



Customer Service Excellence

Assessment Report

for

**London Borough of Tower Hamlets
Adults, Health and Wellbeing Directorate
Homeless and Housing Advice Services**

By Assessor: Sally Gitkin

On behalf of EMQC Ltd

Date of evidence review: 23 March 2009

Date of on-site visit: 2 April 2009

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1. Summary

1.1 Introduction and background

This Assessment Report covers the services provided by Tower Hamlets Homeless and Housing Advice Services. This report includes a brief description of the organisation, the assessment methodology and an overview of how Homeless and Housing Advice Services (HHAS) demonstrated compliance against Customer Service Excellence, the UK Government's national standard for excellence in customer service.

HHAS is responsible for discharging Tower Hamlet's statutory homeless duties as defined in Part VII of the Housing Act 1996. However, this is only one of the range of duties that are undertaken as the Service aims to prevent homelessness through advice and information, provide temporary accommodation where a statutory duty is established and assist 16 and 17 year olds and adults who require assistance. The Rehousing Team facilitates the option of obtaining permanent housing through the Housing Options route, working within the wider structure established for bidding for properties.

To support vulnerable customers, HHAS works with a wide variety of partner organisations, both internally and externally. These partners are from the public, private and voluntary sectors in the borough and sometimes, beyond its boundaries. There are also some key targets set for councils delivering services such as reducing households in temporary accommodation (an expensive option that families traditionally dislike preferring the stability of permanent housing), providing supported housing for homeless 16 and 17 year olds and reducing rough sleeping.

HHAS works within the wider Tower Hamlets Community Plan aims and the new Homelessness Strategy 2008 – 13 focuses on children, young people and families, vulnerable people, access to housing (a key factor in improving lives) and employment and economic well-being.

Gross expenditure for the service is £38,477,400 and gross income is £35,648,400. Therefore the cost of providing services is £2,829,000 for 2009 - 2010. There are currently 88 permanent and 38 temporary members of staff.

1.2 Methodology

The assessment process was a full assessment against all the elements of the Customer Service Excellence Standard. There was a pre-assessment meeting on 11 February 2008 when the assessment process was discussed and HHAS's readiness for assessment agreed. The evidence was sent in electronic format and was reviewed on 23 March 2009 and an Assessment Plan was agreed for the site visit. Prior to the visit day, the assessor spoke on the telephone to the Director of the Adults, Health and Wellbeing Directorate, the Learning Disabilities Team Leader in Tower Hamlets and the Rough Sleepers Coordinator.

The assessor arrived early so had the opportunity to meet some staff who provide security in the building and customer service support in the reception area. The formal assessment visit started with the assessor discussing the application with the Quality Manager and the

Head of Service. After that initial discussion, the assessor met some members of the Service User Panel to discuss their involvement with HHAS. There was then an opportunity to visit the reception area to observe how it is organised and the ways in which the service handles customers who visit the building.

At the partner lunch, the assessor met the Chief Executive of Providence Row Housing Association, a member of Jenkins Duval Housing Consultants, the Team Manager of the Sensory Impairment Team, the Manager of the Leaving Care Team, an advocate from the Tower Hamlets Law Centre, a senior manager from the Swan Housing Association, the manager from the Tower Hamlets Domestic Violence Partnership and a member of staff from Victim Support.

After lunch, the assessor was taken to meet a customer in temporary accommodation with two representatives from a local estate agent and a HHAS officer working in temporary accommodation. There was then an opportunity to see a void property that was being partially refurbished to be rented to a family. After that, a visit to the Aldgate Hostel was arranged to meet the team who work there with vulnerable, single homeless clients. On returning to the office, the assessor met a mental health social worker who liaises between the NHS and the council. Finally there was an extensive discussion around any outstanding points with Team Leaders. As there was limited time in the day, the assessor was unable to meet all the staff she would have liked but noted their roles and responsibilities as part of the evidence review.

Following completion of the assessment, the assessor was able to provide feedback on Homeless and Housing Advice Services' compliance against all the elements of the Customer Service Excellence Standard and her recommendation to the EMQC Certification Committee.

1.3 Summary of strengths

- Leaders are focused on involving frontline staff in improving services.
- Customer Service Excellence has been used as a framework for reviewing how teams work, particularly across functions.
- HHAS has grown specific services internally in response to the needs of vulnerable customers.
- There is recognition that some review of functions to streamline the customer journey is now desirable.
- Work with other agencies is strong and focused on finding ways to assist people in need.

1.4 Conclusion and recommendation

Homeless and Housing Advice Services complies with the requirements of the Customer Service Excellence Standard. I have highlighted strengths, and also areas for further development.

There are no actions that require immediate attention and I am pleased to pass on my recommendation to EMQC's Certification Committee that Homeless and Housing Advice Services be recognised as meeting the Customer Service Excellence Standard. The

Service will be awarded the Customer Service Excellence certificate which is valid for three years, subject to ongoing monitoring.

There are a number of elements which are not fully compliant, and I recommend that an action plan be developed to help address these. Progress against the areas of partial compliance and development areas will be reviewed at the next visit in 12 months' time.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your kind hospitality and cooperation during this assessment.

Assessor Name: Sally Gitkin

Date: 9 April 2009

2. Detailed Assessment Findings against the standard

2.1 Criterion 1: Customer Insight

1.1 Customer Identification

There is a variety of information about current and potential customer groups and this informs the work that HHAS undertakes. At borough level, there are profiles of each electoral ward identifying factors such as age, ethnicity, unemployment rates and life expectancy which are all potential contributors to deprivation. The HOST team collects data around diversity and there is detailed analysis of cases dealt with under the homelessness provisions of the 1996 Act. The latest Homelessness Strategy 2008 – 2013 is built on an in-depth understanding of the range of clients within the borough.

Insight about customers has been gained through the customer satisfaction surveys, specialist focus groups (domestic violence) and the participation of the Users Panel. Customer journey mapping was used to establish the current ways that customers can access services and then to identify potential for new ways of working in a revised structure. It has been recognised that the processes could be streamlined to enable customers to receive the services they require more effectively. HHAS has expanded to meet rising need and created services to assist customers. However, this has made the journey more complex and so longer. The challenge is to shift the focus without losing any of the current positive aspects of service delivery.

There has been specific work undertaken around hard-to-reach groups and an action plan has been developed following consultation with key stakeholders including the voluntary sector. It is recognised that there are hard-to-reach customers with complex problems, particularly 'rough sleepers'. There is coordinated work planned to provide additional support for workers who provide services for this client group. Our assessor visited a hostel that works closely with rough sleepers, many of whom have mental health and addiction problems.

1.2 Engagement and Consultation

There is a procedure for engagement developed for 'consulting, communicating and improving customer focus'. The consultation survey guide identifies methods and which is most appropriate depending on objectives for consultation as well as giving detailed instructions for the survey process, end-to-end.

Consultation with customers is an important driver for improvement and change within the Service. The views of customers are sought through a range of methods and where possible, their views are taken into account. For example, the User Group contributed ideas for the new reception area and many of those have been included in the final design and layout. As part of the recent review of the whole service, the consultants attended a focus group and views were noted in the report as comments and case studies. There is no doubt that customers and their experience of HHAS have informed the outcomes that are now being developed from the Jenkins Duval report.

Customers are given the results of surveys and other methods through the regular newsletter 'In Touch' that is distributed widely.

There is also an engagement calendar that is a guide and tool for regular review of consulting and involving customers. It is important that processes can be tracked and evaluated to ensure that the results are as effective as possible.

1.3 Customer Satisfaction

The engagement calendar includes methods for obtaining customer satisfaction scheduled for specific times of the year. HHAS has used surveys targeted at specific customer groups, exit polls and mystery shopping. The 2008 Customer Satisfaction Survey was very comprehensive, including a full range of questions about service delivery. In some cases, the response rates for surveys are relatively low so may not be giving an accurate picture of satisfaction levels.

The results of the reception exit survey have been publicised in the newsletter and displayed in the public part of the office where it can be clearly seen. Following the full 2008 survey, a number of actions were implemented including training for staff and more focus on implementing the Contact Manager reception software package. The assessor noted that staff are still not using the software to its full potential.

Specific questions around delivery, timeliness, information, access and quality of customer service are included in the main annual survey. The target for customer satisfaction is a year on year increase of 2%. Levels of satisfaction are generally improving though there is still more to be done in some areas to provide a more consistent service and therefore obtain greater levels of satisfaction.

As well as the 'high level' analysis of the customer journey through HHAS, there has also been some work undertaken around moving from temporary to permanent accommodation. A quality circle was formed to look at how customers were supported and a new leaflet was written to improve the information for people going through this transition which can be a confusing and stressful time.

Partial Compliance

1.3.1

Although customer satisfaction is measured for most customer groups, the sample for some groups such as those in temporary accommodation is rather small.

Areas for improvement

You may wish to review how you promote the survey with tenants in temporary accommodation to increase the response rate.

As part of the consultation strategy that has been developed, it would be helpful to review what is being undertaken corporately to ensure that opportunities to participate in larger surveys are optimised and duplication is minimised. This is a useful exercise though we recognise that some of your customers may not participate in other consultations.

Customer journey mapping can also involve customers who can bring their experience to the activity, both after and during the journey. This is called *customer experience mapping* and takes the emotional responses of customers into account which can be enlightening. You may find it useful to look at the Customer Journey Mapping Toolkit for Practitioners available through the Cabinet Office website.

2.2 Criterion 2: The Culture of the Organisation

2.1 Leadership, Policy and Culture

There is good corporate commitment for putting the customer at the centre of service delivery with senior management and Elected Member commitment as evidenced by the corporate priorities and Customer Promise. There is an increasing sense of leadership around customer service both within the Adults, Health and Wellbeing Directorate and HHAS. The Homelessness Strategy is closely aligned with the Community Plan in the Safer and Supportive block as well as having an impact on corporate performance against the Local Area Agreement targets.

Customer insight is used to inform policy and strategy as evidenced by the work that has been undertaken following the visits to temporary accommodation. As a result of that research, the Family Support Team has been established funded by the Primary Care Trust, Children's Services and Supporting People.

Private interview facilities are available and policies, data processing and procedures ensure that data protection is complied with in line with the law. There has been some recent input around privacy for both customers and staff to ensure that there is full compliance with procedures. The new reception includes rooms where people are hidden from view to ensure that they cannot be seen from outside the room. This increases personal safety for customers who may be fleeing some kind of domestic violence.

Staff have been actively engaged in developing a customer-focused culture through the G2E projects which we commend. In addition, there is active engagement with staff around developing the service in line with the recent consultants' report.

2.2 Staff Professionalism and Attitude

Staff are given training and guidance around telephone handling and interviewing to continue to develop customer focused services.

Feedback from customers and partners indicates that staff have an understanding of customer needs and are helpful, aiming to assist customers to solve their problems. Our assessor noted that staff were aware of the difficulties that customers have, particularly those who are vulnerable.

Currently, objective setting takes place within the appraisal scheme and customer service issues are discussed in staff reviews. Team and individual achievements are recognised and promoted. The Bright Ideas Scheme and the Reach for the Stars Scheme both provide encouragement for staff to contribute to customer service improvements.

Customer-facing staff have been involved in some customer journey mapping and their ideas have been implemented. Managers support staff engagement with service improvement and recognise that it is an essential part of improving how customers are dealt with throughout the organisation.

This Criterion is fully compliant.

2.3 Criterion 3: Information and Access

There is good information about the full range of HHAS services available on the website and in leaflets and other publications such as regular newsletters. In the reception area, good use is made of bright posters to promote services such as money advice.

Full details on charges (for example, for storage while in temporary accommodation) and rent are provided in a variety of ways to customers including leaflets in English and other community languages such as Bengali.

There are some interview scripts to act as prompts for staff, ensuring a more consistent approach from each person. The web site is updated to bring information in line with current policies and practice.

In addition to clear written information, customers are given guidance when they telephone HHAS and during face-to-face discussions. Where required, interpreters are used to facilitate communication.

HHAS aims to use whatever channels are required to communicate effectively in line with its customer care policies. Where letters are very important, they are delivered by hand to ensure that customers receive them. Letters are audited to ensure that information is clear and the Users Panel assists with ensuring that the language is as jargon free as possible.

Staff check whether customers have understood information when they meet or talk to them. This is particularly important where legal action may be taken against an individual.

There have been improvements to both web based information and written documents in response to both staff and customer feedback.

The website is accessible and there are a number of options for making contact which take differing needs and issues around disability into account.

The areas where customers visit are clean and comfortable with facilities for people with mobility problems. Our assessor noted the substantial improvements in the reception area since the last main assessment making it a much more inviting place to visit. The atmosphere was calm and services were being controlled effectively despite people having to wait for some time, on occasion.

HHAS has effective arrangements with other parts of the council and partner organisations to ensure that customers receive a co-ordinated service. This was clear from the discussions that the assessor had with a wide range of people during the day. Work continues to be developed to ensure that vulnerable customers are provided with advice and support.

Inevitably, there may be gaps in provision (hospital discharge for some clients) but there was clearly the will to provide solutions to problems even with hard-to-reach clients. We note that plans for the future should improve coordination of services and strengthen the gateways to support for clients. In the process of transition from one model of delivery to another, it will be crucial to maintain the excellent links with other providers that exist and this is inevitably a major challenge during periods of change.

There is interaction with landlords, agents and partners with regular meetings and training to agree standards across the sector. We note that HHAS communicates well with other stakeholders.

Partial Compliance

3.3.2

Currently, the evaluation of access channels is not complete so it is difficult to know how to ensure that the best choices are being offered to customers and that those channels are working effectively.

Areas for improvement

Monitoring of phone responses is an integral part of channel monitoring and this should be addressed corporately. We note that you aim to ensure you comply with the standards set.

Other access channels such as text messaging may be helpful to your client group given that the majority have mobile phones.

2.4 Criterion 4: Delivery

There are targets for statutory areas of work such as making 95% of decisions within 33 days and reducing the numbers of households in temporary accommodation by 2010. Some additional local targets have been set such as 90% of temporary accommodation within the borough and number of households being visited twice a year. The User Panel suggested both the latter ideas.

Performance is monitored on a regular basis, reported internally and key areas are also reported to customers and partners. Dips in performance are noted and where necessary, explained to customers. The projects covered in the G2E initiative aim to address a number of areas.

The Homelessness Strategy Action Plan is a detailed document that outlines improvements and additional targets to achieve the aims set out under each of the headings.

There was a staff survey on standards and performance indicators and suggestions were made to improve how work is monitored and measured. The User Panel was also consulted on local targets.

Staff are given guidance on how to explain what service customers can expect which is an important aspect of their work as people often have unrealistic views given the lack of permanent housing, not only in the borough but across London. There are good levels of satisfaction evidenced by the exit poll survey indicating that outcomes in the first stage of the customer journey in reception are positive.

There has been extensive benchmarking through the Housing Advice and Homelessness Benchmarking Service and the Jenkins Duvall report identifies good practice from similar organisations. We commend the approach to learning from other organisations and recognise that HHAS is building on many areas of good work towards a better future for its customers.

Internally, the G2E range of projects aims to address areas that are identified to improve service delivery. Eventually, the closure list will be published on the web site with outcomes explained.

The Council has a comprehensive complaints procedure indicating a commitment to put things right and deal with customer problems adequately. Staff are given guidance on how to deal with complaints and there is regular reporting on complaints corporately.

HHAS also has an informal complaints and feedback procedure which will generate some useful information when it has been fully implemented and monitored by the Quality Team. The guidance is very comprehensive but we are not sure if the process has been fully embedded yet.

Partial Compliance

4.1.2

There are a number of areas of performance that are very good such as reducing rent arrears and preventing homelessness through good quality housing advice. However, there are still some key areas that are not meeting targets.

4.3.1

Currently, there is not full feedback to customers on complaints across the Service, as we would expect.

4.3.6

The outcome for complainants whose complaint is upheld has not been fully tested.

Areas for improvement

Effective monitoring of each of the outcomes highlighted through the targets set in the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan should result in a much clearer evaluation of the Service's overall performance.

Better use of performance management software will lead to more effective collection of performance data which is accurate and timely.

Working with partners externally to publish best practice examples would be beneficial for the Council and its customers.

Information about all areas of performance could usefully be summarised and published regularly.

Feedback to customers on the number of complaints and comments and actions taken to improve the service could be published on the website.

Compliance Plus

4.2.3

HHAS has been actively opening up services for external scrutiny and benchmarking which is excellent and will lead to a good service improving further. The reconfiguration of services and continuing participation of staff and other stakeholders will help to ensure that teams are established that build on what has been achieved to date and provide coordinated provision for the future.

2.5 Criterion 5: Timeliness and Quality of Service

The HHAS Customer Commitment includes the Customer Charter that outlines timeliness of response for customer contact as well as the quality of customer service. This supports the Tower Hamlets corporate Customer Promise. There are standards for answering telephone calls, letters, personal callers and home visits. The document also explains how performance will be measured and welcomes feedback from customers on service delivery. There is extensive guidance for staff to ensure they are fully aware about how to comply with the promises contained in the detail. We look forward to seeing the results of full implementation at the next visit.

There is a display in Reception advising customers about what they can expect when they visit and service standards are also published on the website and in leaflets. The ultimate aim is to deal with queries at the first point of contact and obtain the information that is needed to complete the work with the customer or enable correct access to a service team. Receptionists are well-informed and can usually signpost customers correctly.

In the future, the aim will be that a more extensive triage takes place during an interview where more information is collected so that queries can be handled more quickly, reducing waiting times. This approach will require extensive additional training and a review of the public space that is being used in the reception area.

Information sharing works well with key partners both internally and externally. In future, full implementation of Contact Manager will improve information flow within HHAS.

There is monitoring against standards for timeliness and quality of customer service though publication has not been as fully developed as well as it could be.

Partial Compliance

5.3.2

Standard are not always being met in relation to timeliness, particularly in the reception area. Customers have to wait longer than would be necessary if the staffing was deployed differently.

Additional evidence is also required in relation to publication around standards for timeliness and quality of customer care.

5.3.3

There could be more work undertaken to compare timeliness in the reception area with similar organisations. This might also be undertaken internally across reception services in Tower Hamlets council.

Areas for improvement

Performance in relation to timeliness needs to be adequately measured and improvements made, where possible.

Publication should be regular and open with reasons why performance has been poor against targets.

Working alongside similar service providers to evaluate how they deliver services in a busy reception area would be valuable. There are likely to be some good comparators across London in other boroughs.

Better use of the technology that is available to staff will improve the service.

Appendix A – Compliance Framework

Criterion	Sub-Criterion	Element	Non Compliant	Partial Compliance	Compliant	Compliance Plus
1	1.1	1.1.1			X	
		1.1.2			X	
		1.1.3			X	
	1.2	1.2.1			X	
		1.2.2			X	
		1.2.3			X	
	1.3	1.3.1		X		
		1.3.2			X	
		1.3.3			X	
		1.3.4			X	
		1.3.5			X	

Criterion	Sub-Criterion	Element	Non Compliant	Partial Compliance	Compliant	Compliance Plus
2	2.1	2.1.1			X	
		2.1.2			X	
		2.1.3			X	
		2.1.4			X	
		2.1.5			X	
		2.1.6			X	
	2.2	2.2.1			X	
		2.2.2			X	
		2.2.3			X	
		2.2.4			X	
		2.2.5			X	

x

Criterion	Sub-Criterion	Element	Non Compliant	Partial Compliance	Compliant	Compliance Plus
3	3.1	3.1.1			X	
		3.1.2			X	
	3.2	3.2.1			X	
		3.2.2			X	
		3.2.3			X	
		3.2.4			X	
	3.3	3.3.1			X	
		3.3.2		X		
		3.3.3			X	
	3.4	3.4.1			X	
		3.4.2			X	
		3.4.3			X	

Criterion	Sub-Criterion	Element	Non Compliant	Partial Compliance	Compliant	Compliance Plus
4	4.1	4.1.1			X	
		4.1.2		X		
		4.1.3			X	
	4.2	4.2.1			X	
		4.2.2			X	
		4.2.3				X
		4.2.4			X	
	4.3	4.3.1		X		
		4.3.2			X	
		4.3.3			X	
		4.3.4			X	
		4.3.5			X	
		4.3.6		X		

Criterion	Sub-Criterion	Element	Non Compliant	Partial Compliance	Compliant	Compliance Plus
5	5.1	5.1.1			X	
		5.1.2			X	
	5.2	5.2.1			X	
		5.2.2			X	
		5.2.3			X	
		5.2.4			X	
		5.2.5			X	
	5.3.	5.3.1			X	
		5.3.2		X		
		5.3.3		X		