

Housing & Social Inclusion

**Customer
Service &
Access Strategy**

2011-2014



**Brighton & Hove
City Council**

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Background
3. What the strategy will achieve
4. Current customer access arrangements
5. Offering choice of access channel to improve customer service
6. Knowing our customers better to improve customer service and access (customer profiling)
7. Using technology to improve customer service and access
8. Transforming how we work and developing our workforce to improve customer service and access
9. Sustainable customer service and access
10. Monitoring and review

Appendix 1 Broad principles for changes needed to improve our customers' experience of our service

1. Introduction

Housing & Social Inclusion is responsible for providing landlord services to approximately 12,200 tenants, and 2,300 leaseholders across the city. This customer service and access strategy is designed to support our service delivery priorities which place customers at the heart of everything we do.

It provides information on things that need to be considered in making sure our customers have a full range of methods for accessing our services in ways and at times that suit them - and that are efficient and cost effective.

The scope of this strategy is broad in that it relates to tenants, leaseholders, and members of the public - anyone who seeks information or a service from us. They will all expect excellent, timely, considered, responsive and consistent responses, regardless of the method they use - be it by email, telephone, face-to-face, letter or other new and emerging media.

It is not a stand alone strategy. It complements other council-wide or Housing & Social Inclusion strategies, plans and commitments - for example those on resident involvement, customer access and improving the customer experience, diversity and equalities, value for money, ICT, workforce development, Workstyles and use of assets. As a living document, it will evolve as demands and expectations of our customers change, or as it is informed by service reviews, technological and other changes.

Council's customer promise

As part of the council's 'Improving the Customer Experience' programme, we have developed the following council-wide customer promise, which also provides a backdrop for this strategy:

- We will be easy to reach
- We will be clear and treat you with respect
- We will listen and act to get things done.

We pride ourselves on our customers being central to everything we do, and have produced a series of service pledges that outline our commitments to them. We want customers to have easy access to our services, and receive great customer service at times and in ways that offer choice. Our customer service and access arrangements are also designed to be suitable for a variety of individual needs.

2. Background

National perspective

The report by Sir David Varney on 'Service Transformation' in 2006 recommended that public service organisations should improve customer services by aiming to resolve customer enquiries at their first point of contact, and develop more self-service and online services - while at the same time achieving a balance of access channels for all customers.

As far back as 2001, the Cabinet Office and UK Online report '**Framework for channel strategies**' urged organisations to look at how customers contact them, how much each method costs, and then increase choice to customers but with an eye on ultimately moving to cheaper methods where possible, while maintaining excellent customer service.

Local considerations

We are aware that we'll only be successful in encouraging customers to use efficient and cheaper access channels by making it worthwhile and effective for them - eg quicker service, access to all the information they need, and transactions done at a time and pace to suit them. Over time, the more we are able to do this, the more likely we are to see an increased shift from the more traditional and costly channels to the use of cheaper and newer service channels.

The development of this strategy has enabled us to take a closer look at how, why and when customers currently contact us, how effective and efficient we are at responding - and to look at the costs involved.

A range of information has helped to shape this strategy, examples are:

- Government reports
- Customer feedback
- Learning from high performing organisations
- External assessment of our work
- Focused discussions with residents and staff
- Council-wide work on 'Improving the Customer Experience' and the council's three overarching customer promises
- The Audit Commission's 'Access and Customer Care' key lines of enquiry (KLOEs)
- Tenant Services Authority (TSA) standards
- Council-wide Workstyles programme looking at the best use of office space
- Work by staff groups looking at customer access and customer experiences of our service
- Intelligence about our business.

There were important messages from our external assessment work that have shaped this strategy. They centre around our processes being resource and administration heavy and not always delivering what our customers need; how there is a need to change to provide easier access to our services, target our services to people who most need them, reduce waste, and intervene at earlier stages where needed; and the continued need to involve residents and staff. The full list of the broad principles can be found at Appendix 1.

While seeking to improve convenience to customers, their access to and experience of our services, it is clear that in the current economic climate we also have to achieve value for money from tenants' rents, and to the tax-payer paying for the services that support housing eg Housing Benefit and council tax benefit. We are striving to achieve a balance between both the customers' needs, keeping our customers at the heart of everything we do, and our business needs. This strategy is advantageous to both.

We are also looking to better understand our customer in the context of their everyday experiences in receiving services from other organisations and businesses they come into contact with, and how this is most likely to have changed over the past ten years.

3. What the strategy will achieve

Aims of the customer service and access strategy

We have an ongoing desire, commitment and responsibility to deliver the best possible service for our customers, in line with what they've told us, and in a way that is sustainable. The main outcomes we will achieve from this strategy are set out under the following four broad categories:

1. Excellent, positive customer experiences

- using customer information to tailor services and meet individual needs
- engaging with and listening to our customers
- keeping customers informed
- customers feeling valued and respected
- increased customer satisfaction

2. Improved choice and flexibility in accessing services

- working with our customers to identify and reduce barriers
- knowing our customers better
- expanding options and supporting preference
- promoting more effective and cheaper channels

3. 'Right first time' approach

- speedy resolution
- reducing 'avoidable' contact
- value for money
- service review
- lower overall service costs

4. Staff enabled and empowered to make a difference

- changing how we think and work
- redesigning our processes
- sharing learning
- working collaboratively
- high performance working

4. Current customer access arrangements

Current access model

Housing offices

The central focus of our current access model is our five housing offices that have been in operation since the creation of Brighton & Hove Council in 1997, and where customer contact arrangements are replicated in each of them. This consists of having someone at reception for face-to-face visitors, people staffing the telephones similar to a mini contact centre at each office, and a cashier at each office for accepting rent, council tax, tenants' contents insurance and other payments.

We have a number of specialist teams traditionally located at housing offices – for example those responsible for capital works, managing our repairs contracts, lettings, supporting vulnerable tenants and tenancies, reducing anti-social behaviour, and providing older people's housing and services.

Other offices

The Housing Income Management Team are located in a separate town centre location and essentially operate a further mini contact centre where much of their work is telephone based, although they do also offer office appointments and carry out home visits.

Telephone access to services through our offices

There are 14 published telephone numbers for contacting our service, with customers also having direct dial extension numbers for up to 80 individual officers.

From each of these offices, customers can use the free public direct dial phone to access the Mears Repairs Helpdesk, Housing Benefits, Council Tax, Homemove, our gas contractor, the Housing Income Management Team, the complaints line and Cityclean.

The Mears Repairs Helpdesk is accessible on a freephone number (with a local number available for mobile phone users) from 8am to 8pm on weekdays and through an out of hours service at other times.

Home visits through our offices

We also enable access to our services through a range of home visits carried out by staff based in the offices.

Effectiveness of our current model

The profile of services delivered from our housing offices has changed significantly in the last 14 years. Many services customers used to come in for are no longer based at each of these offices - and for example repairs reporting, housing benefits advice, rent arrears support, lettings, serious antisocial behaviour management, and tenancy sustainment are dealt with by specialist, centrally located teams. However, some are accessible through the free direct dial phone at each office. Despite this change in services available, we have kept the same traditional delivery model over the years and

this has resulted in its reduced cost effectiveness and ability to deliver value for money. We now need to modernise our approach.

Data capture exercises in recent years eg iMPower work in 2009 and Customer Access Review Group of Officers (CARGO) work in 2010 revealed that up to 40% of visitors to housing offices enquire about services that are either not provided at the offices (eg repairs) or are not provided by Housing & Social Inclusion (eg Housing Benefits, refuse and recycling).

In addition, some offices are not located close to where our customers live (eg the one in Victoria Road) or they have a low daily footfall (eg the one in Selsfield Drive), being used only by small proportions of our tenants, who are mainly visiting for services that need to be referred elsewhere or to pay rent.

Council wide, colleagues have been looking at the use made of council office space under a programme called Workstyles, to help us become as efficient as possible. Some offices have already been redesigned to make best use of space, using ICT solutions for data storage and communications to reduce the incidence of valuable space being used for housing paper files. This has enabled staff to move from unsuitable or costly accommodation, achieving savings. The Workstyles programme incorporates different technologies, work locations and patterns of work that enable staff to adopt creative and flexible approaches to how they work and deliver services.

We do not feel that we are making optimum use of our housing offices with regard to customer access and customer service, and are therefore looking at what we can do to improve.

What we've done

- As part of the council's Workstyles programme we've changed the use of Lavender Street Housing Office by moving staff who did not provide services solely to residents in that area to free up space for Children & Families staff to be located there. This has improved access for local people needing that service and provided better value for money.
- CARGO (a group of officers looking at customer access) have undertaken a study looking at telephone, face-to-face, email, and letter access channels to better understand what customers contact us about, and the extent to which the contact has added any value to the customer.
- Another group of officers has also looked at a few typical customer requests and carried out customer journey mapping to see how effective we are in responding to them in a streamlined way.
- We've completed a total refurbishment of the previous Allen West industrial building in Moulsecoomb to establish a modern, energy efficient office space large enough to accommodate a number of Housing & Social Inclusion teams as well as our repairs partner, Mears. Teams have moved into the building in a

phased programme since May this year, and are already reaping the benefits of being co-located with colleagues in other teams.

- We have increased the number of contact points where customers can get information or help about housing services through the introduction of a new service across our libraries from March 2011 'Council Connect'. This service is supported by trained volunteers who are able to guide customers to access information or carry out service transactions online. It is part of our council-wide 'Improving the Customer Experience' work, and fits very well with our work on increasing choice in customers' access to services.

Actions we will take

- Enable more teams within or outside our service to move into the Housing Centre – especially after we have followed 'smart space' principles and are able to use technology to reduce the amount of space needed for paper based filing.
- Manor Place - consult on plans to move staff to the new Whitehawk Hub where they will be co-located with other local services including a library, children's services and health centre. Also plans to use our 'Our Neighbourhood' local base in North Whitehawk for a wider range of services.
- Selsfield Drive - in time, transferring tenancy management and targeted interventions staff to the Housing Centre, where they will be co-located with a range of other Housing & Social Inclusion teams.
- Victoria Rd - relocating tenancy management staff into the refurbished Portslade Town Hall, and consideration of customers accessing housing services at a local community library.
- Customers needing to see someone in person will have the same level of access to appointments at their home – or at an increasing number of council locations/hubs than just the current number of housing offices.
- Look at opportunities for locating our services with other council services – eg libraries, and possibly sharing use of our buildings with other organisations.
- Carry out a review of our accommodation needs and costs.

5. Offering choice of access channels to improve customer service

This strategy is essentially about enhancing all access channels so that no matter how customers contact us they can expect an excellent resolution to their enquiry. People will only start to use more cost effective channels if they are easy to use and repeatedly offer a good route to a solution.

The more expensive options are face-to-face, letter and even telephone, while the cheaper ones are those that offer a large element of self service eg self service on the website, interactive voice recognition systems - ie those that do not require staff input at the point of contact or transaction.

A further consideration is that whatever channel is chosen, our service offer needs to minimise the need for further chase up or complaint – elements of ‘avoidable contact’.

As well as having services online, we need to promote their availability, and encourage and support people to access them. The process of putting things in place that help our customers make the transition to get the information they need or carry out the transactions they want using less costly and more streamlined options is known as ‘channel shift’. Where we can achieve this, it frees up increased staff time and resources to support those people or situations that require higher levels of staff interaction.

The table below shows the industry standard costs per transaction incurred by local authorities for different contact channels.

Table 1 Transaction costs for different channels

Channel	Cost	£ saving for each transaction shifted from face-to-face	% saving shifting from face-to-face	% saving shifting from telephone
Face-to-face	£3.76	-	-	-
Telephone	£3.06	£0.70	19%	-
Web	£0.08	£3.68	98%	97%

NB: Average costs based on data gathered by SOCITM in 2011

For our customers, availability, choice and speed of resolution are all important. So for example someone working might want to simply report an incidence of anti-social behaviour (ASB) – if they try to do this in their lunch break, they might do it on the phone – and if so they’ll certainly want to get through quickly. However, they might prefer to do this online in the evening. Someone else might prefer to report ASB face-to-face or by telephone. It is also possible that the same person might prefer one or other method depending on the severity of the ASB and the need, or not, for immediate reassurance. Whichever method is used, assurity that the report has been made to the right place, it has been received, advice on the next steps is available, or pointers for further information are available should be the same.

To encourage our customers to use the range of channels available, we need to be sure that each channel is suitably resourced and that they are all connected so that it gives a consistent response - regardless of the customer’s chosen channel.

Where people prefer or need to access our services using traditional channels, this strategy supports improved telephone answering and freeing up officer time for personal visits and other face-to-face contacts eg at locations that might be more convenient for our customers.

Optimising existing channels

We want to make the best use of the service channels available to customers, and that means assessing whether we are optimising the use of our housing offices that provide face to face services/home visits, and our telephone, email and other services.

To help with this, around a dozen members of staff from a number of housing teams formed the Customer Access Review Group of Officers (CARGO) last year to look at our current access channels. They focussed on office visits, telephone calls, letters and emails to look at the reasons customers contacted us, and some of our internal processes for responding to the queries that came in. Their work was mainly qualitative so there was not a high number of statistics arising from it, however some of the key findings of the CARGO work were:

- 17% of the contacts observed could have been avoided (ie 'avoidable contact')
- A proportion of visits to housing offices were requests for services that are provided by other teams in other locations eg repairs, Homemove, Cityclean, explanation of housing benefit letters
- Some service requests were not from council tenants or leaseholders
- Of all the service requests coming in by mail, email, face-to-face and telephone, approximately 50% needed to be passed to another officer, team or service.
- Areas of work that would benefit from reviewing the processes from the stage at which the customer contacts the service to where the customer receives the service (end-to-end process) were identified. They were Lettings, Homemove enquiries, rent advice and complaints.

Some staff have also since spent a day doing 'Customer journey mapping' work looking at ways that some of our back-office processes could be simplified. Once we have implemented the first stage of our staffing framework to deliver transformational services and service improvements we will be in a better position to apply the suggested changes to our work practices and carry out further reviews.

Reducing avoidable contact and getting it 'right first time'

If we can resolve enquiries when they are first raised it provides a better service for customers and is more efficient for the council. We will continue reducing the number of people contacting us to chase the response to an enquiry, or contacting us because we either haven't done something we should have done, or have done something that we shouldn't have. This is one key plank for overall success in achieving more efficient customer service as it throws up areas that are ripe for service improvements. The national indicator **NI14**, measuring avoidable contact, is no longer a statutory requirement to collect. However, it has been useful in making us focus some attention on understanding how time, and therefore money, is easily wasted on putting right things that could have been done better the first time around.

The resources that we save by reducing avoidable contact can be used for preventative work. For example when we carried out some focus groups looking at how we're performing against some of the TSA standards, residents felt that we do not have a strong enough emphasis on preventative measures for anti-social behaviour (ASB), and that complaints take a long time to sort out. Staff time could be re-allocated to make further improvements in these service areas.

Although some of the older participants in these focus groups said they did not use computers, many participants would like to receive information on the website or by email. This shows that there is an appetite for using different channels, and that we have an opportunity to better meet the needs of certain groups of customers. Our staff will have an important role to play in supporting residents' access to the internet.

What we've done

- Worked jointly with library service colleagues to develop the new 'Council Connect' service.
- Included our website and 'Do it now' details on our out of hours recorded messages.
- Introduced the housing Customer online system enabling tenants to have secure access to their account details.
- Made sure that there are clear advantages to customers when they access services online - ie a speedy response, or their transaction completed end-to-end immediately.
- Ensured that all our customer access points have facilities for customers to use the internet to reach services.

Actions we will take

Examples of things we'll be doing up to 2014 are:

- Work with local training establishments to enable residents and groups to gain confidence and skills in using technology and new media.
- Use the training room at our Housing Centre to support tenants to develop their IT skills
- Ensure that all our outgoing letters and emails prominently display links to the council housing landing page on our website. In the longer term this should be more prominently displayed than telephone numbers to encourage channel shift away from telephones too.
- Have a message promoting our website, our 'Do it now' pages, and/or our Customer online system for callers waiting for a call to be answered.
- Amend our email auto-replies to include links to our website.
- Let customers know when their enquiry could have been resolved online and spend time to explain how to do it if help is needed, or send information for future reference.

- Promote our website on our Estates Service and Mears partnership vehicles.
- Carry out process mapping of our various communication and access channels to see that they all deliver a prompt and efficient service, and that staff are fully supported to respond 'right first time'.

6. Knowing our customers better to improve customer service and access (customer profiling)

It is only through knowing our customers better, knowing what they want and need from us, and knowing what their expectations are that we are able to improve the services we offer to them.

While our customers comprise many different groups, they broadly fit into three access groups:

1. A very large group who we rarely have any contact with. Their rent is paid regularly and they are generally very independent - perhaps requiring the occasional repair from us.
2. Another large group of residents have slightly more contact with us, seeking information on a range of services, contacting us for rent payments and queries, and for repairs.
3. A much smaller proportion who have a high need for contact with us, often because they are vulnerable in some way. They are most likely to prefer face-to-face contact.

This strategy aims to achieve reduced service costs, while keeping customers central to what we do, by:

- managing contacts more effectively
- reducing avoidable contacts
- making good use of the opportunities offered by technological developments, and
- providing a gentle nudge and supporting customers to shift some of their contacts from high cost-to-serve channels (eg mail, office visits and telephone) to cheaper self serve options – mainly through online services.

In doing this, our website becomes the linchpin to how we make information available and how some of our services are provided. It becomes a central resource not only for customers who wish to, and are able to, be quite self-sufficient in their transactions with us, but also for staff who will be using it as the main resource for helping customers with their enquiries.

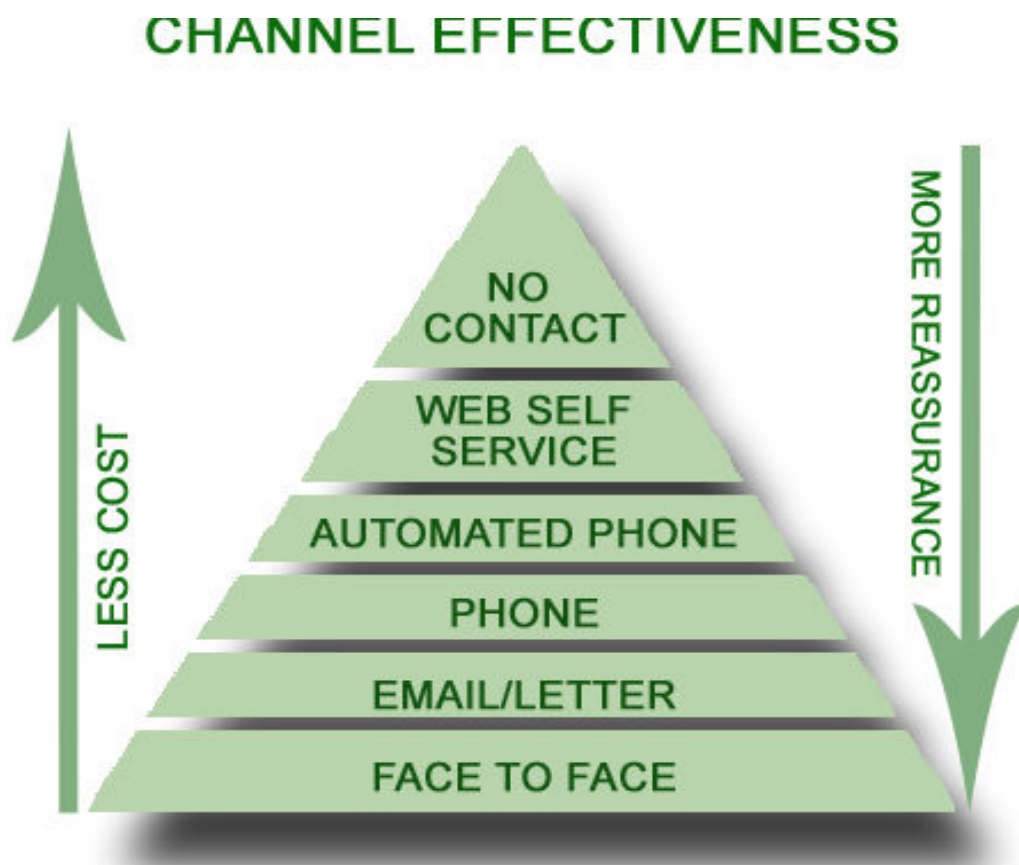
For example, during inclement weather or where we have a lift breakdown, having customers who can access information on regularly updated web-pages will free up officer time to respond to, or initiate contact with, those customers who might not have internet access. Staff in various locations can easily see the latest information about any

situation on their screens, and in this way are able to provide more consistent responses to customers - regardless of the method of contact they prefer to use.

This does not mean that we simply transfer all services to the internet. We know that would not provide excellent and accessible services to people who are currently unable to interact with us or get the information or services they need via a website. What it does mean though, is that we recognise the benefits to our customers, and to our costs, of looking at how technology can help large numbers of people in a whole range of situations.

We anticipate that as the online, self service channel is developed further and gets used more, we'll see a decrease in for example office visits and telephone contacts. Our intention is to increase service satisfaction for all customers, and by making our online and telephone services more attractive to our customers in the first two groups (access groups 1 and 2 above), it enables us to focus more attention on the third group of customers who have higher service needs and/or prefer face-to-face contact.

The diagram below shows how different access channels reduce in cost as they rise up the pyramid, and the preferred channels customers are likely to want depending on the level of reassurance they need.



The website is very effective for obtaining information (eg finding out how to report bulk rubbish) and then doing so, and for simple transactions (eg making a rent payment). Whereas face-to-face contact will be important in cases where a high level of detailed

information, sensitivity and/or reassurance is needed eg serious anti-social behaviour, failing tenancies, or tenancy concerns following a bereavement.

Customer contact channels

During 2010/11 we had approximately 218,000 contacts with customers. The breakdown for how they accessed our service is provided in the table below.

Table 2 Current access proportions across the range of our services

Channel	Percentage
Telephone	60%
Office visit	25%
Home visit	8%
Emails	4.5%
Letters	2.5%

The percentages are of the total contacts by these methods alone. We know that an increasing number of customers are self serving online although we do not have exact figures, but are aware that the proportions are currently low.

Our intention is to support channel shift so that the figures presented in the table above move in the direction indicated below.

Table 3 Target access model with channel shift

Channel	Current percentage	Channel shift direction	2014 Target
Telephone	59%	↓	50%
Office visit	25%	↓	15%
Home visit	8%	↑	10%
Emails	4.5%	↑	8%
Letters	2.5%	↓	2%
Self service - eg website	1%	↑	15%

It is anticipated that initially telephone contact will increase, while customers who want to, are supported in being able to access the information or service aspect they need through our website. Over a two to three year period the percentages of contact made via the telephone is expected to decrease.

What we've done

- We have been working to develop better insight into who our customers are, their needs and their preferences. This has already helped us anticipate some of their needs and will enable us to better provide tailored services, rather than using a one size fits all approach.
- Officers have been carrying out home visits for a considerable time, with an increased focus over the past year, to gather information that improves our knowledge of our customers. So as well as having more insight of our customer profile in terms of age, gender, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation, and whether someone in the household has a disability, we are also aware of eg how some tenants would like to be more involved in decisions that affect them and their neighbourhood, and which formats they prefer to receive information – and we've been able to send them their new tenancy agreement in their preferred format of tape, large print, Braille or a more easy read pictorial version.
- Introduced the customer online system that enables tenants to securely update their own contact details, as well as check their accounts.

Actions we will take

- Continue our customer profiling work, ensuring we have good information about all our tenants, including eg their email address, whether they are interested in receiving energy saving advice or information about household contents insurance, and whether they need support to access other services in the city. We will do this through campaigns, personal visits or telephone contacts.
- Use our profiling data to make sure that all our customers have excellent and equal access to our services.
- Capture more information about the reasons for customers contacting us, when and how they do so, so that we can use it to strengthen our customer profiles, identify trends, and improve services.

7. Using technology to improve customer service and access

There are so many ways that different or better use of longstanding and emerging technologies and new media can enormously improve customer service and access, and help us achieve our council and service objectives.

This section will use some examples from this ever expanding range of technologies that include telephones, mobile phones, smartphones, social media, hand-held devices, You Tube, Twitter, data sharing, social networking, Skype and Facebook.

Access to the internet and digital inclusion

In 2008 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) survey confirmed that 30% of social housing tenants use the internet. We do not have updated figures from ONS, but from our own statistics we know that over one sixth of our tenants, or 2,300 residents, have an email account. Other organisations have noted that there's been a rapid change – especially with the increasing popularity of Smartphones such as Android, iPhone and Blackberry. For example, Southern Housing Trust found that their internet access figures matched those of ONS in 2008 at around 30%; and that by 2010 the percentage of their tenants on the internet had increased to between 55% and 65%.

As well as knowing that at least 2,200 of our residents have email accounts, we know that during a one month period to 7 August 2011 we had 890 unique views of our council housing landing page, and 212 unique views of our Housing 'Do it now' pages. In addition, 93% of all bids made on the council's Homemove scheme have been placed via the internet

Our traditional methods of providing services have not necessarily been convenient for all customers. For example:

- people whose working hours are the same as our office opening
- people who'd have difficulty making phone calls in the daytime at work, and prefer to do so in the evening
- people with particular disabilities who'd find it hard to access services face-to-face, and others who'd have difficulty using the telephone. Internet based provision could give people greater independence, not having to rely on other people - especially with tools such as script readers on the internet, and the ability to increase font sizes and tailor web pages to suit
- people whose first language is not English and might find it easier to get a wealth of information on our website translated into their language at the click of a mouse
- consultations and involvement primarily being through attending meetings that not everyone is interested in doing
- some people with literacy skills find it difficult to read the plethora of information we send. Again they could use the screen reader facility on our website or watch video clips on the website similar to the one Cityclean have produced about recycling.

The benefits of competent online services are that they are quick, easy to use, available 24 hours a day, convenient, and carry low administrative costs.

Potential customer cost savings through using the internet

It's worth noting here how access to the internet can result in not only easier access to services, but also cheaper services or products – and therefore reduced financial outgoings for our customers. For example:

- Skype enables free national and international calls
- There is a wealth of free information on the internet
- Internet shopping can reduce grocery bills
- Increasingly job vacancies are advertised only on the internet
- Online billing from service suppliers usually attract discounts
- Internet sourced energy, insurance and other services offer 'self-serve' discounts
- Emails enable messages, photos and attached documents to be freely sent to anywhere in the world

Supporting residents to access the internet can therefore also assist with tackling inequality and supporting financial inclusion. It also helps improve IT skills for seeking work and learning opportunities.

Using social media

There are many definitions of social media, but as distilled by Wikipedia, a common thread running through all of them is 'a blending of technology and social interaction for the co-creation of value'. It's about the social provision of information that enables people to interact and comment upon it - so it's more like a conversation, a dialogue, rather than information which remains static the way newsprint or a webpage generally does.

It also takes many forms for example blogs, social networking, photo and video sharing. For the purpose of this paper, our main focus is on the social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and video and photo sharing sites such as Youtube and Flickr respectively.

Why use it?

The reasons we want to use social media essentially echo our reasons for resident involvement generally. Some are:

- Give residents the opportunity to engage with us and their neighbours
- Hear their voice
- Quick way to report issues or give their views
- Give them the option of doing this at a time, and a way that suits them
- Potentially strengthens communities and community spirit
- Enables us to be more easily accountable to our customers
- Helps us deliver services that are more relevant to what customers need or aspire to
- Demonstrates a flexible and adaptable approach to service delivery
- Harnesses the resourcefulness of our customers and communities.

Benefits for residents and other stakeholders

In addition to the above bullet points, the benefits of social media for our customers are that:

- It's quick
- Can be fun
- They can have their views heard without having to attend a meeting with the time, financial, childcare and travel costs that entails
- They can comment on things in their own time, at their own pace - on their terms
- It's less formal and bureaucratic than many of our meetings
- Our customers can interact with each other
- It's friendly

Benefits for us

In addition to some of the two sets of bullet points above, the benefits for us include:

- Shows a more human side of our organisation – especially as the relevant staff find their social media 'voice' and are able to confidently engage in/respond to the dialogue
- Real time feedback
- Less paperwork
- Less cost
- Opportunity to hear from anyone who wants to comment – especially those who wouldn't normally do so using other channels, and about what they're interested in
- It's innovative
- Helps us build relationships with our customers
- Enables less formal ways to co-design and improve our services

Our use of social media, and getting our service offer correct on our website, could play a role in increasing digital inclusion by encouraging people to take part. There are people who believe they are not on the 'internet' even though they use Facebook and Twitter from computers or phones. Also they might not visit our website, but might engage with us through social media. If this is their introduction to the internet, there could be later spin-offs for them - eg gaining employment skills, and accessing cheaper products and/or services online.

In addition, some internet providers carry out a full credit check on potential customers, and if people have a poor credit history they may find it difficult to secure a home broadband contract and are more likely to have internet access on their phones – or would find eg a 3G dongle (as offered for loan by our library service now) very useful.

How we might use it

This is not an exhaustive list, but examples of potential usage include:

Flickr

- Estate inspection actions needed
- For tenants to report areas needing attention
- Estate Development Budget (EDB) – share consultation photos for bidding process, and encourage wider participation in EDB spend decisions - people could perhaps then lodge their vote for schemes on our website or via text vote!
- Sharing before and after photos of EDB projects

Youtube video clips

- Introduction to our housing service
- Rent payment options
- Reporting repairs
- Managing anti-social behaviour
- Starting a tenancy
- Ending a tenancy
- Difficulties paying your rent?
- Information for leaseholders - eg payment support
- Being a great neighbour
- Getting involved
- Celebrating initiatives such as estate clean-ups

Twitter

- Giving daily updates on a live issue
- Regular (daily) posting on topics residents following us on Twitter will find useful
- Resident involvement - this affords a really quick, easy and effective way to get views, comment, feedback on an issue, for example at City Assembly for people unable to attend
- Quick and informal reporting and feedback

80% of people who use Twitter do so from their mobile phone. (Source: Acceleris PR and communications agency)

Facebook

- Again, regular news on topical issues eg decent homes updates
- Information we're keen to get feedback on
- Responding to our 'fans'
- Promote events
- Organise quizzes and promotions
- EDB votes
- Reporting issues and commenting on neighbourhoods

Excellent accessible services for everyone

We want to maintain choice for our customers in how they contact us or access our services. Their preferred method will be decided by factors such as:

- Their knowledge of options available
- The complexity of the issue
- Their preferences
- Their access to the internet
- The confidence they have using the internet and their abilities
- The speed within which they need confirmation of an issue
- The extent to which they need assurance of an issue

We are mindful of social, financial and digital inclusion issues, and we will maintain a mix of channels, ensuring no-one is disadvantaged by our service offer. Additionally we will continue to sign-post customers to local and national resources to support them getting online if they wish to do that.

What we've done

- Residents were consulted and involved in changes made to areas of our website
- Our website has recently been developed to improve our customer service, support improved access and support channel shift, with a new landing page www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/council-housing for easier access (including use of icons), and many more transactional services and online forms available on our 'Do it now' pages, eg:
 - ✓ pay rent, leaseholder, garage, household contents insurance and other charges online
 - ✓ use the housing benefits and council tax online calculator
 - ✓ report anti-social behaviour
 - ✓ report repairs, estate issues (eg bulk rubbish), housing and housing benefit fraud
 - ✓ make Homemove choice based lettings bids
 - ✓ take part in consultations
- From August 2011 our 'Customer Online System' enables customers to eg view their rent accounts, make payments or arrangements, and access or amend their personal information
- One housing office has transferred all its paper files and many paper-based ways of working onto our computerised IDOX system - speeding up processes especially by saving 'double entering', but saving a huge amount of paper
- Free internet access at any of the city's libraries, with enhanced support available from the council's 'Council Connect' volunteers.
- Two of our households were the first to be loaned a laptop computer with internet access as part of our new 'Council Connect' service at all city libraries.
- Tenant association groups have been assisted in setting up their own social media accounts.

Actions we will take

Examples of things we'll be doing up to 2014 are:

- Capture more information on internet access, understand barriers to the internet and seek out opportunities to overcome them.
- Continue to make improvements to our website, also developing it as the first port of call for staff responding to customer queries. In this way it would ensure that advice is consistent and that information on it is kept up to date as staff will be referring to it constantly.
- Develop a series of short You Tube video clips providing information that our customers will find useful - eg on how to report anti-social behaviour, how to get involved, and rent payment options.
- Increase our use of group text messaging to keep customers notified of issues they'll be interested in.
- Look into the potential to use Digital Switchover and digital technology to access services via televisions at home.
- Use technology to record levels of avoidable contact – and use this information when reviewing and streamlining our processes.
- Explore the use of 0300 non-geographical numbers reserved for public organisations and charities – and included in landline and mobile phone free minutes.
- Develop open data principles to help make us more accountable, and shift from customers being passive recipients of information we provide, to them being able to engage with the data and use it for a range of purposes. Examples are residents associations using local data on a range of issues (not only housing) to help them work co-productively with us on setting local priorities and budget priorities; capacity building for involvement in city-wide issues; mapping a range of issues – eg EDB spend, land available for growing, and repairs information; and groups working on anti-social behaviour having access to a range of statistics.

Any changes we make will be about broadening our service offer, and therefore extending the choices all our customers have for accessing our services.

8. Transforming how we work and developing our workforce to improve customer service and access

Organisations often talk of their staff being their most valuable asset. This is particularly true here, where officers value their interactions with customers, and are the main source of service provision to them.

We recognise that good people management lies behind the creation of successful, productive, high performing and happy work environments – the exact environment we need for delivering customer excellence and positive outcomes for our customers.

Our Workforce Development Strategy (2009 – 2012) took an organisational development approach, combining management and human resource interventions to support our ambition to make Housing & Social Inclusion a great place to work - delivering service outcomes that both staff and customers can remain proud. The key themes of that strategy are:

- ❶ Recruitment, induction and retention
- ❷ Rethinking management – and strengthening management skills
- ❸ Skilled workforce - identifying skills gaps and developing staff, growing talent
- ❹ 'Big idea' - shared vision, values and sense of purpose
- ❺ Performance management - and celebrating good performance
- ❻ Agile workforce flexible to change
- ❼ Staff engagement and commitment
- ❽ Autonomy over work, with accountability
- ❾ Improved work design and team working

We are currently carrying out a big piece of work looking at how we will transform our service model and work processes to increase staff fulfilment and improve our services to residents. The workforce development strategy will be reviewed and updated in line with the outcomes of this work.

What we've done

- Got a feel from staff about some improvements they would like to see through the iMPower, CARGO, and customer journey mapping and other work.
- Held staff workshops on 'systems thinking' to provide a good overview of how we can change our thinking about service delivery to provide better outcomes for customers through more streamlined and less wasteful processes.
- Undertaken value for money reviews of our services, and developed action plans for making improvements to how we work.
- Staff workshops with specific teams to harness ideas about future service model.

Actions we will take

- Continue engaging with staff to develop and then formally consult on a proposal for service transformation.
- Set up a Customer Service Hub consisting of a front-line team who will be located together and responsible for the majority of our customer contacts by phone, email and letter. The team will also be responsible for staffing our reception points or service hubs, as well as responding to complaints. The team will strive to deal with 80% of its contacts 'right first time'.
- Devise new staff training and induction to ensure officers have the skills and abilities to provide improved and memorable customer service.

- Develop partnership working with eg Health Trainers, Community Workers, the Whitehawk Inn adult IT trainers etc, and ensure staff have increased knowledge to pass onto customers about the services across the city that support eg learning and skills development, access to work and training, life skills and healthy eating, and computer literacy.
- Carry out a series of in depth reviews, using ‘systems thinking’ or ‘lean’ principles, to design the way we work around what our customers need from us.
- Investigate the use mobile devices to support staff effectively deal with business when they carry out home visits, enabling them to deliver a more complete customer service.
- Review and update our Workforce Development Strategy.
- Carry out self assessment (eg using the Cabinet Office Customer Service Excellence scheme) to understand and bridge any gaps in our staff and customer focus.
- Develop internal communication, leadership and management styles, workforce development programmes, and other organisational development practices that reflect a ‘high performance working’ organisation.

9. Sustainable customer service and access

There are several areas within the strategy where consideration has been given to sustainability issues. For ease of reference they are briefly outlined here:

- Increased numbers of staff located at the Housing Centre which is a very energy efficient office, and means less travel between offices for meetings etc.
- Environmental benefits of reduced travel to housing offices through excellent telephone and self-service channels.
- Ease of rent payments through other methods, potentially reducing unnecessary journeys and saving paper – eg paperless direct debit.
- Time, and therefore cost, savings of dealing with queries right first time.
- Officer use of the website for easy access to information saving paper and costs of printing policies and procedural changes.
- Increased self-serve access to internet based services will reduce our reliance on leaflets and other printed materials, with its associated cost and use of paper.
- Potentially eliminating the need for universal paper quarterly rent statements, and rent cards, as customers can view their accounts anytime they like through our Customer online system.

As we work through our transformation with staff and residents, we will be actively encouraging ideas for further improvements to the environmental, economic and social sustainability of our service.

10. Monitoring and review

The actions within this strategy will be monitored throughout the year through our Business Plans, and the strategy reviewed annually.

Appendix 1

Broad principles for changes needed to improve our customers' experience of our service

The findings from the 2009 iMPower review of customer access to tenancy management services were formed into 10 broad principles which provide a basis for the service to change and develop. The aims are to improve the experience of customers contacting the service and ensure that enquiries are resolved 'right first time'.

These principles are:

- 1 Housing management should provide an effective and efficient service that meets residents' needs
- 2 Current ways of working need to change as they are resource intensive and do not always deliver what residents want
- 3 All residents should be able to easily access the service
- 4 There should be a range of ways for residents to contact the service
- 5 Administrative functions should be organised to reduce waste and avoid duplication
- 6 Housing Officers should have a proactive role focused on providing support and tackling problems as early as possible
- 7 Housing Officers should spend less time on administration and more time with residents and taking care of their neighbourhood
- 8 Support should be targeted at those who need it most
- 9 It is possible to improve service delivery whilst reducing costs
- 10 Residents and staff should be involved in developing and delivering change and improvement

