

Access and Customer Care Strategy

Housing Management

6th April 2011



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Introduction

This strategy has been produced partly as a result of the Audit Commission inspection of landlord services in February 2010, and the improvement plan that was produced in response to the inspection. However it is also produced because as a landlord we believe in the vital importance of communicating well with our customers.

The inspection made specific findings regarding the service, and one of the reasons for the poor result of the inspection was the lack of a clear strategy for communicating with customers that considers their specific needs, arising from the lack of customer “profile” information on such issues as disability, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, first language spoken, and specific support needs.

The inspection was also critical about the lack of disabled access to the offices at Endless Street. This has already been addressed by the closure of the Endless Street reception. Customer service to the public is now delivered from the office at 27-29 Milford Street, Salisbury, with administration to be carried out from the new Bourne Hill office and Churchfields, where the repairs service will be based. The new Milford Street reception has full disabled access for the public.

The housing management service is delivered to around 5,370 households living in council-owned accommodation. The main service is around repairs and maintenance of these homes and around half the 73 staff in housing management are involved in planned or responsive maintenance. It is this service that is most important to tenants, and the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) “Big Conversation” confirmed that this reflects the national view of tenants, that the repairs service is the one most important to them.

Knowing our customers

The Standardised Tenant Satisfaction Survey (STATUS) survey 2010 provided a detailed picture of who our tenants are. The most common household composition was one adult aged 60 or over (40%). This was followed by two adults at least one aged 60 or over (24%), one adult under 60 (9%), and 2-parent family with child/ren, at least one under 16 (8%). 48% of respondents said they lived alone, and 32% of respondents lived with one other person.

15% of households contained at least one child aged under 16, while 67% had at least one person aged 60 or over.

62% of respondents said they had been tenants of the council for more than 10 years, with as many as 43% having been tenants for over 20 years.

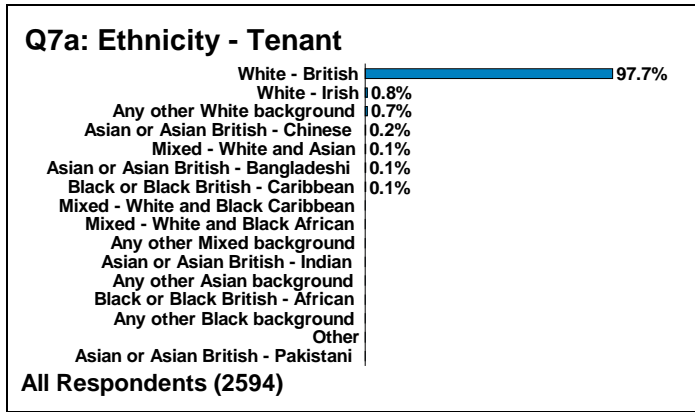
Respondents were asked how long they had lived in their current house. The response to this question followed a similar pattern to that for length of tenancy, although a smaller proportion (29%) had lived in the same home for 21 years or more compared with 43% who had been a tenant for the same period.

Only 2% were aged 16-24, 14% were aged 25-44, 19% were aged 45-59 and 66% of tenants were aged 60 or above.

50% of tenants who took part in the survey were wholly retired from work, while 28% were employed or self-employed. The most common form of household income was state pension (59%) and earnings from employment (28%). A further 25% received other state benefits and 24% received a pension from a former employer.

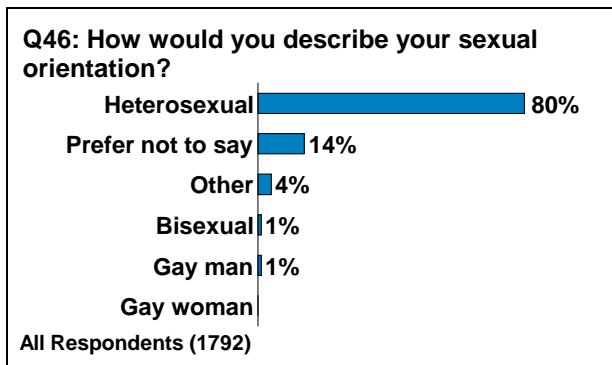
Of those who disclosed their income, the majority (59%) had an annual net income of less than £10,400 a year (combined wage of tenant and partner). 60% of households received housing benefit.

98% of respondents described themselves as white British.



Almost half (55%) of respondents said they had a long-standing illness, health problems or disability including problems which are due to old age. 11% said their household included a wheelchair user.

80% of those who answered the question relating to sexual orientation described themselves as heterosexual. 14% selected preferred not to say option.



In terms of religion, 76% described themselves as Christian, and 17% said that they were not religious.

81% of respondents said that they would prefer Wiltshire to use letters to inform them or consult with them about issues that may affect them as a tenant, 36% selected telephone calls and 26% chose magazine/newsletter or personal visit.

64% of respondents were satisfied that their views were taken into account by their landlord and 10% were dissatisfied. A proportion of tenants said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (13%) or gave no opinion (13%) which suggests that they may not be aware of the extent to which views are taken into account or that this is an area that is not important to them.

52% of respondents were satisfied with opportunities for participation in management and decision making and 6% were dissatisfied. A proportion of tenants said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (16%) or gave no opinion (26%) which suggests that they may not be aware of the extent of opportunities for participation in management and decision making or that this is an area that is not important to them.

81% of respondents felt that Wiltshire Council were good at keeping them informed about things that might affect tenants.

Having considered who our customers, are we need to ensure that the way our service is delivered meets their needs. This strategy is split into three sections-

A – Communication

B – Access

C- Customer Care

A – Communication

As a result of the Audit Commission inspection and the improvement plan, data from the STATUS survey conducted in 2010 has been collected to build a customer profile as summarised in the introduction above. This has been supplemented by information collected from sheltered tenants who all have a support plan, information collected from new tenants when they sign for their tenancy. To further increase the amount of tenant profiling information, a telephone survey has been conducted by staff to target tenants who did not respond to the STATUS survey.

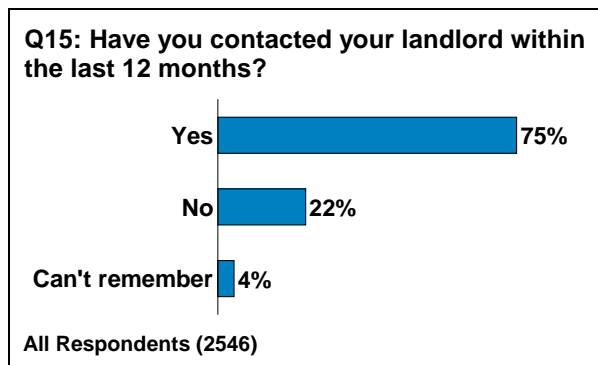
As result of this the council now holds profiling information on 64% of its tenants and can build its customer care and access strategy around their needs. This percentage will increase as new tenancies are created.

Respondents to the STATUS and other surveys were asked if they have any communication needs they would like Wiltshire to be aware of, and 28% said that they had.

The most common issues were respondents finding it difficult to get to the door quickly/hearing the doorbell (15%) or being hard of hearing (14%).

Around three quarters (76%) said their preferred method of contacting the council is by phone, followed by letter (12%).

Respondents were also asked their preferred method of contact from the council, for example about a repair; over half (54%) said via phone, while 37% said by letter.



We therefore need to take into account the profile of our customers when considering how to communicate with them, how to help them access our service, and how we care for them as customers.

From the profiling information we hold it is clear that the great majority of our customers speak English as their first language however there are a significant number of minority languages identified. At present we do not routinely translate leaflets etc. into other languages mainly due to the cost, however this service can usually provided on request. When possible we provide information specifically for elderly tenants in a larger font (size 14).

From a survey of all tenants carried out in 2009 we know that less than a third of our tenants have access to the internet, so while we need to ensure our service caters for those who have access, we need to ensure that it also serves the majority of tenants who do not. For example we offer the ability to pay rent or report repairs online, but also have a telephone payment line and repairs phone numbers.

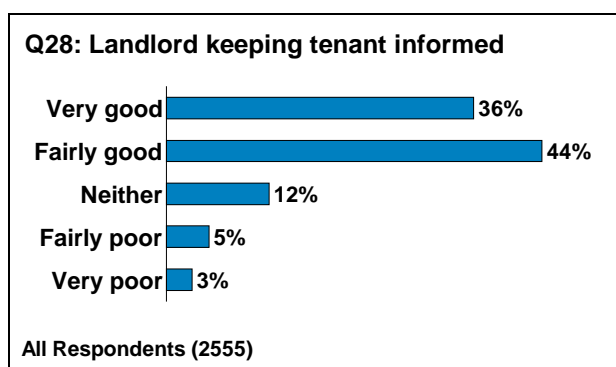
Current communication methods

Written

In considering a future strategy for access and customer care it is worth considering the existing arrangements. Listed below are the current methods of regular written communication with tenants.

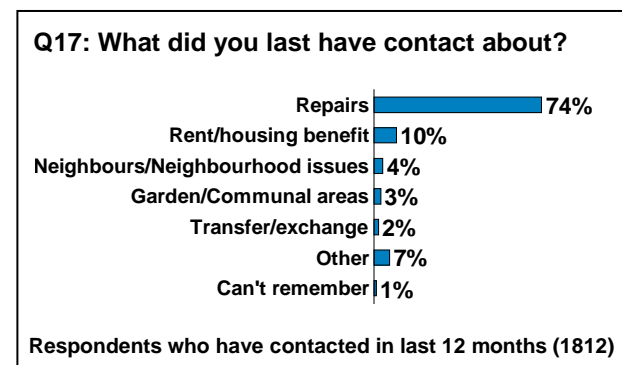
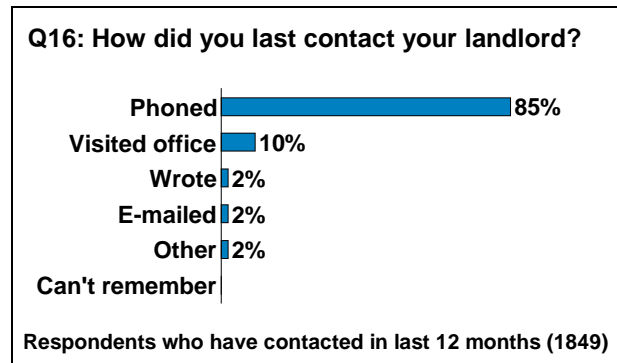
What Message?	Target Audience	Timing	Channel
Housing Matters magazine	All tenants	Quarterly	Magazine
Annual Report	All tenants	Annual	Incorporated in magazine
Rent/ service charge notification	All tenants	Annual	Letter
Rent statements	All tenants	Quarterly	Letter and statement
Service charge invoice and statements	All leaseholders	Annual	Invoice and statement
Annual satisfaction survey	All tenants	Annual	With magazine
STATUS survey	All tenants	Bi-annual	Via survey company

From the survey it would seem that the type and frequency of communication is about right as the great majority of tenants felt this was the case-

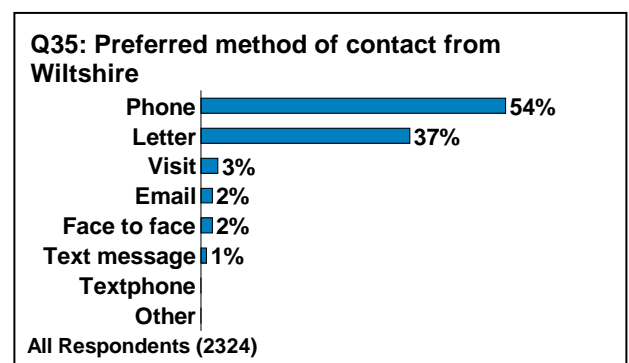
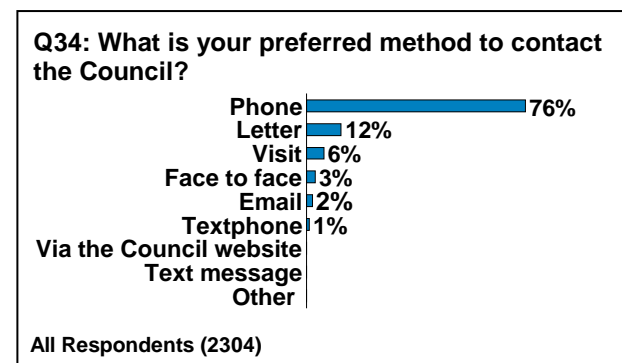


In addition to these systematic written communications, we send a survey card following the order of every responsive repair. The repairs service is the one most important to tenants, and the one around which they have most contact with the council -

For tenants the telephone is their main method of contact for general issues, and for most of the time this will be about repairs.

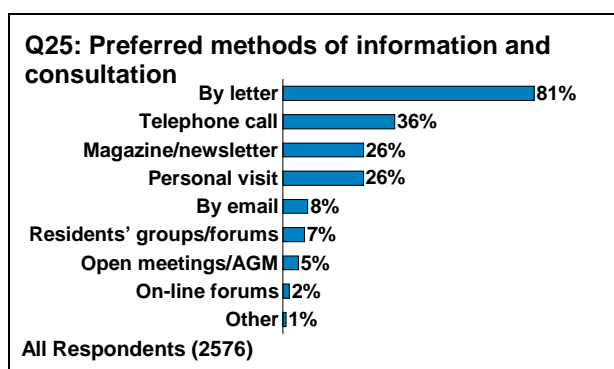


This is broadly matched by preferred communication methods. Around three quarters (76%) said they preferred method of contacting the council is by phone, followed by letter (12%).

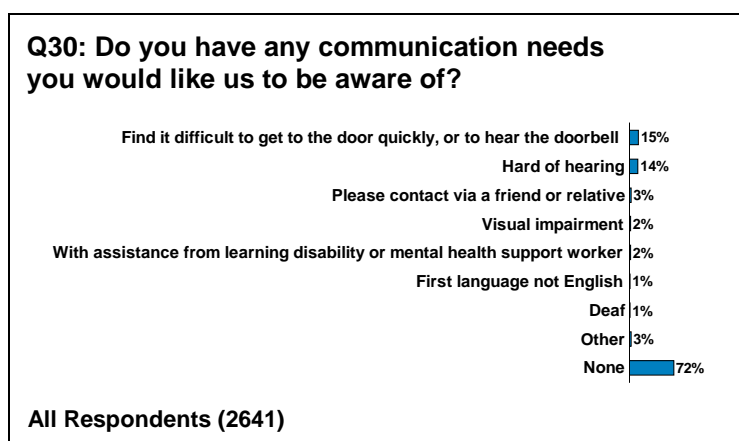


Respondents were also asked their preferred method of contact from Wiltshire Council about a repair for example. Over half (54%) said via phone, while 37% said by letter. It is notable that much of our communication is written while tenants seem to prefer telephone contact. Clearly large amounts of information cannot be given over the phone, but this preference for spoken rather than written communication needs to be taken into account if we are to meet the wishes of our customers.

However it is interesting that when it comes to consultation there is a preference to written information over other means-

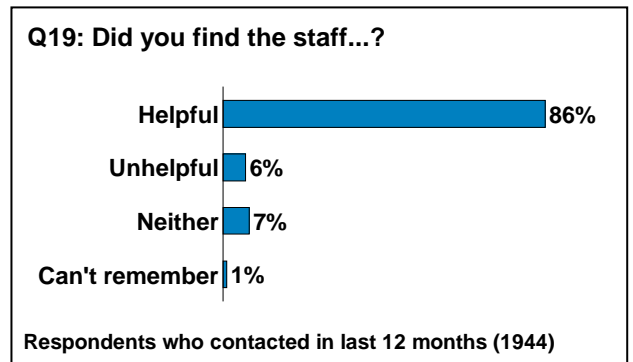


It is worth noting that in terms of specific requests about communication needs, the issue of hearing the doorbell or being able to get to the door quickly is the most frequently mentioned issue, and therefore one that we need to ensure that all visiting staff and contractors are aware of-



B- Access

Customers access our service in a variety of ways, including by phone, by receiving a home visit, through visiting our reception at Milford Street, by letter, by email, using the internet, or via a third party such as a councillor or advisor. It is difficult to assess precisely the proportion of contact that is made through these means, but we know that the repairs service is the one used most, and the majority of contact for the repairs service is by phone.



The move of the reception to Milford Street has addressed the major issue over the lack of disabled access to the former reception at Endless Street. However issues remain over the access at the estate offices at Bemerton Heath and the Friary.

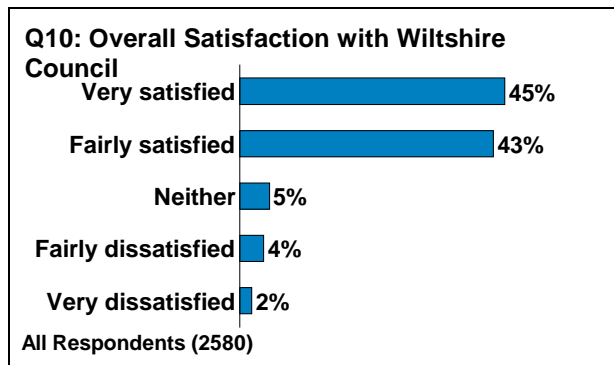
In terms of the success of the Milford Street reception providing overall good access to services, it is too early to judge if this can be achieved successfully, as clearly the geographical dispersion of housing management staff between Milford Street, Bourne Hill, Churchfields, and home working is a completely new way of working.

It is worth noting that while the issue of physical access to the reception has been addressed, access via phone, email and other contact needs to be considered as well. In particular with a lot of staff now dispersed at multiple locations we need to ensure that the benefits of having offices which comply with disability legislation are not outweighed by the disadvantages that can arise from a dispersed workforce.

C – Customer Care

We have a set of standards for customer care that are published covering every aspect of our service. Following a review of these, a set of improved standards was taken to the Tenants' Panel on 18th October 2010 and approved, and this has been designed to provide a new leaflet and loaded onto the Council's website. The performance against these standards will be

monitored and reported on a regular basis to the Tenants' Panel. From the overall results from the STATUS survey, it is pleasing to note that 88% of tenants are satisfied with the service they receive which is in the upper quartile of all stock retaining councils-



D- Future Strategy and Action

Communication

Our service needs to be tailored around the needs of our customers. Given the preference for communication by phone we will consider greater use of this medium, for example an automated system to remind customers of repair appointments by text as used by a number of private sector organisations, and already being trialled within housing management for gas servicing.

The main communication difficulty highlighted from the STATUS and other surveys is hearing or responding to the doorbell quickly, and we need to ensure that all our visiting staff **and contractors** are aware of this issue.

As more customers get access to the internet we can develop the website to be more interesting and interactive, and also make more use of “Web 2” developments such as forums, and social networking sites like “Facebook”, and “Twitter”, to communicate and give opportunities for participation which we are also seeking to encourage, along with the involvement of a more diverse cross-section of tenants.

We will continue to ensure that correspondence and minutes targeting specifically elderly residents are produced in 14 point type size or larger.

We are in the process of ensuring that all our leaflets are properly branded and include information about their availability in other formats.

Access

The move of the reception to Milford Street needs to be monitored to ensure that the benefits of improved access for disabled customers are not outweighed by the dispersion of staff to multiple locations. Managers have already attending briefings on the best methods of managing a dispersed workforce and we need to ensure that communication and co-ordination is maintained at a time of great change in working locations and practices.

We will continue to publicise direct dial phone numbers and email addresses for staff to make our staff as accessible as possible.

Customer Care

Improvements to customer care will come from the improved service standards that have just been approved by the Tenants' Panel. The other changes made to improve disabled access to the reception will assist with enhanced customer, along with the improved knowledge about our customers and their communication preferences. The numerous actions in the Improvement Plan, for example the enhanced range of leaflets on our services will further improve customer care across the service.

E- Hard to reach customers

As well as the general communication needs covered in this strategy particular consideration needs to be given to the needs of hard to reach groups who may otherwise still not receive the same level of service. Advice on this group has been provided from the Housing Services Equality and Diversity Advisor and is incorporated below.

Gypsy and Travellers at times form a closed community who have preferences around the spoken word and sometimes do not value education in the same way as settled residents. The community has very high levels of members who do not read. All staff should be aware of these needs and contact by phone is often the preferred method.

Hearing Impaired people may need access to a mini com service or a hearing loop and staff need to be aware of this issue, and for example should consider this when booking rooms for public meetings.

Visually impaired – At times people with a visual impairment may need access to much larger print than 14 point; easy access to Braille should be available on request. Consideration is also needed for people with colour blindness, for example when choosing the format for presenting written

information like graphs in the Annual Report. It is also recommended that a pale yellow background can be beneficial for people with some forms of visual impairment and this should be considered when designing leaflets.

Learning Difficulties - people from this community are often able to live independently, but they need support and information in an easy-to-read version, and staff with time and willingness to understand their needs.

Dyslexia – there are some tenants who may need information in a verbal format, so that a tape of correspondence or a taped version of documents like the magazine or Annual Report may need to be considered.

Disabled tenants may need positive action to support them via home visits and face to face contact.

Complex issues- many customers who have chaotic lives are very hard to engage with, and communications with them can be compromised. This can include customers with mental health needs, people engaging in substance abuse, victims of domestic abuse or suffering personality disorders, or a combination of issues. Extra effort is needed to engage with these hard to reach groups including repeat contacts or develop an on-going method of communicating via a trusted person or family member or carer.

Care leavers are often the most vulnerable customers who are unable to see the need for communication. Frequently they may fail to understand the significance of letters and requests, leading to high levels of failed tenancies.

Value for money

Given the current financial climate it is important to ensure that the way we communicate with our customers provides the service they want in an efficient way. This is already taken into account. For example when possible we do combined mailings of rent statements with our housing magazine to save postage, and we decided not to print a copy of our Annual Report for every tenant but rather make it available on request and via the website.

Conclusion

This strategy has aimed to highlight the issues around the communication, and access needs of our customers. To meet these needs requires a knowledge of our customers which comes from the surveys and experienced and dedicated staff.

Information about Wiltshire Council's services can be made available on request in other languages including BSL and formats such as **large print** and audio.

Please contact the council on **0300 456 0100**, by textphone on 01225 712500 or by email on customerservices@wiltshire.gov.uk

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