CSE assessor and the assessment co-ordinator for Gateshead Housing Company prior to the on-site assessment and details of the people to be seen on the assessment visit were also agreed.

The on-site assessment visit took place on the 22nd January 2016. The assessment started with the Assessor meeting the Managing Director, Customer Support Manager and the Head of Customer Services. The assessment included a review of key documents, discussions with customers, front line delivery staff and managers.

4. Summary of Strengths

A number of strengths were identified during the Assessment. These are detailed below.

- Gateshead Housing have an excellent insight into their customers and potential customers and have used these insights effectively to understand their needs. Customers are profiled using a range of measures and data is analysed to consider the needs of specific subsets. For example using this profiling method they have recognised that young people and people with black and minority ethnic (BME) heritage are more likely to fall into rent arrears. This information is then used to selectively target and support these individuals to ensure they are able to sustain their tenancies. In addition Gateshead Housing have made concerted efforts to reach disadvantaged groups and run a series of Service Improvement Groups (SIGs) as well as forums to consider the needs of BME customers and customers with disabilities. (1.1.1, 1.1.2 & 1.1.3)
- Very positive feedback from a range of customers supported by the service. Testimony from customer suggests that staff employed by the service are well respected, highly knowledgeable and very customer focused. (3.2.1)
- Working with partners and interactions with the wider community is a particular strength, Gateshead Housing work with a number of organisations and community groups to improve the area of Gateshead. For example partnership arrangements with Mears result in the delivery of coordinated services to the benefit of customers and the 'Hoops for Health' initiative. The organisation has supported its tenant volunteers in forming networking groups who contribute to improve the wider community. (3.4.1, 3.4.2 & 3.4.3)

5. Areas for Continuous Improvement

A number of areas for continuous improvement were identified during the assessment that could enhance the service delivered. These are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the Customer Service Excellence Standard

- Consider how best to further develop and refresh the work of the Service Improvement Groups to ensure that all customers feel that they have appropriate ability to contribute to get involved in future housing decisions and ensure that more customers feel happy that their views are taken into account (1.2.3)
- Consider the benefit of increasing the use of case studies to better demonstrate the highly effective partnership working which is resulting in the development of the holistic needs of the customers it serves. (3.4.1, 3.4.2 & 3.4.3)
- Consider ensuring that complaints, compliments and comments are published and promoted externally to stakeholders, this may be in the form of an annual report and should focus on the service improvements made as a result of the complaints received (4.3.4)

6. Assessor's Findings

6.1 Criterion 1 – Customer Insight

Gateshead Housing continues to monitor the characteristics of their customers and over time have developed a clear understanding of the customer groups that they serve. Gateshead Housing use insight gathered from their very active customer forums, which are used increasingly well to identify and support any underrepresented groups, including Gay, Lesbian, Bi Sexual and Transgender tenants. They make efforts to reach out to these individuals and ensure that the facilities they provide are accessible to all. In addition, they continue to encourage tenant volunteers run estate tours and involve these groups in the strategic decision making activities. Strategies for engagement are regularly reviewed and adapted as appropriate, tenants holistic needs are addressed by Advice & Support Officers who deal with tenants wider needs, such as dealing with debt and improving their employment prospects. Staff of Gateshead Housing are seen as proactive, forthcoming and personable. Staff of the service discuss with customers how to improve services; and they act upon the suggestions made, for example by using the Service Improvement Groups to gain specific insight on customer needs. A clear commitment and route way to implement changes remains in place and any policy changes are discussed with a range of stakeholders.

Formal customer satisfaction continues to be measured effectively and is measured through both quantitative and qualitative methods; for example following repairs satisfaction levels are gathered on operatives handheld devices or via a phone call. These types of survey continue to include appropriate questions regarding timeliness and quality of service delivered. There are relevant and stretching performance indicators and targets for customer satisfaction levels, which continue to be met and exceeded. These are disseminated to interested parties through several routes: formal reports, via the company's website and via the Service Improvement Groups. Since the last assessment findings from these satisfaction audits have been used to implement positive changes to the entire compliments, comments and complaints process to better meet customer need.

You are fully compliant in this criterion.

Compliance Plus

During the previous year's assessment criterion 1.1.1, 1.1.2 & 1.1.3 were judged to be at compliance plus level. Evidence provided at this assessment continues to support these areas as being Compliance Plus.

6.2 Criterion 2 – The Culture of the Organisation.

There is clear and strong corporate commitment to customer service throughout the organisation. A bespoke mission statement for the Company clearly states its aim; *'to provide quality homes and customer-focused services in Gateshead,'* supported by a clear mission statement *'to be successful in the provision of quality homes and customer-focused services we must work effectively in partnership and invest in our employees'* both the mission and aim are complimented by a clear set of values which are well understood by staff. Leaders drive this aim and managers act as positive role models, promote high standards and insist on high quality outputs for the customers they serve. Clear policies, processes and procedures are in place across the service, many of which are published on the website, which is seen as excellent practice, these documents are effective in supporting the right of the tenants to expect excellent customer service and a service which meets their needs.

Staff feel trusted by the organisation and empowered to promote excellent customer service, reporting a strong commitment to customer service from the senior leader of the organisation, with senior managers promoting an increased focus on supporting tenants holistic needs and working

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together with complementary services with both internal staff and those from outside the authority who provide support to customers, for example by developing links with Stonewall, Citizens Advice Bureau, North East Credit Union and the Illegal Money Lending Team. Staff feel continuous personal development opportunities are good, they are encouraged to participate in additional training in areas such as Equality & Diversity and Safeguarding. Team meetings allow for opportunities to focus on service improvements.

You are fully compliant in this criterion.

6.3 Criterion 3 – Information and Access

Information on the services provided are delivered through the corporate website, hard copy brochures and leaflets are also available. Social media is being used increasingly well by Gateshead Housing to communicate with its customers. Where charges are to be made these charges are communicated to customers in advance of the charge being made and where appropriate the customer understanding of this charge is checked. A range of useful guides written in clear English describe processes and promote for example the range of payment methods available, which includes direct debit, in person at post offices, payment offices, by phone, debit card, PayPoint, post and by salary deduction.

Significant work is being undertaken with customers to raise their awareness of how to save money by changing energy providers and a dedicated energy advisor is made available to customers to support this. Payment facilities now include an on-line 'click and pay' system. A wide range of policies and procedures are in place and available on-line, information viewed as part of the assessment was accurate and complete. Interpreters and translators are provided where appropriate, for example telephone callers can access language line where English is not their first language. Partnership working within Gateshead Housing is very strong and a range of examples were given as examples during the assessment, including the 'Hoops for Health' scheme which provides a healthy living programme with professional sporting role models, using basketball as an activity to convey a range of positive health message to young people in primary schools, including the importance of keeping physically active and eating healthy. The strong and positive relationship with Gateshead Housing Companies maintenance and repair partner Mears also benefits customers, with a 98% rate of jobs completed on time and a 95.5% achievement of 2 hour appointment slot against a target of 93%.

You are fully compliant in this criterion.

Compliance Plus

During the previous year's assessment criterion 3.2.1 & 3.4.3 were judged to be at compliance plus level. Evidence provided at this assessment continues to support these areas as being Compliance Plus, however added compliance plus has been achieved in 3.4.1 & 3.4.2 due to the significance of the work achieved by Gateshead Housings' repairs partner Mears who ensure that customers receive seamless support, in a timely manner, right first time and the quality of the work carried out is good under this arrangement.

5.4 Criterion 4 – Delivery

As at the time of the last assessment Gateshead Housing Companies performance and service standards are agreed with customers, developed and set to be challenging, and use the HouseMark Benchmarking Scheme. Other service standards have been devised in consultation with customers via the active customer forums which are used well by Gateshead Housing. These relate to aspects such as speed of responses to phone calls, general levels of service expected, including dealing with customers in a polite and helpful way. As at the last assessment performance against service delivery is presented to quarterly to the board with a RAG rating

system used to indicate against each measure. This performance data is also shared via paper based publications, such as the annual report which is distributed to customers.

Service standards are agreed at the outset of activity undertaken and promoted via the website, over time, the service has become adept at meeting these standards, managers expectations are high and standards whilst are mostly achieved consistently are stretching.

Customer Satisfaction shows the following;

- 88.5% of customers were happy with the overall services offered by the company (the company's target was 85.5%)
- 88.7% of customers were happy with the standard of their home (target was 85%)
- 86.9% of customers are happy with the neighbourhood they live in (target was 86.8%)
- 85.2% of customers see their rent and service charges as good value for money (target was 85%)
- 69.8% of customers were satisfied with the opportunities to get involved in future housing decisions (target was 73%)
- 68.3% of customers are happy that their views are taken into account (target was 74%).

Where satisfaction levels are below the targets set by Gateshead Housing, the organization have identified ways to improve these levels, such as refreshing the Service Improvement Groups.

Since the last assessment a new complaints procedure has been introduced which provides Gateshead Housing with a more robust approach to complaints management and resolution. A complaints scrutiny framework provides a very useful method of ensuring that complaints are systematically investigated, reviewed and responded to in an appropriate manner. This framework also logs the service improvements that have resulted following the complaint. Whilst this framework is very new, its innovation and robustness will be looked at during next years assessment in detail to understand if it is sufficient to result in a compliance plus area in criterion 4.3. There remains a complaint scrutiny panel which was refreshed in 2015 to ensure it was fit for purpose and includes customers which ensure that the complaints process is working effectively. All complaints which are upheld are checked to ensure the customer is satisfied.

You are fully compliant in this criterion.

6.5 Criterion 5 – Timeliness and Quality of Service

There are set and appropriate measurable standards for the timeliness of response for all forms of customer contact, these are set out on both the website and cover the main services, titled 'the service you can expect' – an example of the detail is shown below for the area of HomeRepairs, which includes timescales to complete repairs.

We will:

- Aim to complete repairs within timescales
- Ask customers if they were satisfied with the HomeRepairs service
- Aim to offer you an appointment for all urgent and routine repairs at a time that is convenient to you
- Ask if you are satisfied with the small tasks service received.

We will:

- Measure the number of repairs that are completed within timescale
- Conduct a HomeRepairs service satisfaction survey with randomly selected customers
- Monitor repair appointments to ensure they have been made and kept
- Conduct a Small Task satisfaction survey with all customers receiving the service.

Monitoring of performance against standards for timeliness and quality of customer service continues and is reported to the board and to external stakeholders via the website. Considerable efforts continue to be made to deal with customer at the first point of contact, whether that be by staff who utilise newly launched i-pads to deal with queries on a face to face basis or by telephone. It should be noted that at the time of assessment telephone queries were taking longer to answer due to staff shortages and therefore it is advised that this area is remedied as soon as practically possible to ensure that this doesn't adversely effect your overall strong performance in this area. Benchmarking against comparator organization takes place annually where the performance in relation to timeliness and quality of service compares well with that of similar organisations, a number of key areas where performance is measured is detailed below :

- Making 99.45% appointments and, of these appointments, we are keeping 96.31%.
- We aim to complete a repair within specific timescales – Gateshead Housing achieved this 98.04% of the time.
- 99.96% of appliances have received an annual gas service, securing the safety of residents and the local community.
- 87.80% of leasehold service charges were collected as a percentage of charges due to be collected. 86.47% of major-works charges were also collected.
- It is Gateshead Housing Companies aim to resolve antisocial behaviour cases without the need for legal action – this was done for 94.3% of cases reported.
- Aim to keep rent loss in empty homes to a minimum, and for April to January 2016 Gateshead Housing Company achieved the target set, with rent loss at 2.21%.

You are fully compliant in this criterion.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

Following this visit I can confirm that you continue to meet the requirements to maintain Customer Service Excellence Standard Certification. I can confirm the next annual monitoring check will be carried out twelve months from the date of this visit. If you feel you would benefit from an assessment before this date, please contact either myself and/or Assessment Services Limited on 0845 304 8600.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your kind hospitality and cooperation during this assessment.

Name: Rob Mottram

Date: 6th February 2016

Registered CSE Assessor for Assessment Services Ltd

8. Compliance Against the Customer Service Excellence Standard

Criterion	Sub Criterion	Element	Non Compliant	Partial Compliance	Compliant	Compliance Plus	
1	1.1	1.1.1				✓	
		1.1.2				✓	
		1.1.3				✓	
	1.2	1.2.1				✓	
		1.2.2				✓	
		1.2.3				✓	
	1.3	1.3.1				✓	
		1.3.2				✓	
		1.3.3				✓	
		1.3.4				✓	
		1.3.5				✓	

Criterion	Sub Criterion	Element	Non Compliant	Partial Compliance	Compliant	Compliance Plus	
2	2.1	2.1.1			✓		
		2.1.2			✓		
		2.1.3			✓		
		2.1.4			✓		
		2.1.5			✓		
		2.1.6			✓		
	2.2	2.2.1				✓	
		2.2.2				✓	
		2.2.3				✓	
		2.2.4				✓	
		2.2.5				✓	

Criterion	Sub Criterion	Element	Non Compliant	Partial Compliance	Compliant	Compliance Plus	
3	3.1	3.1.1			✓		
		3.1.2			✓		
	3.2	3.2.1					✓
		3.2.2				✓	
		3.2.3				✓	
		3.2.4				✓	
	3.3	3.3.1				✓	
		3.3.2				✓	
		3.3.3				✓	
	3.4	3.4.1					✓
		3.4.2					✓
		3.4.3					✓

Criterion	Sub Criterion	Element	Non Compliant	Partial Compliance	Compliant	Compliance Plus	
4	4.1	4.1.1			✓		
		4.1.2			✓		
		4.1.3			✓		
	4.2	4.2.1				✓	
		4.2.2				✓	
		4.2.3				✓	

		4.2.4			✓	
	4.3	4.3.1			✓	
		4.3.2			✓	
		4.3.3			✓	
		4.3.4			✓	
		4.3.5			✓	
		4.3.6			✓	

Criterion	Sub Criterion	Element	Non Compliant	Partial Compliance	Compliant	Compliance Plus
5	5.1	5.1.1			✓	
		5.1.2			✓	
	5.2	5.2.1			✓	
		5.2.2			✓	
		5.2.3			✓	
		5.2.4			✓	
		5.2.5			✓	
	5.3	5.3.1			✓	
		5.3.2			✓	
		5.3.3			✓	