

Customer Care Standards

Revised May 2006

***CUSTOMER CARE IS THE
FOUNDATION UPON WHICH OUR
SERVICES ARE BASED!***

***OUR CUSTOMERS ARE THE PEOPLE
WHO ELECT OUR MEMBERS AND PAY
OUR WAGES***

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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS CUSTOMER CARE

Customer Care is much more than a document. It is a way of working, a way of thinking and a way of developing our organisation to meet the needs and expectations of our customers. It is a combination of:

- ❖ The way we treat our customers
- ❖ The systems and procedures we have in place to allow us to deal with our customers
- ❖ The standards of conduct and behaviour expected of our staff in dealing with our customers
- ❖ Our pledge to listen to our customers and learn from their comments

CORPORATE AIMS

The Council actively promotes a positive attitude towards customer care to ensure that all customers are treated in a friendly and courteous manner, and are dealt with promptly and effectively with due regard to their personal dignity.

The Council aims to ensure that all written communication and forms are clear, concise, simple to understand, jargon-free and available in alternative languages, larger print and Braille if required

The Council will invest in any necessary staff training, to ensure the skills needed to provide quality services are maintained and constantly improved. The Council will also continue to develop programmes to obtain quality accreditation by nationally recognised awarding bodies.

The Council aims to deal efficiently and objectively with all complaints where customers feel they have not been provided with the level of quality and care expected. To this end, the Council has a Complaints Procedure which is reviewed every two years and revised accordingly. Staff are given specific training in relation to the complaints procedure.

The Council aims to provide its services fairly and consistently ensuring that all citizens are treated equally and have equal access to Council services. To this end, the Council also has an Equal Opportunities Policy on which all employees are given training.

TARGETS AND PRIORITIES

The Council works towards the attainment of a number of targets regarding customer care, indeed some Services have particular and demanding challenges to meet. To publish these standards in full in this handbook would be impractical; however they are available for inspection on the Council's website or from the relevant Section. As with other Council documents, these will be made available in other languages or formats such as Audio, Braille or large print if required.

Regulated Targets

These are targets imposed upon us by external bodies which a particular Service is required to meet. They are reviewed on a regular basis by the appropriate Regulating Authorities and published for comparison purposes.

Enhanced Targets

These are targets set by ourselves in order to enhance our levels of customer support. The targets we set ourselves are often more challenging than those set out by Regulating Authorities.

PART TWO

CORPORATE STANDARDS

CONDUCT AND BEHAVIOUR – Guidelines for Staff

Staff should ALWAYS

- ❖ Be prepared to address any customer requirements with regard to age, religion, race, gender, disability or sexual orientation
- ❖ Be tidily and suitably dressed and wear designated council uniforms where required
- ❖ Carry and display proof of identity
- ❖ Introduce themselves to customers stating their name and job clearly
- ❖ Treat customers and their homes with and respect and dignity
- ❖ Be friendly, helpful, patient, understanding and sensitive when dealing with customers
- ❖ Deal with customers promptly
- ❖ adopt a non-judgmental attitude
- ❖ Behave in a proper and professional manner and carry out duties in such a way as to ensure the Health and Safety of staff and customers
- ❖ Stay calm in a potentially violent situation. Withdraw and call on the assistance of a supervisor or other officers if necessary

Staff should NEVER

- ❖ Use bad language at any time
- ❖ Use customers' facilities without the permission of the customer
- ❖ Forget that customers can tell if you don't care
- ❖ Make the customer feel unwelcome, embarrassed or uncomfortable
- ❖ Sound bored, sarcastic, aggressive or uncooperative
- ❖ Look untidy, uninterested or disorganised
- ❖ Come to work under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- ❖ Make derogatory comments of any sort about a customer (*Indeed if offence is caused to anyone by any such comments then the person making the comments will be subject to disciplinary action and may be committing a criminal offence which could lead-to prosecution*)
- ❖ Respond to aggression with aggression

CONFIDENTIALITY

Staff should ALWAYS

- ❖ Assure customers that any personal information or details given or held in records is treated with the strictest confidence
- ❖ Seek the consent of the customer before disclosing information either internally or to other agencies and then only on a strictly need to know basis
- ❖ Assure customers that all staff and other agencies receiving confidential information observe the same levels of confidentiality as ourselves
- ❖ Ensure that interviews and conversations with customers about personal, confidential or contentious issues are carried out in private and not in reception or other public areas
- ❖ Ensure that all customer records are held securely and can only be accessed by officers authorised to do so
- ❖ Ensure that requests for specific details are always made in writing

Staff should NEVER

- ❖ Discuss a customer's personal or confidential details with friends, family or other acquaintances outside work
- ❖ Disclose confidential information to any other agency or with other staff generally in an unauthorised manner
- ❖ Take any action or disclose any information that potentially or actually places a customer in danger

DATA PROTECTION

All staff must

Be aware of and comply with the Data Protection Act 1998, which affects anyone accessing personal data. The eight principles of good information handling set out in the Act are:

- ❖ Obtain and process personal data fairly and lawfully
- ❖ Hold the data only for the purposes specified
- ❖ Use the data only for the approved purposes, and disclose only to authorised persons
- ❖ Only hold data, which is adequate, relevant and not excessive in relation to the purpose for which the data is held
- ❖ Ensure personal data is accurate and where necessary, kept up-to-date
- ❖ Hold the data for no longer than is necessary
- ❖ Allow individuals appropriate access to information held about them and, where necessary correct or erase it
- ❖ Take appropriate security measures to prevent unauthorised or accidental access and the alteration, disclosure, or loss and destruction of information

Staff should be aware that they are personally liable for any breaches of security under the Act.

CUSTOMERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

When dealing with customers with special needs staff should ALWAYS

- ❖ Be prepared to address any customer requirements with regard to age, religion, race, gender, disability or sexual orientation
- ❖ Make appropriate arrangements for customers with visual impairments, taking into account the use of magnifiers, large print, Braille or audio tapes
- ❖ Make appropriate arrangements for customers with other special needs, including those who have difficulty in reading, understanding or speaking English
- ❖ Familiarise themselves with the Council's working arrangements of the Language Line service which can provide interpreters for interviews and the translation of documents
- ❖ Advise the customer of the availability of alternative services from other agencies where we are unable to provide a particular service. Arrange contact and make referrals as necessary with the permission of the customer

Staff should NEVER:

- ❖ Make assumptions about a customer's mobility or ability to communicate or understand
- ❖ Ignore the customer by speaking directly to their advocate or interpreter if they bring one with them

CUSTOMER APPOINTMENTS

Staff should ALWAYS

- ❖ Be prepared to address any customer requirements with regard to age, religion, race, gender, disability or sexual orientation
- ❖ Refer to the Council's 'Risk' Register BEFORE making appointments for an office interview or home visit
- ❖ Arrange appointments for home visits and office interviews at times that are convenient to the customers
- ❖ Aim to keep an appointment however where this is not possible always inform the customers in advance with an explanation of the reason why
- ❖ In the event of a customer being kept waiting for more than fifteen minutes offer an apology and advise them of the reasons for the delay, the length of the expected delay and offer them another appointment if necessary

Staff should NEVER

- ❖ Ignore customers in the reception area, even if they have not approached the reception desk

HOME VISITS

Staff should ALWAYS

- ❖ Refer to the Council's 'Risk' Register BEFORE making a Home Visit
- ❖ Ensure that they are prepared to meet the need for any special requirements during the visit
- ❖ Ensure that a calling card is left if a customer is not available. The card should identify the Council, the name and telephone number of the caller, and an indication of when the caller can be contacted by the customer

Staff should NEVER

- ❖ Cancel an appointment without good reason. If an appointment has to be cancelled the customer should be given as much notice as possible and a full explanation of the reason for the cancellation
- ❖ Enter a customer's home without the customer's permission
- ❖ Park vehicles on any unauthorised area grassed area or designated disabled parking space. Council officers should set an example in this regard as often enforcement action may need to be taken against residents for similar actions

TELEPHONE COMMUNICATIONS

Staff should ALWAYS

- ❖ Ensure calls are answered whenever possible whether that means
 - Transferring calls to other staff or
 - Activating voicemail if necessary
- ❖ Ensure that where Voicemail is used the greeting is appropriate
- ❖ Ensure Voicemail is changed to advise callers if they are away from the office for more than one working day. The message should advise of a return date and alternative contact for urgent issues
- ❖ Return all telephone calls the same day or as soon as possible thereafter
- ❖ Answer telephone calls giving their name and the service they represent
- ❖ Use the functions of the telephone system to 'pick up' calls for staff who are out of the office
- ❖ Ensure background noise is kept to an absolute minimum
- ❖ Know how to use the Mincom facility
- ❖ Know how to use the "Type Talk" service

Staff should NEVER:

- ❖ Transfer a call to another extension unless they are sure it is the correct extension and /or there is a member of staff available to take the call
- ❖ Transfer a call without first explaining to the recipient the nature of the call

DEALING WITH MAIL

Staff should ALWAYS:

- ❖ Ensure that where possible, letters and written communication from or on behalf of customers are responded to within five calendar days of receipt. If this is not possible then an acknowledgement must be sent within five days and a full response sent within fourteen calendar days of receipt of the correspondence. The acknowledgement should state who is dealing with the matter
- ❖ Adhere to any mail monitoring procedures specific to their area of responsibility and record details and dates of incoming and outgoing mail as required
- ❖ Ensure that all written communication and forms are clear, concise, simple to understand, jargon-free and available in alternative languages, larger print and Braille if required
- ❖ Ensure that all correspondence follows corporate styles using designated formats, letterheads and logos
- ❖ Ensure that all correspondence is suited to the needs of the particular customer

DEALING WITH ELECTRONIC MAIL

Staff should ALWAYS:

- ❖ Ensure that where possible, electronic communications from or on behalf of customers are dealt with within one working day of receipt. If this is not possible then an acknowledgement must be sent within one working day giving the customer a reference number, the name of the person dealing with the enquiry and details of how it will be progressed. A full response should be sent within five working days. Service response times may be extended but only when the customer is provided with an action plan and definite answer timetable
- ❖ Ensure that all electronic communications and forms are clear, concise, simple to understand jargon-free and available in alternative languages if required
- ❖ Ensure that all correspondence follows corporate styles using designated formats, letterheads and logos
- ❖ Ensure that all correspondence is suited to the needs of the particular customer

PART THREE
DEVELOPMENT

DEVELOPING AND FOCUSING CUSTOMER DIALOGUE

Extensive Customer Satisfaction and Consultation Surveys have been and are, on an ongoing basis, carried out by individual Services in relation to Best Value Reviews, Quality Award applications, customer satisfaction feedback and customer consultation generally.

However we recognise the need to regularly re-examine our corporate customer care practices, therefore, as part of our ongoing commitment to customer care, the Council will aim to:

- ❖ Expand its current consultation mechanisms e.g. Viewpoint Panel which will enable us to further involve customers in setting standards and priorities by
 - ◆ Actively seeking and listening to customers views and complaints
 - ◆ Being specific about subjects for consultation and targeting our customers more effectively
 - ◆ Re-assessing the effectiveness of how we consult with our customers and the range of mechanisms we use to do so, eg circulars, leaflets and questionnaires
 - ◆ Re-examining how well we respond to customer comments
 - ◆ Assessing what we have put into practice as a result of customer comments

- ❖ Benchmark our standards against other Local Authorities
- ❖ Ensure maximum availability of downloadable forms/information from the Council's website
- ❖ Further develop the interactive capabilities of the website
- ❖ Further develop the Council's Information Centre facilities

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000

All Local Authorities are required, under Section 19, Freedom of Information Act, 2000, to adopt and maintain a Publication Scheme, setting out in classes, information regarding Council services/functions.

The Publication Scheme is meant to be a guide for customers to information regarding Council services/ functions which is held and published by the Council or which the Council intends to publish either routinely or on occasion and which is available and accessible to the general public.

City of Durham Council's Publication Scheme was submitted to the Information Commissioner in December 2002 and approval for the scheme was granted for the period 28th February, 2003 to 28th February, 2007. The Publication Scheme is published on the Council's website and will be made available, on application, in hard copy, free of charge.

The right of members of the public to make individual requests for information, under the Act, came into effect in January 2005.

The Council aims to:

- ❖ Maintain our Publication Scheme in order to assist our customers to identify and access information held by the Council
- ❖ Expand our Publication Scheme on an ongoing basis, as more information is added.
- ❖ Indicate within the Publication Scheme whether a fee will be payable for copy information, or whether certain information is restricted by time e.g. is not available prior to a given date.
- ❖ Maintain our Publication Scheme on the Council's Website and make it available in hard copy, free of charge, upon request, for those customers who either specifically request a hard copy or have no access to the internet.
- ❖ Maintain an effective Request Tracking Procedure, to ensure the efficient and timely retrieval of information, necessary when responding to formal requests for information from our customers

PART FOUR

CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

THE CORPORATE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Despite our best efforts, there may be occasions when customers have reason to complain about something we have done, or have not done. We welcome comments on the services we provide and give an assurance that any complaints will be thoroughly investigated.

We aim to settle all complaints to the customer's satisfaction when they are initially raised. However, if this is not possible, the Council's Complaints Procedure allows customers to make their point formally and for us to investigate and to put things right.

The Complaints Procedure is essentially a step by step means to formally register a complaint.

If the complaint remains unresolved then the customer can ultimately refer the matter to the Local Government Ombudsman Service who can be contacted at:

Beverley House
17 Shipton Road
York
Y030 5FZ
Telephone: 01904 380200
Advice Line: enquiries.york@lgo.org.uk

Information explaining the Corporate Complaints Procedure is set out on the Council's website (www.durhamcity.gov.uk) complaints forms are downloadable. Hard copies of the Information Leaflet and the Complaints Form are available at all Council offices. Staff are available to assist in the completion of the form if required.

The Complaints procedure is reviewed every two years and revised as necessary.