



Because good homes make everything possible

Customer Service Strategy

A brand-new commitment to our residents

Strategy, Research & Communications

September 2020

Context

Delivering first class customer service is one of Network's strategic objectives. We have been investing significant amounts of energy and resources over the last five years to improve the quality of the service we provide, making sure it is compliant with our residents' expectations. In 2018/19, we achieved overall customer satisfaction of 88.3% - up from 87.3% in 2017/18 - getting closer to our five-year strategic objective of at least 90%. In particular, we have exceeded our target for customer satisfaction with repairs, at 82.8% against a target of 80%, and on new homes satisfaction we are making substantial improvements to our Aftercare services.

Over the next five years, keeping up the positive trend through continuous progress will require a renewed ability to address major challenges in relation to digitalisation and increased transparency and accountability. In the aftermath of the Grenfell fire, the Government called for a deeper focus on customers, putting strong emphasis on the role that residents can play in shaping services. Specifically, the Social Housing Green Paper (SHGP) has drawn attention to the need to develop a more transparent approach to communication, as well as the importance for housing providers to release satisfaction indicators which assess landlords' performance against issues of key importance to residents. In this regard, the Government has recently renewed the commitment to bringing forward a Social Housing White Paper.

Furthermore, lockdown measures recently introduced in response to the covid19 outbreak have put the housing sector under pressure in relation to our ability to effectively manage homes and neighbourhoods whilst complying with social distancing rules. The enforcement of social distancing in March made particularly difficult for front-line staff to action repairs and maintenance works, and ultimately resulted in landlords having to focus their resources on supporting vulnerable tenants and dealing with emergency situations.

As a return to a pre-covid19 normality seems unlikely in the foreseeable future, this crisis provides an opportunity for the housing sector to accelerate a phased migration to digitalisation through the offer of multi-channel services.

Where does Network currently stand?

We have recently [launched](#) a 5th strategic objective focused on Trust, developed in close collaboration with our resident panels in London and Hertford. The new objective will set the basis for our renewed commitment to resident engagement and improved transparency and communication.

It is therefore crucial that our dedication to achieving first-class customer service ultimately contributes towards an increased perception of Network as a trustworthy landlord, able to understand residents' concerns and deliver effectively on their promises.



This approach will allow us to provide an adequate response to the issues raised in the Green Paper and effectively comply with Hackitt's recommendations around Health & Safety.

Particularly, we will address the following concerns:

- Ensure that Network's reported overall scores on customer satisfaction are aligned with residents' perceptions of the quality of our service;
- Improve the way we communicate with our residents, in relation to both the accuracy of information and the adopted 'tone of voice';
- Keep track of our residents' evolving needs and demands;
- Empower residents in relation to H&S concerns through increased transparency and accountability; and
- Cope with concerns around social distancing and gradual shifting towards a more digitalised offer in the aftermath of lockdown.

Project: a brand-new strategy

Strategic aim

The Customer Service Strategy (CSS) will inform the service we provide to our residents and the quality of daily interaction and will set a basis for the adoption of a more proactive approach, in line with the upcoming Trust metrics.

Through the ongoing analysis of resident issues and levels of satisfaction we will be able to track our residents' journey and plan for an optimised use of internal resources over time.

We will increasingly rely on digital services to manage routine interaction with residents, improving processes and reducing avoidable contacts, whenever sensible to do so. In-person interactions will be specifically reserved to addressing emergency issues and managing relations with vulnerable tenants.

We will utilise post-call surveys, call monitoring and other mechanisms to assess the quality of customer interactions to continually improve the quality of service delivered to our residents, and ultimately achieve our 90% satisfaction target.

Objectives in the strategy

1. Achieve our target of minimum 90% of customer satisfaction, in line with our strategic objective of delivering first-class customer service.



2. Meet our ambition to have at least 50% of our customer transactions self-serviced online by 2023.
3. Transforming the way we communicate with our residents at every level, getting to know our residents and their needs and turning Network into a really resident-centric organisation.
4. Moving ahead of the Government's regulatory agenda in relation to increased residents' engagement, transparency and accountability.

Approach

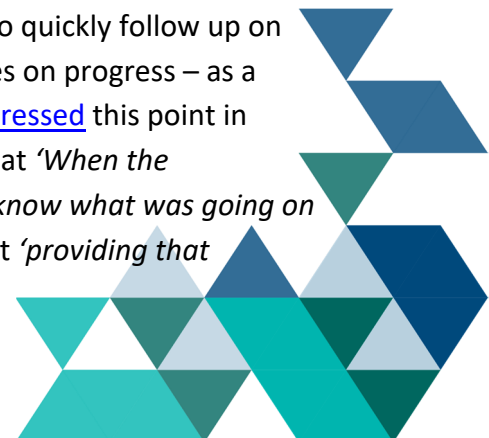
Our new CSS will set our future approach to customer service provision for a variety of tenures, including Social Rent, Intermediate Market Rent, Older people and Sheltered accommodation, Build to Rent, and Leaseholders. It will be shaped around the following principles:

- **Transparency:** in relation to our approach to customer service provision, the way we operate and the way we measure overall customer satisfaction.
- **Engagement:** we will get to know our residents better through pro-active engagement and enhanced Neighbourhood Service offers, so that we are able to effectively meet our residents' needs and expectations; our resident panels will inform our strategy and future action.
- **Accessibility:** improved access to our services driven by the use of technology and the ability to offer residents their 'channel of choice' through a fully integrated multi-channel service; this will include 'My Network Homes' portal, accessible online.
- **Accountability:** in relation to our responsibility to provide residents with a first-class experience, as well as the methodology behind satisfaction measurement techniques.
- **Consistency:** across Network's departments and housing tenure types.

Customer Service and Trust

In April 2020, as part of our effort to produce a 5th strategic objective, we ran a survey among a representative sample of over 500 residents to find out what 'Trust' means to them. Our findings show that across all tenures and age groups, dependability/reliability – the belief that 'Network will do what they say they will do' – is among the most important facets of trust.

Particularly, a large majority of respondents mentioned the ability to quickly follow up on raised repairs and complaints – including through automatic updates on progress – as a good metrics of reliability. The chair of our London panel has also [stressed](#) this point in reference to previous attempts to pro-active updates, suggesting that *'When the information (was) provided, even if it was negative, it felt better to know what was going on behind the scenes than not to hear anything at all'* and agreeing that *'providing that*



information by default, wherever possible, will be an important part of delivering on the (5th strategic) objective.'

Our findings echoed the results of a research study [conducted](#) by HACT in 2018. The study shed light upon residents' concerns with 'repairs' and 'communication' as the major drivers of overall satisfaction. When looking specifically at what makes a provider trustworthy to its residents, the study reported a strong relationship between trust and communication questions, with concerns about 'understanding customer issues' and 'updates on deliveries' recording the highest level of correlation, above 0.75 – on a 0.0 – 1.0 scale. 'Repairs' followed, with 0.68.

These considerations provide evidence around the importance of finding the right balance between a high-quality service – e.g. dealing with raised repairs and complaints – and a proactive communication that would strengthen our residents' trust in our commitment to delivering on promises, and ultimately drive up satisfaction.

Managing our internal resources efficiently will be essential to make sure we can fulfil our objective of delivering first-class customer service – and strengthen our residents' trust – while retaining our strong financial position. Achieving this result will require us to increasingly rely on technology, expanding our digital offer and utilising automated services to gradually develop a more proactive approach. This will allow us to further improve our communication standards without putting extra-pressure on our Contact Centre and front-line staff.

Methodology

The Customer Service Strategy will provide Network with a detailed action plan to be implemented around the following areas:

Improved communication and 'tone of voice'

We will address concerns around 'poor communication' through the following interventions:

- Adopting a standardised communication format: the Marcomms team is working alongside Resident Engagement on the production of standardised templates that will ensure consistency throughout different communication channels. For instance, standard templates will be set up for letters to be delivered to residents via mail, so that different departments can fill in the appropriate template with up-to-date information before sending it through.



- Improved 'tone of voice': teams across the organisation will be given appropriate training with regards to the 'tone of voice' to be adopted when we communicate with residents, being that via mail, email or telephone. These measures, along with the ongoing Gober training sessions, are expected to address recent concerns around poor communication style.
- Service tailored to residents' preferences for different communication channels: customer segmentation by age cohorts and IT literacy will help us identify potential for increased use of digital communication – such as emails, apps, instant chat, SMS – to reach out to residents.
We have already conducted an accurate study of residents' demographics which will serve this purpose. A high-level investigation into residents' preferences for digital services might also form part of the survey we currently send out to residents through Voluntas.
- Data collection and cleansing: a gradual shift to digital communication will also entail addressing current issues with data collection and cleansing, making sure residents' contact details are regularly reviewed and up to date. So far, we have brought together updated email addresses from 6000 households, or about 30% of Network's customer base.
- Increased use of Newsletter and Website as sources of information on internal policy reviews and service reshaping – whenever possible – so that residents are kept up to date on ongoing plans for service improvement.
- Increased use of Newsletter as a source of information on successful efforts to improve services – with attached references to case studies and positive stories. Currently, we are already sharing information on service improvements and strategic reviews with panel members in London and Hartford. However, providing regular updates through the Newsletter will allow us to reach out to a larger pool of residents we are not currently capturing.

Improved resident engagement and delivery of a high quality and consistent service across all tenure types

Extensive effort to produce the 5th strategic objective for the business, as directed by the Board, focussing on improving Trust and Resident Engagement. As part of the effort, the following measures have been implemented:

- The Research and Policy team will work alongside the Resident Engagement team on a thorough review of our Resident Engagement Strategy.



- We will provide residents with a range of engagement options – informal pop-up events, digital platforms and eventually discussion forums – with the aim to get more people involved on a longer-term basis. Future pop-up events will be publicised via mail, email or text message so that we can reach out to a larger group of people.
- Particularly, we will encourage residents to participate in our pop-up events as a key opportunity to meet Network’s Repairs Service team and discuss queries and concerns around the way we manage contractors and our renewed commitment to a ‘Right First Time’ approach to repairs services. The Repairs Services team has also suggested that a crucial step towards increased trust would be to invite residents to take part, as observers, in our monthly meetings with contractors. This way we could provide direct evidence of our dedication to improved services and transparency.
- Resident pop-ups have been temporarily suspended over the lockdown months because of enforced rules on social distancing. As lockdown measures are slowly lifted, it is unlikely that we will be able to host new gatherings in the foreseeable future. An alternative option might be to set up digital pop-ups on Teams, so that residents would still get the chance to feed back on our performance as a landlord. We have already trialled digital meetings with our resident panels and Network Thinks events, with very positive outcomes.
- Over the long run, digital events should not be intended as substitutes of in-person pop-ups, as they might restrict the pool of participants to the most IT skilled, excluding many others. However, if successful, this method could definitely work in integration with traditional face-to-face communication, allowing us to reach out to a larger portion of residents.
- We will build a database listing residents who have been involved in the different offers in the past.
- We will continuously invest in our resident panels to ensure connection between our decision-makers and residents are sound.

Neighbourhood Service Offer

Bearing in mind the importance for Network to make efficient use of resources across departments, it is crucial to recognise that residents strongly value well-established face-to-face relationships with their Neighbourhood Officers. This is particularly true when it comes to vulnerable people.

As an example, in April 2020 ‘Network Thinks’ event – centred on strengthening residents’ trust – the Regeneration team stressed the key role played by inter-personal relationships at the neighbourhood level in giving people enough comfort and assurance to have their



homes demolished and re-developed. They know there is a face for Network they can trust. This cannot be easily replicated through regularly issuing text.

By being visible we also receive great responses from residents to some very difficult situations – including ASB and damage to local assets – which we would not be able to get by solely relying on digital communication. Front-line staff are indeed crucial for active listening and mediation when it comes to coping with ASB, especially in presence of language barriers. By doing active listening we become proactive and prevent further damage from happening so that people would trust our coping methods.

However, it is important to acknowledge that high levels of confusion around Network's role as a landlord are contributing towards rising expectations. We need clarity around those situations that go beyond our formal responsibilities.

Striking a balance between our effective role as a landlord and residents' changing needs will entail managing these expectations and focus our resources on addressing issues of key importance to residents.

On the above concerns, we will implement the following measures:

- The Resident Engagement team has put together a Customer [Service Charter](#) by working with our residents, already approved by our Customer Service Committee. The Service Charter explains what Network Homes tenants or leaseholders can expect from us. Stating our commitments to our residents will enable them to have confidence in our service.
- We will adopt a risk-based approach to neighbourhood management which will allow Neighbourhood Officers to focus their efforts on those communities particularly affected by major issues such as H&S concerns, poor level of services etc. Effectively, the Neighbourhood team is already following this approach, with Officers moving across different estates according to the extent of issues.
- A reviewed Housing Management Strategy will include information on people dedicated to specific functions and will make sure residents are kept up to date with reviewed contact details and resources.
- Digitalisation could play a big role in cutting the distance between residents and Officers, providing residents with online accessible community platforms to share information and concerns about their neighbourhood. However, managing these platforms might also be labour intensive and require dedicated resources.

A new approach to reception services: The Hive

In a post-covid19 world, a more balanced approach to Reception services might help save valuable resources for operations 'on-field'. As we try to achieve the best possible outcomes



while operating within limited budgets, treasuring what we have learnt during the lockdown months will be key in organising our renewed reception at The Hive.

In this sense, reception staff will be partly redeployed to service delivery and able to move around estates to provide support with Housing and Neighbourhood management.

This means that residents that would usually visit our reception to raise issues or complaints will need to be re-directed to our 'main channels' of communication, namely My Network Homes, the Contact Centre, the digital support service, depending on their preferred 'channel of choice'.

Information on our new approach to reception services will have to be advertised on our resident Newsletter and Network's website, so that it does not come as a surprise to residents.

Digitalisation: incorporate our IT Strategy into our Customer Service Offer

Over the last year, we have introduced key elements from our major IT Business Transformation programme, including the first phase of our new customer self-service portal, My Network Homes.

[My Network Homes](#) is an extension of Customer Hub, so anything residents report via their online account will automatically appear in Customer Hub and therefore Northgate in the same way. Currently, residents can use it to:

- Update their contact details;
- Check the balance and recent transactions on their rent account;
- Pay their rent online;
- Ask us a question and view all enquiries they've made online;
- Access our FAQs library;
- Report ASB and view any reports they've made through their account;
- View the repairs they report to us;
- Make a complaint and view all complaints they've made via their online account.

For the moment we're rolling out My Network Homes to our General Needs' tenants. We'll be doing this in stages. In May we gave tenants living in a General Needs property, managed by Network Homes, access to their online account. We are now in the process of giving tenants living in a General Needs property, managed by SW9 Community Housing, access to their online account.

My Network Homes is currently not available to leaseholders, Shared Owners or tenants in Intermediate Rent or Smart Rent properties with Network Homes.

My Network Homes: Phase 2



As part of the second phase of My Network Homes, residents will have direct access to their entire repairs history, and will be able to check the current status of raised repairs, without having to rely on follow-up calls for an update.

Crucially, residents will be able to book repairs online at convenient time slots for them and download key information about their building.

Moreover, the platform will include detailed instructions on how to raise emergency calls, listing up actions that residents can easily undertake to stay safe in specific situations – e.g. gas leak – and providing access to a range of emergency contacts they can use to inform Network of suspected shortfalls.

Further progress on digitalisation

In order to meet our ambition to have at least 50% of our customer transactions self-serviced online by 2023, the following improvements will also be required:

- We will integrate Network's Digital Customer Strategy into our Customer Service Offer. As part of this effort, the Business Intelligence team has produced a Data Quality Policy which will pave the way for a more effective and consistent approach to data gathering and storage.
- As we move towards the Data Aggregation phase of our Digital Customer Plan, collecting up-to-date contact details and households information will be essential to develop the next stage of the Customer Journey Analytics. The Research & Policy team is working on the collection of updated contacts for over 8,000 tenants, a project due to be finalised within the next six months.
- As residents might not be aware of My Network Homes, it will be essential to advertise the portal in the Newsletter and on Network's website in order to reach out to as many residents as possible.
- Most importantly, we need to recognise that not every resident has currently access to the Internet connection. Among those who have access, there might be major discrepancies in the level of IT skills. Adopting a phased-migration approach to digitalisation – with the ongoing provision of a multi-channel service, tailored to the needs of a diverse customer base – will allow us to mitigate the impact of digital exclusion, especially among our most vulnerable tenants.

Explore the opportunity for Network to adopt a more proactive approach to resident's queries on maintenance issues and complaints



Resident panels have asked for a higher involvement of the business in providing regular updates on raised issues and complaints. A proactive approach in this sense would give residents the assurance that Network is committed to resolving complex issues, and strengthen trust in our ability to 'do what we say we're going to do'.

At the moment, the Contact Centre is the first point of contact for residents to raise issues with unfulfilled services or damage of property sections etc. Over the last years, the Contact Centre has taken on a very large share of queries, promptly dealing with residents' concerns and actioning effective operational responses.

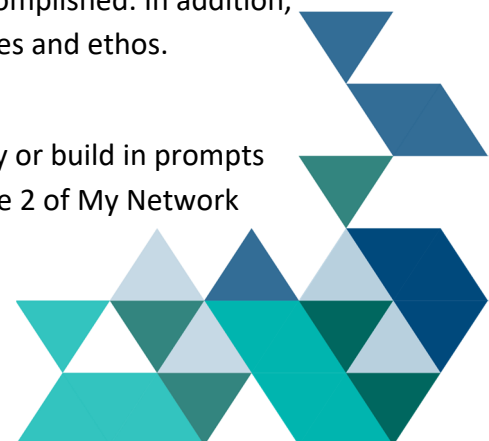
It is crucial to point out though that the Contact Centre is not intended for the provision of regular follow-ups to residents, especially for what concerns updates on technical interventions. Asset Management staff, for instance, would be better qualified for regular updates on maintenance and repairs, on the account of their technical expertise and more frequent interaction with appointed contractors. For such reasons, we do not envisage that the Contact Centre will take on a more proactive role as it is already operating to its full capacity.

Becoming more proactive might instead require smoother interactions between residents and the operational teams and departments directly responsible for dealing with raised repairs and maintenance issues. Once again, it is about finding a balance between the level of expertise we can offer at the first point of contact and what we do in the back end.

Over the lockdown months, this balance has proved crucial in allowing us to effectively tackle raised issues and emergencies, despite the fact that we were operating on stretched resources. In a post-covid19 world, preserving this arrangement of resources – and gradually improving the digital offer – will play an even more important role in the way we accomplish tasks.

In this regard, the following measures will be implemented:

- Encouraging contractors to adopt a 'Right First Time' approach to repairs, making sure maintenance work is always performed to the highest standard, and providing progress updates to residents whenever delays occur. The repairs team is already following this approach, hosting weekly and monthly meetings with contractors to keep track of any shortfall in the conduction of tasks. Contractors will always be responsible for following-up with residents on repairs until the task is deemed completed, whilst Network' Repairs Service team will directly intervene when tasks are not fully accomplished. In addition, contractors will always be required to adhere to Network's values and ethos.
- Developing new ways to provide progress updates automatically or build in prompts from system to staff. In this regard, the implementation of Phase 2 of My Network



Homes will provide residents with direct access to repairs history, allowing them to track progress on raised issues and monitor course of action.

In addition, as part of the Transaction surveys conducted through Voluntas, we will explore the opportunity to send out automatic follow-up questions on 'repairs booking' and 'raised complaints' via text messages. Residents would have the chance to confirm whether the repair has been effectively carried out or whether complaints have been really resolved – reducing potential escalations.

- My Network Homes portal will allow residents to make queries about the current state of raised repairs and complaints and get some reassurance on whether a response has been actioned. Such measures will effectively enable Network to adopt a more proactive response to maintenance issues and complaint resolutions by using technology to manage real-time interaction with residents.
- A commitment to a timely response to customer service queries from across the whole organisation. Our customer service standards in relation to answering calls and email enquiries from residents are already defined within our [Offer](#) to residents. We specify our aim to provide the best possible service in an efficient, effective, polite and professional manner. As part of this effort, we assert our commitment to a 5 days response for all queries from all teams.

Incorporate Hackitt Review's recommendations into our resident engagement process

A multi-disciplinary group has been established within Network to implement Hackitt Review's recommendations on Health & Safety. As part of this effort, a Building Safety Resident Engagement Strategy has been drafted.

The Strategy will make sure that residents are involved in future decision-making on H&S and that transparency and accountability measures are put in place to effectively empower residents in relation to H&S concerns. The Strategy also sets clear responsibilities for residents and landlord in relation to keeping buildings safe.

Review satisfaction measurement techniques

We will adopt a mixed approach to satisfaction measurements, as follows:

Satisfaction metrics based on transaction surveys

- Getting things 'Right First Time' and resolving enquiries and complaints quickly.
- Minimising the number of times contact is required before an issue is resolved, minimising repeat calls and improving the resident journey.



Measuring residents' trust

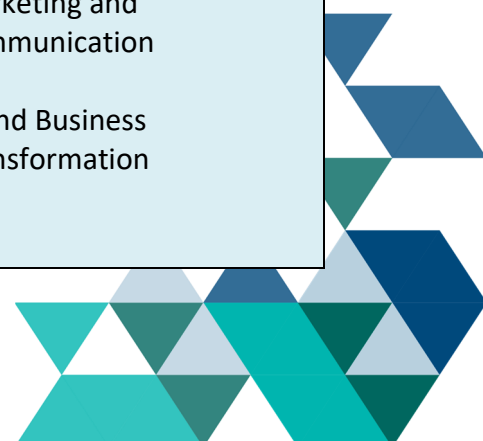
Current measures of customer satisfaction at Network rely on limited survey evidence, mostly focused on transaction-based feedback. Transactional surveys are generally perceived as an accurate and timely measure of customer experience – being conducted on responses to specific technical issues – useful in providing actionable feedback for service improvement.

On the other hand, the exclusive use of transactional surveys might fail to account for the needs and opinion of a larger proportion of residents – e.g. people who have not recently experienced problems with their properties but who might still feel unsatisfied (or satisfied) with their landlord/management of the estate.

In line with the launch of our 5th Strategic Objective, in order to gather a more robust measure of customer experience in the round, we are in the process of producing a Trust metrics useful to track residents' confidence in our ability to drive service improvement.

Teams and departments involved in the drafting of this Strategy

What type of services do we provide?	Mediums – delivery mechanisms	Teams to get involved
Information and communication	Visits	Customer Service
Maintenance and repairs	Contact Centre	Contact Centre
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health and Safety Aftercare 	Digital	Asset Management
Planned works		Welfare Advice
Older persons support		Income Teams
Welfare advice		Neighbourhood Officers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial inclusion Rent arrears support Benefits (UC) 		Residents Engagement
Employment support		Research and Policy
People		Marketing and Communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neighbourhoods ASB 		IT and Business Transformation



Estate management <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ground maintenance• Trees planting and maintenance		iWOW and Business Intelligence
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