

# Department for Communities

Customer Care Standards: Version 1.0

Approved by Communities DMT 17.10.18

(Next Review October 2020)

# Department for Communities

## Customer Care Standards

### 1. Core Values

Our values underpin and guide the way that we work, the way we improve and the way we make decisions in our community. It also includes our approach to delivering high standards of customer care, with timeliness, information, professionalism and staff attitude being key factors.

Alongside is a reminder of the core values – although there are clear links to ‘Customers First’, the other values are also key components in the process of providing high standards of customer care. This is especially important for all of us as staff delivering the range of services on behalf of the Department.



#### **Working as one team**

We recognise that by working together and making constructive connections we can make the best use of our resources for our communities

#### **Focus on our customers**

We work to improve the lives of the people in our communities this is our focus and key purpose.

#### **Listen to improve**

We will listen and engage with our communities, partners and all stakeholders to inform our improvement plans.

#### **Strive for excellence**

We will remain vigilant and ensure that we deliver to the best of our abilities and always explore ways to improve what we do.

#### **Act with Integrity**

We will actively think about what is the right thing to do when presented with choices in a work situation.

### **Take personal responsibility**

We will all consider how we support and apply these values so they actively underpin and guide the way we work.

## **2. Why is Customer Care Important for Us?**

We are all customers many times each day: a customer of the bus company that provides our daily transport to work; a customer of the sandwich shop at lunchtime; a customer of the telephone company or electricity company.

As customers (and especially as *paying* customers), we expect polite and helpful service, we expect our requests to be listened to, and we expect an appropriate and satisfactory response. And if we don't receive such service, we may well choose to take our custom elsewhere.

Customers of local authorities have no such option, since local authorities have a monopoly on many services and regulatory functions. This in itself must make customer service a priority for local authorities. When you also consider that many of our customers may be vulnerable, needy or in difficult or even desperate situations, then such a priority is even further reinforced.

Customer care is everyone's responsibility at every level of the Department; we are all critical contact points for the public and have our part to play.

The Institute of Customer Service has a vision of an organisation which delivers customer service excellence:

*"The organisation is honest, gives good value for money, has a high reputation, meets deadlines, has quality products and services, has easy to understand processes, responds to criticism, encourages complaints and handles them well, and demonstrates that it is passionate about customers. At all levels people are respected, well trained, friendly, contactable, flexible, knowledgeable, honest, trusted, stable, involved and consistent. The perceived culture is one of professionalism, efficiency, teamwork, caring, respect, seriousness ...."*

Customer service excellence is difficult to describe. But we think we know it when we experience it and we definitely know when it's absent.

*Mr X has just called the office, asking to speak to Officer A in Housing whose calls have been diverted to the Business Support Team. This is his third attempt within a week and messages have been passed on each time, asking Officer A to ring back but this has not happened. No information is available on the calendar to indicate when Officer A will return to the office. Mr X is annoyed; and he doesn't understand why Officer A hasn't returned his calls and why no information is available as to the officer's whereabouts/when a return call can be made.*

*Officer B is dealing with a member's enquiry and urgently needs specific information. He contacts the relevant team and speaks to a member of staff, who doesn't know the whereabouts of the officer. No offer is made to contact the member of staff involved.*

This document outlines the standards for staff within the Department for Communities in their interactions with external and internal customers whether it be by telephone, Email, correspondence, face-to-face contact or website feedback. These standards are important with the shift towards agile working.

The Departmental Management Team approved these Standards on 17<sup>th</sup> October, and managers should be aware that there is a mandatory E-learning module that all staff need to complete (see Page 9).

### 3. Principles of Customer Service Excellence

- Establish a culture of high quality customer service and commit to deliver superior service whether over the phone or face-to-face.
- Make customers feel comfortable, valued, and appreciated. Be knowledgeable of and understand the relevant policy and procedures.
- Treat customers with respect, empathy, and efficiency.
- Listen actively to be responsive and exceed customer expectations.
- Effectively resolve the customer's problem.
- Say "Thank you" and "Please" graciously.

### 4. Basics

Every member of staff, regardless of seniority or grade, is responsible for providing the highest quality of customer service.

We should all:

- use customer-friendly protocol and take personal responsibility for each call, and each request for service or information.
- keep our electronic calendars on Outlook up-to-date and give full access to colleagues.
- take responsibility for returning calls, especially where there are repeated requests for call-backs
- make arrangements for phones and Emails when away from the office, or if a colleague is on extended leave.
- be professional in using formal titles when first speaking to a member of the public, i.e. “Mr.”, “Mrs.”, “Miss”, etc., and only use their first name until they have given their permission to do otherwise.

## 5. Preferences

Be aware of the preferred method of communication and record this:

- Telephone, mobile, letter or Email
- Language choice
- Arrangements for sensory impairment

Customer care is very closely linked to the Welsh language and the provision of a bilingual service. Please follow this link:

<http://intranet/our-people/working-for-us/working-bilingually/>

## 6. Telephone Calls

### 6.1 Call Answering

- ✓ All calls should be answered promptly within 5 rings
- ✓ All calls should be answered regardless of who answers them - pick up a ringing phone if a colleague is absent or away from their desk
- ✓ Provide a short bilingual greeting <sup>1</sup>
- ✓ Use a friendly and helpful, yet formal, tone to put the customer at ease

### 6.2 Managing the Call Effectively

- ✓ Speak clearly
- ✓ Avoid jargon
- ✓ Upon answering the call, listen attentively without being tempted to make assumptions as to the nature of the call
- ✓ Find out the customer’s name and use it throughout the conversation
- ✓ Be efficient – deal with the customer promptly and if you need to put the call on hold, it is advisable not to do so for more than 5 minutes (if it is going to take longer than this, then offer to call them back)

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<sup>1</sup> “Bore da, Good morning” or “Prynhawn da, Good afternoon”, followed by either “Communities Department” or the name of your team (whichever is most useful to the customer). Avoid abbreviations.

- ✓ Be careful with continuing conversations without placing the caller on mute/hold, which means that they can hear other conversations taking place. This could lead to an inadvertent GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) breach if sensitive information is overheard.
- ✓ Do not transfer a call unless you are certain you know the correct person to transfer it to
- ✓ If you need to transfer a call, brief your colleague as to the nature of the call
- ✓ Keep a note of who you have passed calls to in case the customer does have to come back to you personally
- ✓ If you do not know the correct person to transfer the call to, or if the relevant person is unavailable, offer an apology and take the caller's name and telephone number and agree a time when either you or somebody else will call them back
- ✓ If you are receiving a call transferred to you by someone else, you must also offer your name and telephone number
- ✓ Pass messages on promptly by Email. If the message is urgent, pass it on by telephone/mobile or inform the Team Manager.

### 6.3 **Closing the Call**

- ✓ Check that the customer has received the required information
- ✓ Agree any call-back arrangements
- ✓ Provide your contact details if any follow-up is required

### 6.4 **Arrangements Whilst Away from the Office**

- ✓ All staff should make arrangements for calls to be handled during any absences or periods away from the office<sup>2</sup>. Where others will cover the calls, these arrangements must be agreed in advance, and information provided to help colleagues (including alternative contacts).
- ✓ For periods of prolonged absence, ensure that incoming calls are transferred to a colleague (managers to check this if the absence is unexpected)
- ✓ Each staff member is responsible for ensuring that calls are diverted whilst working away from the office base:
  - If you have a work mobile, calls should be transferred to this
  - Otherwise, calls should be transferred to others within your Team
- ✓ Cancel any diversions on your return to the office
- ✓ Check any messages that have been left in your absence and respond, especially where it is clear that an urgent or timely response is required

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<sup>2</sup> See guidance on the Intranet for phone settings to assist with transfers, etc.

<http://intranet/our-people/it-support/telecommunications/phone-settings/>

Transfers to mobiles: Press \*89 followed by your mobile number. To cancel, press ##8

- ✓ Ensure that your electronic calendar is up to date – stating where the meeting is, contact address and a unique reference number from a service management information system, e.g. CareFirst, as appropriate. The latter is essential for the safety of lone workers making visits.

#### 6.5 **Returning Calls**

- ✓ If you promise a colleague that you will call a customer back by a specified time, ensure you do so
- ✓ If the required information or person is not available by the time a return call has been promised, phone the caller anyway and explain the difficulties. Do not leave the customer wondering what is happening. Agree a revised time for someone to phone again

#### 6.6 **Taking Responsibility and Ownership**

- ✓ Respond to messages and return calls
- ✓ Make sure your electronic calendar is up to date so that colleagues can locate you if an urgent response is required.
- ✓ If a colleague is away from the office and a call is for your team, be helpful and accept the call
- ✓ Where a call is for you or your team, please accept the call and do not delay by asking for further information before accepting it
- ✓ Ensure that colleagues are aware of the correct contacts within your team, and update if there are any changes or alternative arrangements if someone is away on long-term absence
- ✓ Be sensitive to someone whose call has been passed around a number of contacts before their call has arrived with you. If you are sure who the contact is, then pass the call on; if not, take their name and number and explain that you will find out and call them back. Give them your name and number so that they have a contact point.
- ✓ Don't deliberately organise mail-shots before periods of leave, which mean that you won't be available to handle any queries arising from customers

#### 6.7 **Dealing with Abusive Calls**

- ✓ Inform the caller that you cannot help if they persist with their behaviour
- ✓ If they continue, advise them that it may be more constructive if they call back later
- ✓ Advise them that if they continue, there is no alternative but to terminate the call
- ✓ Ask them once more if there is any way in which you can help them
- ✓ Advise them that you are about to terminate the call
- ✓ Terminate the call
- ✓ Take a break if you feel it will help
- ✓ Report the incident to your line manager

- ✓ Record the incident using the Council's Incident Reporting Form – ADOR1<sup>3</sup>
- ✓ Seek further support, if appropriate

7. **Written Communication**

- ✓ All letters should be answered within 10 working days
- ✓ A customer should receive a signed reply in the language of the original letter
- ✓ Use plain, everyday language and avoid jargon
- ✓ Be sensitive to the recipient's situation and use an appropriate approach, particularly for children or vulnerable persons
- ✓ Use Carmarthenshire County Council headed paper
- ✓ Include a contact, direct dial and Email details
- ✓ Circular or standard letters should be bilingual with Welsh uppermost and foremost
- ✓ Use 14 point pitch when replying to a customer who has a visual impairment. The same applies to circular or standard letters where the target group may include older people or those with a visual impairment

***Emails***

- ✓ Only use Email when required
- ✓ Respond promptly
- ✓ Check Divisional and group Email boxes on a daily basis and forward to the correct person
- ✓ Include a standard email signature, which should be bilingual and include your name, job title, team and contact details
- ✓ Put your out-of-office notification on Outlook when away from the office or on leave, stating when you will be able to respond and who to contact if can't wait. This includes out-of-office replies for people both within and outside the Council.
- ✓ Managers should contact IT to arrange for an out-of-office reply for colleagues away for an extended period
- ✓ Make sure you send your Email to the right person and use secure Email facilities for items including personal data

8. **Face-to-Face Contact**

- ✓ Always greet the customer with a smile and say 'Bore Da/Good Morning' or 'Prynhawn Da/Good Afternoon'. Listen to the customer's enquiry and take notes if necessary
- ✓ Ask for the customer's name and use it throughout the enquiry

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<sup>3</sup> Online incident reporting: <http://dollar:9000/Welcome.aspx>



- ✓ Recap the enquiry with the customer to ensure that you have all the details you need to proceed with
- ✓ Keep the customer informed, particularly if you are unable to answer the query immediately or will have to pass the customer onto another colleague
- ✓ Maintain a positive, helpful attitude throughout the conversation
- ✓ Ensure the customer fully understands all the information you have given them and offer clarity on anything they are unsure about
- ✓ When you have completed the enquiry, ask if there is anything else they would like help with
- ✓ Before the customer leaves, thank them for their enquiry and give them your name and contact details should they wish to speak to you again

## 9. **Extended Leave and Changes of Responsible Officer**

Where people are away from the office for longer periods of time, e.g. maternity leave, sickness, secondment, the Team Manager is responsible for contacting people and advising of the arrangements during this time. Similarly, where the responsible officer changes, it is vital to contact everyone involved to let them know.

## 10. **Learning and Development Resources**

The Learning and Development Team have developed resources to support high standards of customer care practice and these are available on the Intranet<sup>4</sup>.

### **E-Learning – mandatory for all office staff working in Communities**

- This looks at common issues and problems in customer service, from the perspectives of both the customer and the service provider.

### **Half-day programme for individual teams**

- This provides your team with the opportunity to reflect on the needs of their own customers and review your own service. It also includes a section looking at how to deal with aggressive customers. It will provide your team with the opportunity to reflect upon the service you provide and your customers' requirements – so helping to provide a better service.

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<sup>4</sup> Link to Learning & Development resources: <http://intranet/our-people/learning-and-development/personal-effectiveness/customer-care/>