



CUSTOMER SERVICE & COMMUNICATION POLICY

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This policy describes how Almond Housing Association Limited (AHA Ltd.) will seek to achieve the highest standards possible in providing services and information to our tenants and other service users.
- 1.2 AHA Ltd. believes that a 'high quality service' means that:
- a) we are accessible (can be easily contacted) by all sections of the community;
 - b) we are accountable for the decisions we make and actions we take;
 - c) we keep those we are in contact with informed, as appropriate;
 - d) we ensure that the information we provide, whether verbally or in written form, is easily understood, accurate and up to date;
 - e) we consult our tenants and other users on the standards of service they receive and we encourage tenants to have a say (to participate) in the decisions we make;
 - f) we listen and respond to the needs of our tenants;
 - g) we treat those we contact honestly, with respect and courtesy;
 - h) we are reliable, and do what we say we will do.
- 1.3 This policy summarises our standards in the areas of Customer Service and Communication and draws on a wide variety of policies and procedures which describe in greater detail the various activities referred to.

2.0 RESPONSIBILITIES

2.1 Board of Management

- To ensure that there is in place a policy on Customer Service & Communication that complies with current guidance, quality standards and good practice.

2.2 Management

- Chief Executive: To ensure that the policy is communicated to all employees and implemented throughout AHA Ltd.
- Head of Corporate Services: To co-ordinate the implementation of agreed customer services standards throughout AHA Ltd., providing employee training where required, and to oversee the production of publicity and information materials, ensuring high standards of clarity and design etc.
- Heads of Section: To ensure that agreed customer service standards are provided by their staff and that all publications are of a high standard.

2.3 Employees

- To read the policy and implement agreed customer service standards at all times.

3.0 GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

- 3.1 AHA Ltd.'s Customer Service and Communication standards flow from the overall standards and requirements we are expected to meet as a social housing provider. These include:
- a) fulfilling our statutory and contractual duties to anyone receiving a service from us;
 - b) having regard to all relevant codes of practice and current guidance, and following these in practice unless there are very good reasons for not doing so;
 - c) ensuring that all employees have clear definitions of their roles and responsibilities;
 - d) having comprehensive, well-written policies and procedures for all aspects of our activities, ensuring that these are reviewed regularly and revised in accordance with changes in legislation, current practice or guidance;
 - e) ensuring that our policies and procedures are understood by all employees and are easily accessed by them;
 - f) having effective systems and guidance for employees so that they fully understand what is expected of them as they carry out their duties, minimising mistakes and deviations from policies or procedures through effective training, supervision, management and performance monitoring;
 - g) undertaking ongoing internal self-assessment to ensure we are meeting or exceeding current standards, or to identify areas where improvements are required, and implementing plans or programmes to achieve improvement;
 - h) ensuring that efficient and effective records are kept and that they are up to date;
 - i) achieving effective liaison and co-operation between all the sections in AHA Ltd.;
 - j) ensuring that all decisions are made objectively, fairly and consistently, that where required specialist advice is sought before reaching a decision, and ensuring that decisions are taken at the appropriate time and without unnecessary delay;
 - k) informing all service users in writing about decisions which concern them individually or collectively, with the reasons and justifications for such changes;
 - l) promoting tenant participation in all relevant activities, in particular developing the use of Tenant Focus and Scrutiny Groups, consulting on specific issues as required, and implementing any necessary changes and/or improvements identified as a result of views and comments received.

4.0 EMPLOYEE CONDUCT

- 4.1 AHA Ltd.'s employees will, as part of complying with the Staff Code of Conduct:
- a) comply with the employee dress code, and aim to be friendly, welcoming and helpful while conducting themselves in a proper and professional manner at all times;
 - b) carry proof of identity when making home visits;
 - c) introduce themselves to the person(s) they are dealing with, and give their first name when answering the telephone;
 - d) treat every individual they contact with honesty, courtesy and respect as part of complying with our Equality & Diversity policy, and treat the homes of those they visit with respect;
 - e) deal with personal callers to the office promptly;
 - f) show patience, understanding and sensitivity when dealing with an individual's problems.

5.0 GENERAL TENANT SERVICES

5.1 In addition to the general requirements in section 3 and to other specific standards in the sections which follow AHA Ltd. will aim to ensure that:

- a) we allocate our properties fairly and in accordance with our current Allocations policy, providing the support required both at the start of and throughout the tenancy;
- b) we operate a 'one-door' approach, with all initial contact through the Housing Management section, with individual Housing Officers allocated to specific areas;
- c) we maintain our estates and the surrounding environment to a high standard;
- d) we handle all complaints about 'neighbour nuisance' or anti-social behaviour, breaches of tenancy conditions and harassment of individuals or minorities confidentially, sensitively but firmly, as detailed in our Anti-Social Behaviour policy and procedures;
- e) we consult with tenants on proposed changes to annual rents, service charges or any housing management or maintenance policies which will directly affect them;
- f) we provide appropriate information on current rents, annual rent increases and service charges, as detailed in our Rent and Service Charges policies and procedures, and access to our principal housing management, maintenance or general policies;
- g) we promote and encourage tenant participation in our activities, including supporting the establishment of Tenant Focus and Scrutiny Groups, and consulting our tenants on matters which affect them, as detailed in our Tenant Participation policy and strategy;
- h) we provide the required adaptations in the homes of tenants with a physical disability;
- i) we monitor and review our service provision through regular tenant feedback surveys, tenant scrutiny activities and ongoing internal self-assessment.

6.0 MAINTENANCE STAFF & CONTRACTORS

6.1 In addition to the general requirements in section 3, maintenance staff and contractors will:

- a) take due care of tenants' property and possessions, protect them at all times from the effects of maintenance work, e.g. dust and paint etc., and endeavour to keep tenants' homes secure when work is in progress;
- b) keep all materials and equipment used on site safe to avoid risk of danger to household occupants and visitors, and where work is being undertaken in an occupied property, ensure that all building rubbish is cleared from inside the property at the end of each working day;
- c) comply with all Health & Safety legislation and all relevant codes of practice, in particular ensuring that services such as water, gas and electricity are re-connected and tested as required on completion of maintenance work;
- d) make good any damage to internal decoration resulting from an accident by or negligence by the contractor;
- e) carry out all work to currently acceptable good standards;
- f) aim to complete all work within AHA Ltd.'s current published timescales.

7.0 OFFICE, RECEPTION AND INTERVIEW FACILITIES

7.1 AHA Ltd. will, so far as is possible, ensure that:

- a) our office opening hours are well publicised and our offices are accessible to all, in particular for parents with prams or pushchairs, or for wheelchair users and others with physical disabilities;
- b) the reception area is friendly, welcoming, comfortable, clean, tidy and safe, with current reading material and facilities for children;
- c) private interview rooms are available and accessible to all;
- d) information provided in the reception area is up to date, adequately stocked, well presented, neat and tidy;
- e) reception staff have received all the necessary training and instruction in our policies and procedures to enable them to respond promptly and accurately to enquiries;
- f) potentially confidential information or advice being provided to a tenant or an applicant is not easily overheard by other individuals in the reception area.

8.0 APPOINTMENTS

8.1 In providing housing management and maintenance services AHA Ltd. will aim to ensure that:

- a) office interviews or home visits are arranged at mutually convenient times;
- b) we keep to the appointment times made, or if we are unable to, we give adequate notice and arrange an alternative date/time without delay;
- c) those who call into the office with an appointment are seen promptly;
- d) those who call in to our office without an appointment will not have to wait longer than 15 minutes before they are seen;
- e) if the person a caller wishes to see is not available, a colleague offers to assist;
- f) we always leave a calling card when a home visit is made and the tenant or applicant is not available.

9.0 CONFIDENTIALITY & DATA PROTECTION

9.1 In complying with our policy and procedures on Confidentiality and the requirements of the Data Protection Act and related guidance, AHA Ltd. will aim to ensure that:

- a) we have appropriate procedures in place for the disclosure of information to tenants, applicants or factored owners, and to enable them to have access to the information we hold about them, in accordance with their legal rights.
- b) access to confidential information about individuals is limited to those employees who 'need to know', and information is secure against unauthorised access;
- c) we have appropriate procedures and protocols in place for the transfer and sharing of information with other appropriate agencies;
- d) we inform applicants or tenants of our Confidentiality policy and procedures at the time of application and sign-up and obtain their consent (in writing where required) to retain 'sensitive' information and share this with others as required.

10.0 TELEPHONE CALLS & E-MAILS

- 10.1 In dealing with telephone calls AHA Ltd. will aim to ensure that:
- a) each incoming call is answered within 5 rings, and the employee answering the call gives their first name and confirms that the caller has reached AHA Ltd.;
 - b) the call is dealt with by the most appropriate employee;
 - c) if the employee is not able to reply or provide the information required immediately, they call back by the next working day, or where additional time is needed to gather information, they agree with the caller a time limit for a reply;
 - d) where an employee receives a message from a colleague, they seek to contact the caller by the following working day at the latest;
 - e) an answering service with clear information and instructions is provided for callers when the office is closed, especially where callers need to report emergency repairs;
 - f) all employees have received the required training to enable them to use the telephone system to maximum effectiveness;
 - g) employees who are leaving the office advise the 'frontline' team answering calls that they will not be at their desks and complete the 'staff movement tracker' on the IT system, to avoid unnecessary delays in trying to contact an individual.
- 10.2 AHA Ltd. will monitor the capacity of the telephone system and invest in the upgrading or replacement of the system as required from time to time.
- 10.3 AHA Ltd. will develop the use of e-mails and texts as an alternative means of communication, publicising the e-mail address to be used by tenants, applicants and factored owners etc. In dealing with external e-mails we will aim to ensure that, where a reply is required, we respond within the same target timescales as for correspondence – see section 12.
- 10.4 When away from the office for a day or more, e.g. at a training event or on holiday, employees will activate their 'out of the office' automatic e-mail reply.

11.0 WRITTEN and ORAL COMMUNICATIONS

Written Communications

- 11.1 In our written communications AHA Ltd. will aim to ensure that:
- a) our letters, forms and all our key information, including the Tenancy Agreement, Policies, Information Sheets, Newsletters are clear, concise, easy to understand, use everyday language avoiding the use of 'jargon', technical or legal language wherever possible, and are inviting to read;
 - b) we make appropriate use of readable fonts, print size and uncluttered layouts (offering larger version print size or Braille versions for those with reading difficulties);
 - c) we use attractive and relevant illustrations, and make good use of colour;
 - d) statistics, tables and graphs are produced in an easy to read format;
 - e) we use good quality paper and materials;
 - f) we produce information relevant to the various groups who require it.

11.2 AHA Ltd. will aim to ensure that our various application forms:

- a) follow the design principles described above;
- b) include clear instructions for completion;
- c) are easy for tenants or applicants to understand and complete;
- d) contain sufficient space for the information requested to be provided.

[As we are part of the West Lothian Common Housing Register the housing application form and guidance are jointly produced by West Lothian Council, Weslo and AHA Ltd. In any discussions on the design of these documents we will seek to ensure that they conform to the above standards.]

11.3 AHA Ltd. will provide written communications in relevant minority languages where requested, and will liaise with translation services where necessary.

11.4 If a tenant or applicant has literacy difficulties AHA Ltd. will deal with the individual in a sensitive way, providing explanation or advice as required on the content of letters or forms, and assistance with the completion of forms.

11.5 AHA Ltd. will produce a Tenants Newsletter at least four times each year, and from time to time seek the views of tenants on its contents.

11.6 AHA Ltd. will produce and circulate to our members a comprehensive Annual Report containing relevant information on our performance over the previous year. Copies of the Report will also be available to anyone else who requests one.

11.7 AHA Ltd. will produce in association with tenant representatives an annual report on our performance in comparison with the targets and standards set under the Social Housing Charter, circulate this to all tenants and publicise it via our website. Copies of the Report will be available to anyone else who requests one.

Oral Communications

11.8 AHA Ltd. will wherever possible arrange for language interpreters to be present at interviews with tenants or applicants who have difficulty speaking or understanding English.

11.9 AHA Ltd. will provide alternative versions of Tenancy Agreements and other documents such as the Tenant Information Sheets or Policies, as required by tenants or applicants who are unable to read them.

11.10 AHA Ltd. will arrange for the assistance of appropriate individuals or organisations when we are dealing with tenants or applicants who are deaf, or who may have learning difficulties.

12.0 CORRESPONDENCE

12.1 In addition to the standards described in section 11, AHA Ltd. will aim to ensure that all incoming correspondence is dealt with promptly and efficiently by:

- a) date stamping all incoming mail and ensuring that it is then forwarded promptly to the relevant employee(s);
- b) where a reply is required, responding within 5 working days or, if this timescale cannot be met, acknowledging receipt of the letter within 3 working days and advising when a formal response is likely to be received;

- c) sending all correspondence etc. in the name of the employee dealing with the matter and ensuring that the employee signs the letter;
 - d) addressing correspondence to the tenant, applicant or other enquirer by name.
- 12.2 AHA Ltd. will send out application, exchange and transfer forms within 2 working days of the request being received.
- 12.3 As required by specific policies and procedures, AHA Ltd. will provide tenants or applicants with written confirmation of any verbal information given to them or any action taken.

13.0 COMPLAINTS

- 13.1 As detailed in the Complaints policy and procedures, AHA Ltd. will aim to respond within the target timescales, and to resolve all complaints effectively.
- 13.2 AHA Ltd. will ensure that:
- a) we provide clear advice and information to tenants, applicants, factored owners and other members of the public on how to complain about our services and decisions.
 - b) our complaints system is simple to administer, easy to understand, conciliatory, fair and impartial;
 - c) our complaints system is consistent with the complainant's legal rights.
- 13.3 AHA Ltd. will apologise to those with justifiable complaints, take appropriate remedial action and we may provide redress or compensation appropriate to the loss or inconvenience suffered.
- 13.4 AHA Ltd. will ensure that all complainants receive information on the independent sources of help in making complaints and/or obtaining redress, including Citizen's Advice Bureaux, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman or First Tier Tribunal for Scotland – Housing Property Chamber (for factored owners).
- 13.5 AHA Ltd. will monitor all complaints to ensure that all justified complaints are taken into account when reviewing our services and the performance of employees or contractors, and will report on all complaints received, by type and outcome, to our Board of Management.

14.0 TRAINING

- 14.1 To ensure that this policy can be implemented AHA Ltd. will ensure that all employees have the appropriate skills and knowledge they require to function effectively, and that they receive all the training and instruction necessary to enable them to carry out their duties.
- 14.2 AHA Ltd. will ensure that we provide employees with ongoing learning and development opportunities to ensure they remain up to date with all current legal requirements and with our policies and procedures.
- 14.3 AHA Ltd. will provide all employees who come into contact with tenants, applicants, factored owners and other members of the public with the necessary training in interviewing skills, handling difficult or potentially violent situations, customer care issues and equal opportunities.

15.0 IMPLEMENTATION AND REVIEW

- 15.1 Where targets have been set, AHA Ltd. will monitor our performance through regular checks and other methods, including 'mystery shopping' techniques.
- 15.2 Reports on the results of surveys and any other monitoring exercises will be reported to our Board of Management and, where appropriate, AHA Ltd. will incorporate the results from such surveys and feedback in the regular reviews of our policies, procedures and practices.
- 15.3 Where the need for improvement is identified AHA Ltd. will set achievable targets within realistic timescales within which the changes are to be implemented, and monitor progress.
- 15.4 The Head of Corporate Services will ensure that the Senior Management Team reviews this policy at least every five years.

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