



**How to...**

*deliver excellent customer  
service*



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**Affinity Sutton**

# How to... deliver excellent customer service

1 To build a good and lasting relationship with your customers you need to find out what they want from you and – as far as you can – meet their expectations. Excellent customer service is not an add-on to your business: it's a vital component which needs to be valued and owned by all – if one part of the business doesn't do this, it can affect the reputation and performance of the whole. It's about getting the core business basics right and understanding how and where you can add extra value.

This 'How to' guide is about putting the following elements in place to ensure that your customers are satisfied:

- listening to your customers and finding out what they want
- changing your services so that they get what they want in all their dealings with you
- having competent, trained and strongly motivated staff who put customers first
- regularly finding out if customers are satisfied and – if not – why not
- keeping customers informed.

One key message is that good customer service is a two-way process: if you involve residents in shaping and delivering services you will achieve much higher levels of satisfaction than if you simply make decisions about services yourselves. A second key message is that the steps outlined here are a continuous process that must be built into your organisation's culture, not just a 'project' that runs for a fixed period of time.

## Listen to your customers and find out what they want

How much and what information do you need from your customers? Every organisation collects at least some basic information. The challenge is to build on this to give you more knowledge about your customers and what they want, while making sure you collect only what you need and in ways that can be used to shape the services they receive.

Collecting data can be expensive and time-consuming, so you need to devise means which are cost-effective as well as providing timely and meaningful information. For example, can you collect or update some customer profile information when you do regular gas maintenance work?

An essential first step is to review the information you already collect: there is guidance on this in section 4 of the TSA/CIH guide [Tenant Insight: Toolkit for landlords](#).

The main types of information you collect may cover:

- who your customers are (often called 'profiling' information)
- what they do and don't do, need and don't need
- their attitudes and aspirations, which might affect the services you offer
- what they think about specific services and how they could be improved.

**Who your customers are** is about a range of issues and – importantly – should cover equality questions, vulnerability and communication needs (such as foreign language requirements or having a sight impairment, needing large print, Braille or CD). This is the basis on which you will identify customers who may need different arrangements.

Profiling also enables you to 'segment' your customers - so that leaseholders (for example) get different, targeted information to tenants. Many landlords pay special attention to groups or individuals who are either reluctant to engage with them or have special communication needs, and have devised ways of finding out about and addressing their needs.

## Learning from others

**Wakefield and District Housing** (WDH) used a popular local delicatessen to help develop links with the Polish community and gain information about issues that may affect them in accessing a new choice-based lettings scheme, Homesearch. With the emergence of Eastern European Communities establishing roots in the Wakefield district, WDH has supported the formation of a Polish Community Association, in particular supporting them to have their accounts audited and by printing leaflets and newsletters to publicise their activities. The association has since taken over office space in a local church centre.

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**Tower Hamlets Homes** (THH) identified Somali tenants as having particular difficulty in paying their rents, and partnered with local Somali organisations to find out why and offer targeted financial inclusion work, resulting in reduced rent arrears. This resulted in Somali satisfaction with THH's service rising from 59% in 2009/10 to 82% in 2011/12.

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**What your customers do** - or in some cases what they don't do - is information about behaviour. It will vary depending on what the information is to be used for. For example, if you are looking to improve performance on rent arrears, you may want to collect information about how, when and where people pay their rent and what barriers there are.

Other examples include:

- transfer requests and reasons for wanting to move
- number and nature of enquiries and complaints made
- number and type of repairs requests
- access to the internet and use of social media
- participation in surveys, events or local groups.

### **Your customers' attitudes, lifestyles and aspirations**

– which might influence the way services are delivered. Examples include:

- what could we do to make your home and community even better?
- how can we help to make your neighbourhood a safer place to live in?
- where do you want to live in the short to medium term?
- would you pay extra for extra services?
- which additional services would you like us to provide?

**What customers think about specific services** - key questions include:

- what do you think about services that you have received?
- which services that we provide could be improved and how?
- do you have enough opportunities to be involved in decisions we take?
- if not, how could we improve?

You might want to ask these generally or to frame specific questions around particular services. Snapshot views of what people think or about their aspirations are useful, but it is much better to get ongoing information in a format which enables you to identify trends and how they change over time.

## Learning from others

**Affinity Sutton** identified that 57% of customers had web access, and this led them to create online facilities to allow tenants to report repairs, check the status of a repair and check rent statements. Online business is expected to grow in the future and Affinity Sutton continues to run a series of 'Get Connected' programmes helping their residents to get online and access services. They see this as a moral as well as a business issue.

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## Learning from others

For many years **Affinity Sutton** have been conducting customer surveys and now do so quarterly. This is because they want to know quickly what they're doing that is satisfying customers, so that they can do more of it (and what is unsatisfactory so that they can do less). They have worked with **The Leadership Factor** (TLF) to deliver the surveys.

The TLF survey, launched June 2011, has two elements:

- a survey of 800 residents asking about their recent 'transaction' with Affinity Sutton, logged on their contact manager system
- a survey of 200 randomly selected residents asking them how satisfied they are with more general issues about safety and security in their neighbourhoods, their general surroundings, and how effectively Affinity Sutton communicates with them.

Supplementing the quarterly survey, TLF carry out monthly repairs tracker surveys to gauge satisfaction with responsive repairs. The combined scores from this and the quarterly survey provide Affinity Sutton's overall Satisfaction Index, reported to the business and to residents.

All the surveys, both in-house and outsourced, are designed to probe low scores, and so provide not only quantitative analysis but also customers' comments. They give managers an insight into specific areas where Affinity Sutton may need to improve.

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**Salix Homes** set up a customer focus group which designed a protocol for contractors working in the homes of disabled people - it has now been adopted by other companies.

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## Change your services so customers get what they want

Information on customer views is only valuable if it drives the services you provide for them. Your goal is to create a culture where services are designed and delivered based upon tenant insight.

This is easier said than done, because it often involves a significant change in the culture of an organisation. The focus should be on improving services by using information from both satisfied and dissatisfied customers to decide what services should be provided or what changes should be made.

Some key steps in handling this change are:

- communicate – say what the changes are and why they need to happen now
- create a team of people who will drive change at different levels
- plot the key factors favouring or acting as barriers to change (there are various techniques – several are discussed in [Housing and the customer](#))
- make sure customers and board members/councillors are kept informed
- commit resources – time, training, finance – to make the change
- keep communicating vision and strategy to those who are involved
- celebrate any quick wins
- manage resistance – don't deny it but tackle it; take on board comments that are appropriate
- ensure that staff are empowered to take action and keep momentum going
- engage with 'hard-to-reach' customers - you may find they want different services to others
- embed the change into the organisation's culture and keep it under review.

## Learning from others

**Affinity Sutton** puts a lot of emphasis on using information from customers to improve services, using it to establish 'learning points' and 'priorities for improvement' (a typical example is 'keeping customers informed'). Their business improvement team works closely with managers to agree these and the actions to be taken. Progress is tracked through a customer action plan and shared with residents.

Actions taken include:

- company-wide campaigns called 'Make my day', 'Marriage made in heaven' and 'Christmas Stars' - intended to focus staff on improving customer care
- organisational change such as the setting up of a repairs administration team
- performance measures being built into bonus-related team targets
- learning points from the TLF survey included in customer service training with discussion points on how staff can improve customer satisfaction and keep them better informed
- bespoke bi-weekly reports to team managers detailing outstanding and incomplete call-back processes for their staff
- a bi-weekly list of the top 20 best performing staff on the organisation's intranet
- a quarterly 'Customer Service Champion' award: so far 30 members of staff have received the award together with a £50 gift voucher
- feeding back to customers how their views have influenced services in the You Said...We Did newsletter.

**South Essex Homes** has a customer-focused appointment system for gas servicing which ensured they were 100% CP 12 compliant for the whole of the 2011/12 financial year. An initial notification letter with an appointment is sent two weeks prior to servicing and tenants can use a freephone number to rearrange an appointment if it is not convenient. Appointments are also available on certain evenings and Saturday mornings as well as during normal working hours. Telephone reminders are made two days before the appointment and an automated text sent the day before.

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## Ensure your staff put customers first

Staff training is key to ensuring that everyone in the organisation puts customers first. Training should be mandatory for all staff, at all levels. The aim should be not only to ensure that everyone 'gets the message' but that the training makes them enthusiastic, encourages them to come forward with ideas for improving services and – over time – embeds the cultural change needed to ensure that customers come first.

To achieve good results, training requires considerable planning. For example:

- having inspirational trainers who give a 'buzz' to trainees
- regular updating and refreshing of programmes so there is always 'something new' not 'the same old thing'
- building in ways of encouraging and rewarding ideas and participation, such as delegates naming three changes they can make following the course
- relating the training back to day-to-day work by bringing in and discussing live examples
- requiring customer care as a competency in staff evaluation
- if possible, involving customers themselves within training programmes, to help improve staff's understanding of customer views (especially backroom staff). For example at Harvest Homes customers are trained to be 'mystery shoppers' but then use the experience to provide mentoring to staff on how to improve their customer interaction.

## Find out if customers are satisfied

A key test of customer satisfaction is whether it aligns with performance. Look at the diagram below and consider where your organisation falls.

**Customer perception of satisfaction**

		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
<b>Performance management</b>	<i>Low</i>	Low objective performance and customer feedback. Intervention likely by regulator	Low objective performance but high customer satisfaction. This may be because of low customer expectation
	<i>High</i>	High objective performance but customer expectations are more demanding i.e. better services at less cost	Alignment of high performance and high satisfaction

**Source:** Housing and the customer

Organisations should be achieving high performance management scores and high satisfaction ratings (the bottom right of the matrix), but many find themselves in the top right or bottom left cells. To address this you may need to:

- change your performance management indicators so that they are better aligned with the ways used to measure customer satisfaction
- find out about and raise the aspirations of customers that may have a culture of low expectations of service quality
- challenge customers with high expectations over the balance between improved services and the costs, or consider offering different levels of service.

## Learning from others

In 2008, **Helena Partnerships** set an ambitious target to increase the number of customers who were very satisfied with the organisation's services by 25% within four years.

By focussing on the issues which customers told Helena mattered most to them, this target was exceeded two years early, with 49% of customers 'very satisfied' in 2010. This rose again in 2011, with 52% of customers very satisfied and 90% satisfied overall.

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**Soha** in Oxfordshire has a 'co-regulation' approach where tenants are part of scrutiny and inspection within the organisation. It has 42 trained tenants in these roles who have directly helped shape Soha's policies, check service delivery and have challenged board and management decision-making on issues such as flexible tenancies. They have signed a code of conduct and a confidentiality agreement and as a result have access to the information they need to inform their discussions.

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## Learning from others

**Affinity Sutton** has a range of methods for testing satisfaction and making changes in response to customer views. They include:

- Resident Area Panels – there are 14 of these in different areas and changes that have resulted have ranged from changing the contact centre number so it is the same for all queries, to involving residents in some design aspects of the website
- Estate inspections – offering opportunities to improve the environment, for example a resident complaining about walkways being slippery led to a non-slip covering being applied.
- National Residents Council – bringing together up to 100 of the most involved residents from the area panels to focus on key priorities for the coming year, questioning the group board and attending workshops
- Resident Scrutiny Boards – three boards are newly established across the country and will scrutinise the company's performance in their areas.

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## Keep customers informed

Finally, keeping your customers informed is a vital stage of the process. There are some basic rules about this type of communication:

- be clear about what you want to achieve: for example, informing residents of a service change or reporting back on how their views have influenced services
- crystallise your messages: make sure there are a small number of key points that you aim to communicate, so that recipients get the message even if they only glance at what you provide
- think creatively about how to reach each 'segment' of your audience: what methods of communication are likely to be most successful in each case?
- tell them more than once, and in different ways: but plan what you do so that each way complements the other.

The CIH book [Housing and the customer](#) has a wide range of information on ways that different organisations use to keep in touch with customers.

## Learning from others

**Affinity Sutton** has a range of communications to residents including:

- At Home – a newsletter issued by estate teams at local level up to four times per year with news about estate clean-ups, repairs and maintenance and details about how to contact the local housing management team
- Shine – national newsletter sent out four times per year to around 50,000 residents includes a mix of national and regional news and features
- Rapport – which goes four times per year to the most involved residents across England
- Local and regional pages on the website - with regular news and updates about what is happening in local areas.

Affinity Sutton also reported back to residents on some of the key areas where customer feedback has been taken on board, in its leaflet You said... We did.

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## Useful resources and information

Housing and the Customer  
[www.cih.org/thebookshop](http://www.cih.org/thebookshop)

How to... prepare for regulation reform: Tenant engagement and scrutiny  
[www.cih.org/howtobriefings](http://www.cih.org/howtobriefings)

Involving residents in shaping services: CIH Housing Practice Issue 10  
[www.cih.org/housingpractice](http://www.cih.org/housingpractice)

Tenant Insight – a toolkit for landlords (CIH/TSA/HouseMark)  
[www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR//templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/Tenant\\_insight\\_a\\_toolkit\\_for\\_landlords](http://www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR//templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/Tenant_insight_a_toolkit_for_landlords)

Tenant Scrutiny – Now and in the future (CIH/TSA/HouseMark)  
[www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR//templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/Tenant\\_scrutiny\\_now\\_and\\_in\\_the\\_future](http://www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR//templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/Tenant_scrutiny_now_and_in_the_future)

What tenants want – Globally!  
[www.cih.org/thebookshop](http://www.cih.org/thebookshop)

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