

TITLE	Customer Empowerment and Involvement Policy
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Lead Officer(s) & Author:	Lynn Hanson
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This Policy relates to the involvement of customers of the WM Housing Group, and its partner housing associations. It supports the groups strategic ambition of *'becoming excellent in involvement in the eyes of our customers within three years'*, as set out within its strategy approved by Board in September 2009.

1. Policy Statement

- 1.1 WM Housing Group, (WMHG), and its partner associations, Whitefriars Housing Group, Harden Housing Association, Kemble Housing Association, and Nexus Housing Association, (the partner associations), aim to achieve the objectives set out within its adopted, group wide Customer Involvement strategy, through this policy, and its associated implementation plans.

These objectives, and the themes around which this policy is structured, have been agreed with customers through various involvement mechanisms.

In particular, this includes the Joint Group Customer Panel whose adopted terms of reference includes that of scrutiny of the strategy; this policy, and actions plans to meet Tenant Empowerment and Involvement national standards.

2. Policy Purpose and Aims:

- 2.1 This policy provides a framework within which the partners associations and their customers will, in a co regulatory approach, operate, monitor and impact assess procedures and approaches for the involvement of its customers. This will apply, taking into account national standards and expectations, WMHG values, business driven priorities, and understanding of the central focus and driver of its customer and community led needs.

The policy contributes to the Groups vision of *'creating places where people are proud to live and work'*, and its values of:

- Providing Excellent Service
- Acting with Integrity
- Valuing People
- Delivering Creative Solutions

In particular by:

- engaging customers in supporting the achievement of the vision and values, and
- in judging whether WMHG and the partner associations are moving towards the achievement of its vision, and acting in accordance with its values in the delivery of

services, and

- in its contribution to the sustainability, and co-hesiveness of communities.

In our contact with customers, who in the context of this policy engage with us, we will act with integrity by being honest in our dealings with them, facilitating genuine involvement and influence, and empowering through training, support and timely engagement, to support effective and informed participation.

WMHG, is continuing to take steps to support the capture, recording, and proactive use, of information on the demography of the customer base within the partner associations. This will inform group level responses, and engagement and service related planning within partner associations.

Customer involvement is regarded as part of the role and responsibility of every employee and is integral to each service area, and the associated policies.

Other policies and strategies directly related to this policy are the Customer Excellence Strategy, Equality and Diversity Strategy and Policies, Customer Expenses and Grants policy, Value for Money Strategy.

This policy meets the requirements of the Governments regulation of all Registered Providers as prescribed in the Housing Act 1996 and laid down in the Tenant Services Authority's Regulatory Framework, (April 2010).

It also meets the requirement of the Quality Assessment Framework, (QAF), relating to the supporting people funding regime.

Legislation places on all Local Authorities a Duty to Involve. This encompasses Information, Consultation and Involvement. WMHG and the partner associations are committed, within its policy and business plan commitments and limitations, to work with the local authority to deliver its duties, and to working within partnerships to deliver wider sustainable and cohesive communities.

3. Our Policy

3.1 Policy framework

WM Housing Group through the partner associations provide many services, and work in many communities and local authority areas.

We believe that it is key to the success of our business that we listen to customers, work effectively with them and their local communities, to help shape and deliver services that meet current needs, as well as the needs and aspirations of future customers.

We also recognise and welcome customers as partners in the regulation of our business. This policy aims to support and develop this.

We understand that involving our customer helps drive our programme of continuous improvement of services.

Our policy is developed from the themes within our involvement strategy, as follows within this section.

3.2 **Effective Partnerships**

The most effective partnership that we need to sustain is with our customers and we aim to continuously improve this through this and our other strategies and policies and the actions we take to agree, implement and monitor their continued effectiveness and appropriateness.

We aim to work in partnerships which focus on engaging with customers and communities, particularly in areas of multiple deprivation, or where services are provided by a number of agencies.

Partners may include local authorities; community groups; voluntary groups; and statutory agencies. Community, voluntary and faith groups that involve or represent those of our customers who we need to work harder, and in different ways, to reach, are seen as key partners to achieve improvements in our understanding and engagement of WMHG diverse customer base.

We are aware of the statutory duty upon local authorities to inform, consult and involve, and of the regulatory, and other responsibilities upon a range of other agencies with whom we may consistently or from time to time work in partnership. We will endeavour to support others in the discharge of their duties in the spirit of partnership, ensuring our core business and regulatory responsibilities are supported through such arrangements.

Overall we welcome the opportunities created by partnership working and will engage in those opportunities in a responsible, manner focussing on outcomes for customers and communities.

3.3 **Opportunities**

We will aim to provide and facilitate a range of opportunities that improve the involvement of our customers, to enable their influence on their services and communities.

We will aim to use creative, value for money approaches which respond to what we know of customer involvement preferences. Those preferences will be periodically tested, using various mechanisms including surveys and community focussed events.

In particular we will work to ensure that the opportunities offered are informed by business need, customer demand and profiles, and are accessible and appropriate to the wide diversity of customers, insofar as it is reasonable, responsible and outcome focussed, within our business resources, to do so.

WMHG understands that in seeking to engage its diverse customer base that it needs to consistently improve its understanding of that customer base to the extent that it informs the business and complies with legislative, including data protection requirements.

WMHG will ensure that the opportunities offered include various routes through which customers can feedback to the partner associations their views on the quality and appropriateness of services provided.

This will include satisfaction surveys, undertaken by feedback cards, electronic, postal and telephone methodologies, through community events and complaints, comments and compliments.

We will ensure that the opportunities offered enable customers to be effective partners in co regulation of WMHG and its partner associations; the national standards framework; agreed local offers, and the future development of the business.

We will do this initially by building upon existing involvement opportunities that have co-regulatory elements, and work towards our Board agreed approach that develops customer driven approaches in each of the partners.

We will aim to empower involved customers to achieve a position of informed constructive challenge in the interests of all customers.

3.4 **Training Development and Support**

WMHG recognises that in order for customer involvement to be effectively developed and facilitated that its staff must not only own the agenda but have an appropriate level of awareness, and skills to engage and respond.

Equally customers need to be empowered through training and support to engage with the organisation to present a continuous challenge, informing and supporting the continuous improvement of the business and its services.

For staff we will ensure this through inclusion in induction, specific training interventions for staff, the setting of objectives, coaching and support from specialists within the organisation.

Customer empowerment will be included in the annually updated action plans and will be developed to include opportunities for involved customers to develop their confidence to become involved, their understanding of the business and relevant wider housing issues, assertiveness techniques and influencing skills. Specific training for those involved in scrutiny activities will be offered.

Training will be delivered through opportunities to attend relevant conferences and courses; through in house development and delivery, or procurement of training delivered by an external organisation and membership of best value procurement approaches e.g Learning Equals Partnership, (Whitefriars).

Voluntary and partner agencies may also have a role in equipping residents within communities or, communities of interest setting e.g. aspects of disability or who also engage with them. Opportunities for delivery of both staff and customer training needs through local partnerships

will be sought where relevant and cost effective.

3.5 **Effective Involvement**

WMHG and the partners aim to ensure that customer input takes place at the earliest possible opportunity, and that it is part of the whole decision making process.

In its planning cycles it will make sure that the need to involve customers, including recruitment and training, surveying or otherwise combining the outcomes of various involvement methods, is reflected in the process and timing of the project/review/other.

Systems will be developed to ensure the more effective collation of customer opinion, gathered from various feedback sources to inform projects/reviews/monitoring, and to make this available to the business.

Service improvement documentation and action plans will require the inclusion of proposals for, and outcomes of, customer involvement. Involvement methodologies and activities must be demonstrated to be appropriate, timely and genuine.

Within our involvement approaches will use opportunities that are designed to ensure it is the best approach deliverable to ensure the effective engagement of the various groups e.g. young people, disabled, BAME.

3.6 **Evaluation**

WM Housing Group and its partner associations recognise that customer involvement must contribute to the continuous improvement of the business, its strategy, planning, and service priorities, and contribute to monitoring its progress in the achievement of its vision and values.

Improved systems will be put into place to ensure the evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of customers involvement activities. This will include the outputs, outcomes and value for money of the activities.

Annual reports of the key activities, an evaluation of their impact on the business and value for money considerations, will be presented to Boards, and published for all customers via web sites and articles in partner magazines and annual reports to customers.

The Joint Group Customer Panel, will undertake the customer scrutiny function in relation to this policy area and will be involved in the evaluation of its effectiveness.

Benchmarking, peer review and performance measures and arrangements will be developed in conjunction with the Joint Group Customer Panel.

3.7 **Evidence of commitment**

The group will demonstrate its commitment to empowering and involving its customers through its actions to implement its strategic commitments; through its annual review of its performance

against the national standards; consideration of a local offer for this area of its activity, and ongoing communication on how we have acted on feedback and customer views and priorities in the continuous improvement of our services.

3.8 **Culture**

As part of our wider customer service excellence strategy the organisation will take steps to continue the change in its culture through leadership, its vision and values, communication, training and performance management and development processes.

4. **Equality Impact Assessment**

4.1 WM Housing Group carry out Equality Impact Assessments to understand the impact that our policies may have on groups of people or individuals.

This policy contributes to ensuring that WMHG and the partner associations understand the diversity of its customer base and acts to ensure that services are delivered in ways that ensure equal access and provision of services.

We will ensure that the demographic information held on our customer base is used to inform and shape our actions to engage those who are less well represented and whose views and experiences of our services and the communities in which they live are less well known to us.

In each of the theme areas of our strategy, and this policy, we will consider the diversity of our customer base in the development and delivery of the arising actions plans to ensure equality of engagement, representation, consideration and response to views

5. **Performance Measures and Targets**

5.1 Each year our performance will be measured by the extent to which we have delivered the priorities agreed with the Joint Group Customer Panel and published within the organisations annual report and statement.

Annual reports will be presented to Boards setting out performance against agreed actions and priorities

6. **Monitoring and Review**

6.1 The effectiveness and achievements of this policy will be monitored by the Joint Group Customer Panel as part of its scrutiny function for this regulatory theme area.

The policy will be reviewed with them, (or its successor body), on a three yearly cycle commencing from June 2010.

7. **Responsibility**

7.1 This effective implementation of this policy is the responsibility of the Executive Director of Homes and Communities.

8.0 Associated Documents/Policies

8.1 List of documents/associated policies/publications.

- *Customer Involvement Strategy September 2009*
- *Customer Excellence Strategy 2010*
- *Equality and Diversity Strategy*
- *Value for Money Strategy*
- *Complaints Policy*
- *Tenant Services Authority's regulatory framework April 2010*
- *Audit Commission Key Line of Enquiry*
- *Data Protection and Information Handling Policy*