



Connected Customers – Building Futures Together

Customer Involvement Strategy 2008/9

Our commitment to involving customers in shaping services.

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About Aire valley Homes

Aire Valley Homes Leeds (AVHL) is an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) wholly owned by Leeds City Council. Created in April 2007 following a merger of two smaller ALMOs; Leeds South Homes and part of Leeds South East Homes.

We are responsible for:

- Collecting rent;
- Managing estates;
- Inspecting and arranging day-to-day repairs;
- Dealing with breaches of tenancy;
- Consulting our customers, making sure tenants and leaseholders have a say in how we deliver services;
- Letting council homes and
- Managing and arranging the modernisation and improvement of council homes.

Services are delivered in line with six strategic objectives:

1. To deliver excellent, customer driven services.
2. To provide quality, well-maintained homes and environments.
3. To support social inclusion, community and neighbourhood regeneration.
4. To empower colleagues and customers to achieve our mission.
5. To be a well-managed, high-performing and efficient business.
6. To seek new business opportunities that accord with our values and mission.

Our objectives are supported by six core values:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Customer Focus | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understanding who our customers are;• Understanding the different needs of different customer groups;• Listening to and involving customers;• Shaping services around the needs and aspirations of our customers. |
| Community Focus | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shaping and improving the communities in which our customers live;• Working with partners to maximise our contribution to our communities;• Being active citizens. |
| Innovation and Initiative | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being open to challenge and change;• Demonstrating creativity and imagination in responding to customers. |
| Integrity and | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Agreeing standards with our customers and then |

Professionalism

delivering against them;

- Maintaining high standards of personal conduct;
- Valuing and supporting our colleagues.

Service Excellence

- Achieving high levels of customer satisfaction;
- Achieving challenging performance targets;

A Customer Communications Team of four, including three Customer Involvement Officers oversee Customer Involvement. This Strategy is managed by this team and delivered using their Action Plan. The Action Plan in turn is delivered in line with the following principles:

We will:

- take a broad view of what a 'customer' is. A customer can be an existing tenant, a leaseholder, a family or household member of a tenant, a member of the housing register, a carer or advocate on a tenants behalf or a resident living in an area where Aire Valley Homes have an influence over the local services delivered.
- involving customers at an early stage of policy and decision making, including involvement in the procurement of contractors for customer facing services.
- ensure equality of access
- continue to foster an organisational culture that values, listens and responds to customers
- consider the experiences, training and confidence of those getting involved and resource and empower customers accordingly.
- regularly communicate opportunities for involvement as well as what has improved as a result of customers involvement.
- Integrate customer involvement across the whole of Aire Valley Homes and place involvement within the day to day work of all staff and Area Panel and Board Members.
- explore working in partnership with others to maximise opportunities for involvement.

Why get involved?

Effective customer involvement is essential if we are to achieve our objectives.

Customer involvement is of benefit to customers, ourselves and to the wider community.

What's in it for us? The opportunity to...	What's in it for tenants, residents and leaseholders? The satisfaction of...	What's in it for everyone? Together we can...
Increase customer satisfaction - using customer experience to learn from our mistakes.	Seeing views turning into real improvements.	Build trust and understanding
Deliver services more in tune with individuals needs from hearing the voice of a range of customers.	learning new skills and having new experiences.	Learn and discover new and exciting ways to share ideas and improve services.
Have clear and open decision making, creating a spirit of openness and honesty	Understanding more about our housing services and other services customers can influence.	Help each other identify and break down barriers to getting involved.
Use feedback to keep our board, staff and customers informed of current views about our service.	Developing a stronger sense of community, building local networks and helping those around you.	Be flexible, allowing us both to focus on and address the issues that matter most.

Lessons learned in 2007/8

When we began operating as Aire Valley Homes in April 2007 we carried on using the customer consultation mechanisms and strategies from the former Leeds South and Leeds South East ALMOs. We joined our practices and experiences into a new Customer Involvement Strategy – *Connected Customers, Building Futures Together*.

This provided an initial framework for us to work to until full consultation and a review could be carried out. This also gave customers and Aire Valley Homes the opportunity to test the models we had adopted from the former ALMOs.

To challenge whether our inherited structures were meeting the needs and expectations of customers a review was carried out in January 2008 using:

➤ **The annual Customer Roadshow**

People visiting the Roadshow were asked an exit survey about the experience and talked to the Customer Involvement Team about how and why people would get involved. Customers told us that we should be more targeted on where we consult and should do so about specific local issues rather than being there to give general advice. Whilst those that attended welcomed the opportunity to meet staff and ask questions it was felt that a Roadshow based in a fixed number of locations wouldn't give most customers a reasonable opportunity to attend.

➤ **Area Panel Review workshop**

Area Panels, created in June 2007 as part of the governance structure of Aire Valley Homes, met as a group in January 2008 to review progress on both how they thought they were working and their relationship with other involvement structures in the customer involvement strategy. They told us it still felt like they were developing, but that they were getting more confident and stronger as more decisions were made that was having an impact locally. The panels also fed back to us that they thought overlapping more with existing tenants and residents groups would be useful – so they stayed aware of what local people wanted.

➤ **Customer Panel feedback**

A survey asking for feedback from members of the customer panel attracted almost 100 responses. Many of the comments from the respondents were very positive, stating how interesting they found taking part in consultation was and how they felt valued. However, some felt we didn't give clear enough feedback on the decisions made as a result of their involvement and a small number weren't sure what being on the Customer Panel meant at all.

➤ **Consultation with Tenant and Resident Groups**

Customer Involvement Officers carried out regular visits to tenants and residents groups. The groups were generally complimentary about how we communicated with them and how the day-to-day communication with the Customer Involvement Officers was good. However, some groups within one of the former ALMO areas commented that they felt there should be more opportunities for tenants and residents groups to meet each other. Others weren't exactly sure about the relationship with the Area Panels and themselves for issues such as funding for community projects.

As previously, our 2008/9 strategy focuses on giving customers four main levels of involvement. These levels are not mutually exclusive, and many customers access one or all levels at various times about various issues.

Put simply, the four levels are:

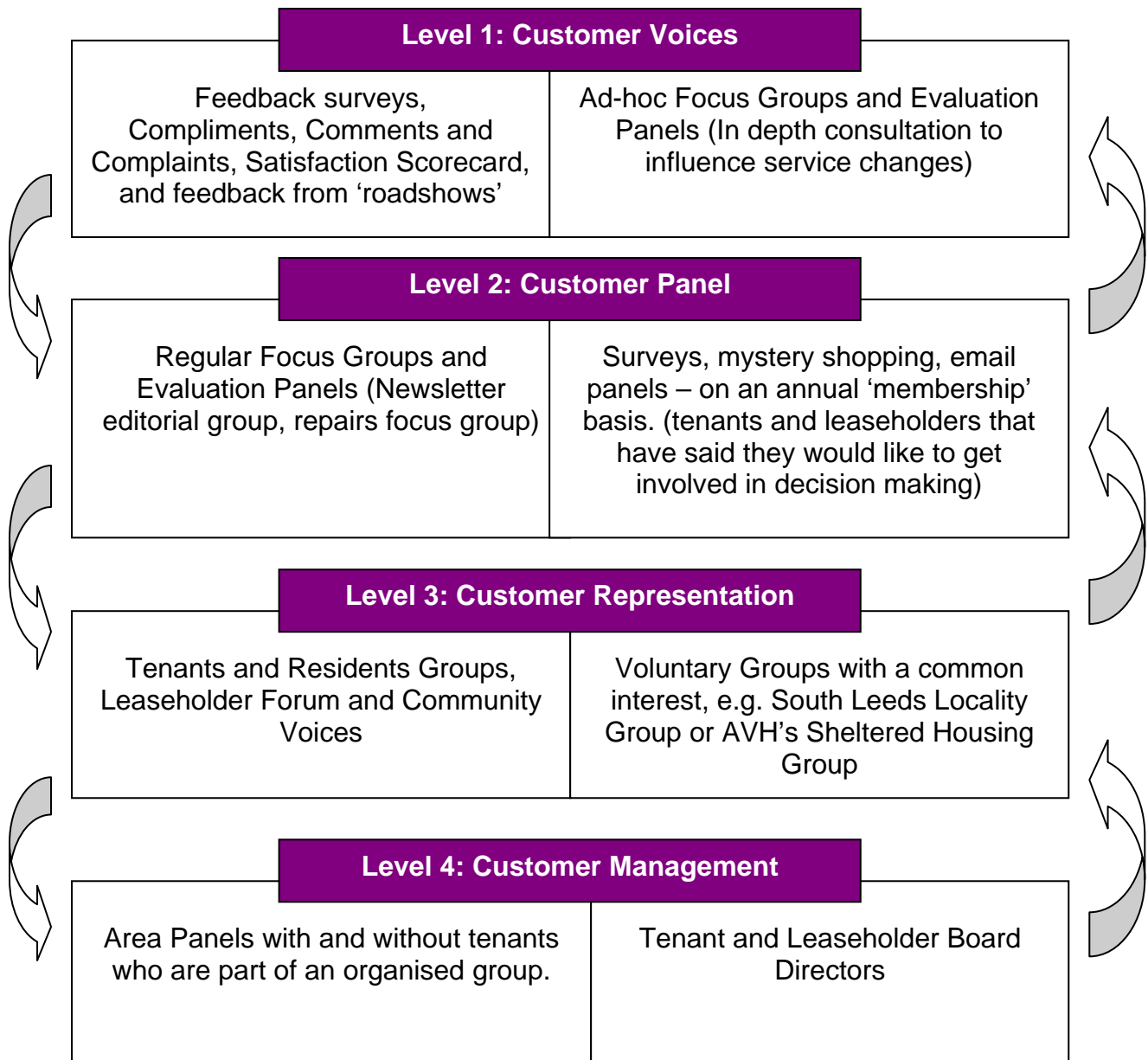
- Customer Voices
- Customer Panel
- Customer Representation
- Customer Management

The main results arising from the consultation were that these four levels provided a clear framework and should be retained, however, changes should be made to clarify how certain groupings worked.

The revised summary can therefore be summarised as follows...

Ways to get involved

The four levels of involvement:



More about Customer Voices

Customer Voices capture just that, the feedback from customers as and when they choose to give it. It is generally received passively as it arises from us delivering our day-to-day services. It can be:

- A complaint or compliment about our service;
- An ad-hoc survey about a service, like feedback on a day to day repair;
- Taking part in our Customers Satisfaction Scorecard – a quarterly survey of people who have used our services, asking them what they think about them;
- Feedback from Roadshows or consultation events out in local neighbourhoods;
- Ad-hoc focus groups and evaluation panels (for instance, how we reward good tenants);
- Responses to newsletter articles seeking customers views;
- A comment on a web form about an element of service received; or
- Any informal feedback, like a letter, e-mail, a web form or even just a conversation with a member of staff.

This is the most informal way to get involved and each year can capture the comments and views from hundreds, if not thousands, of customers.

More about the Customer Panel

The customer panel is a list of customers who have volunteered to be involved in a more organised way.

Panel volunteers can be:

- Invited to focus groups to discuss something.
- Sent surveys (by e-mail or by post)
- Telephoned to give their view about something

Some focus groups meet regularly, like asset management and our newsletter editorial group, others are one off's, for example, getting feedback on changing our name or if we should do more to recognise and reward good customers.

The customer panel gives a range of opportunities to become involved in a issue, at a time and in a way that's convenient.

We recruit to the panel by advertising in the newsletter and on our website. We also highlight the Panel as a way to get involved as and when the opportunity arises (like when new customers begin a tenancy with us). Equality and Diversity monitoring ensures we are aware of how representative feedback from the Panel is. Members of the Customer Panel remain so for a period of one year and are then invited to stay on the Panel for a further year.

In addition to the actual Panel we also have a group of Mystery Shoppers. This group of tenants and leaseholders are recruited partly from the Panel and partly through a separate recruitment process.

More about Customer Representation...

Some customers find it beneficial to become involved on a more collective level, speaking on behalf of a number of others. This includes Tenants and Residents Groups, "Community Voices".

We currently support 29 tenants and residents groups and 2 community voices.

The Customer Involvement Team advise and support each of these groups who all act autonomously to Aire Valley Homes. Funding to cover their running costs and administration is available from us if the group adopts a constitution that describes the importance of acting in an inclusive and appropriate manner.

Community Voices act on the behalf of a small number of tenants who perhaps live in one particular street or sheltered housing complex. They have evidenced to us that they actively canvas the views of their local residents and act as a 'one person' residents group where interest might not be there to form a committee to make a residents group.

Customers are also represented through standing focus groups such as the sheltered housing focus group and the newsletter editorial body.

More about Customer Management...

The most organised and formal way of getting involved.

Customers can directly influence the management of the organisation by becoming a tenant or leaseholder Board Director or by joining one of our three Area Panels.

We have three Area Panels, mirroring the Council's Area Committee boundaries; Outer South, Outer South East and Inner South. Each comprises six tenants, a Board member and two ward councillors; in order to achieve a fresh mix on involvement three of the six tenants were selected by nominations from registered tenants and residents groups and three from volunteers from the Customer Panel list.

The Area Panels are each supported by a team of 1 senior manager from Asset Management and 1 from Housing Management, with additional support from the Customer Communications Team. Area Panels have two delegated budgets: £10,000 pa for supporting community activity and £100,000 for environmental improvements.

We have four Tenant/leaseholder Board Members selected from those directly elected to the Boards of the former ALMOs. During 2008/9 we are reviewing the link

between Area Panel and Board places.

Both Board and Area Panel members are provided with training and support and understand their role is defined by a terms of reference and code of conduct.

Opportunities across all our services

The Customer Involvement Strategy enables customers to shape the whole range of services they receive from us.

Our services are provided by three divisions; Housing Management, Asset Management and Corporate Services. Within each division, distinct service areas deliver our day to day work. These include:

- Tenancy Management
- Estate Management
- Income Management
- Customer Communications and Involvement
- Property Lettings
- Sheltered Housing Services
- Responsive Repairs
- Capital Programme (achieving Decent Homes)
- Regeneration, including PFI partnerships

Our Strategy places customer involvement as an integral part of all these areas thought processes. Within each of these we expect customers to be involved in:

- setting and reviewing service standards;
- the procurement procedure for contractors or goods and services we buy.
- helping to monitor service performance against actual service standards;
- developing ideas on service improvements and
- priority setting within action plans.

The Value of Diversity

The Connected Customer Strategy takes account of the diverse needs of our customers and actively seeks to include people who are vulnerable to exclusion. In order to achieve this we want to increase the number and diversity of customers who get involved and for customers to be satisfied with a menu of opportunities offered for them to participate.

Aire Valley Homes aims to involve more people who are either vulnerable or from different ethnic backgrounds who can be easy to reach but sometimes hard to engage. Initiatives to be taken include:

- Offering to translate publications into other languages

- Provide or signpost training and support to encourage and empower customers to participate
- Use creative marketing to promote positive images of diverse and vulnerable customers who are currently involved. Provide publicity in appropriate community locations and to targeted customer groups.
- Take positive action to address under-representation. This may include activities geared to areas of high black or minority ethnic population, or involve cultural and / or faith based events.
- Offering to provide documents in large print, audio tape and Braille versions of publications
- Communicating through the local media.
- Offering face to face meetings and home visits.
- Offering to arrange transport to events and meetings.
- Talking to advocates of people unable to speak for themselves e.g. relatives of frail elderly people.
- Continue to consult with customers on widening involvement

How we engage with customers, how we consult, visit, and deliver day-to-day services needs to be flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of our customers. We know from customer profiling that our customers have a range of needs and communication preferences.

We will be building and updating our knowledge of customers and using this information across the organisation.

Leaseholders

We recognise that leaseholders have both common as well as different interests in the services we provide. We will therefore aim to consult with all leaseholders as they receive a number of services from us. In particular, we have obligations under the Common hold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002 to consult with leaseholders before we carry out major repairs. This responsibility, along with our day to day communication with leaseholders, is managed by a project officer with leaseholder liaison responsibility.

During 2008/9 we will:

- hold a leaseholders forum on a quarterly basis – helping us continually review the service we provide;
- continue to write a dedicated column in the quarterly newsletter;
- carry out an annual satisfaction survey;

- seek leaseholder representation on our Board; and
- keep updated a specific page on our website especially for leaseholders

Beyond Housing

We recognise that a resident's quality of life is affected by factors other than the quality of their home. These include: community safety and crime, environment, health, education, training and access to employment and leisure.

Where we are not directly responsible for providing local services, we will continue to work in partnership, whenever possible, with statutory and voluntary sector agencies to provide integrated services and to contribute towards cohesive and successful communities.

The Connected Customers Strategy in particular will:

- promote examples of good citizenship
- support and participate in local community initiatives
- assist community groups to develop and progress local initiatives

Working with Leeds Tenants Federation (LTF)



We work closely with Leeds Tenants Federation (LTF) . Both ourselves and LTF operate “an open door policy” in terms of encouraging customer involvement for everyone's benefit.

LTF operate on a more strategic level. They champion Customer Involvement across the city of Leeds to improve housing and housing related services. LTF also act as a city wide voice for the tenants and residents to influence national and regional housing policy.

Leeds Tenants Federation is a resident-run organisation.

More information about LTF can be found on their website: www.leadstenants.org.uk

Aire Valley Homes have quarterly liaison meetings with LTF to

- share good practice;
- inform each other of new and emerging tenants and residents groups or those that are no longer working;
- maximise the opportunities to share training resources and;

- to help each other signpost tenants and residents to each others programme of events.

Our Service standards

The standards of service our customers can expect is described in our Guide to Customer Involvement.

To deliver our Connected Customers Strategy and to work in accordance with our customer involvement principles we will:

- employ a dedicated Customer Involvement Team to support, assist and encourage participation of groups;
- publish a Connected Customers Strategy which explains the different ways you can become involved that has been agreed with customers;
- consult you on any significant changes in services we provide, both individually and through more formal structures such as the Customer Panel and Area Panels;
- pay reasonable expenses so you are not out of pocket for getting involved, e.g. travel, or child care costs;
- issue freepost envelopes for tenants and leaseholders to use when their views are being sought by post;
- wherever possible have a member of staff in attendance a tenants and residents groups meetings if we are invited;
- help and advise groups to get funding from various sources to help them achieve their goals;
- inform new tenants at 'accompanied viewings' about existing community groups in the area;
- monitor the profile of tenants and residents groups and work with them so they are more able to speak for the whole community;
- be considerate when organising events such as focus groups or meetings so they are accessible, pleasant and convenient places to be;



- offer training to help customers get the most from their involvement;
- produce a newsletter at least four times a year to help promote the success of local groups and to let all our customers know what has changed as a result of your feedback;
- produce an annual report reviewing our work over the last year;
- be open to new ideas and ways that customers can become involved and influence our services; and
- offer a range of ways to get involved that meet all our customers needs.

Innovation and Good Practice

The Customer Involvement Team are committed to continuous improvement and innovation to explore new ways of working.

During 2008/9 we will be exploring:

Utilising technology to consult and engage such as the ability to:

- text and receive feedback via text messaging
- using mobile working to increase customer involvement
- the possibility of touch screen technology to enable easier access to our services in certain locations

Adopting good practice from others – for instance:

- high performing housing associations and ALMOs
- learning from professional others such as Tenant Participatory Advisory Service (TPAS), Tenants and Residents of England (TAROE) Housemark, the Chartered Institute of Housing etc.

Links to other strategies

The Connected Customers has a direct link to:

Access to Services Strategy

Equality and Diversity Strategy

Aire Valley Homes Business Plan

Wider team, divisional and ALMO improvement plans

To use as a benchmark for an 'excellent' housing service the Audit Commission's Resident Involvement Key Line of Enquiry.

Training and Support

Currently we offer a range of training opportunities whether delivered by ourselves or others.

For example, we offer:

- Support and advice, confidence building, organisational skills etc,
- Chair, secretary and treasurer skills for committee members of tenants and resident groups and
- Provide a Board Director training programme

To add to the above we will consult with customers to identify their training or learning needs and wishes and discuss the choice of training methods. We will explore the use of creative techniques to achieve a wider customer appeal, including the use of web-based learning.

Some training and learning will be provided, or facilitated by Aire Valley Homes. In other cases we will direct customers towards local training providers. We will explore the potential for partnerships with appropriate local contractors and businesses in order to maximise value for money.

Some suggested training areas for individual customers include:

- information technology e.g. using the internet;
- public speaking;
- understanding wider Council services;
- understanding who does what at Aire Valley Homes; and
- maintaining a home and garden.

For Tenants and Residents Associations suggestions include:

- Committee Skills;
- publicity and communication;
- negotiating skills; and
- Equality, Diversity and Community Cohesion.

Within our budget we will support tenant and leaseholder requests to:

- access relevant formal accredited study e.g. Certificate in Tenant Participation; and
- attend relevant conferences and wider training events.

We also want to ensure no tenant, leaseholder or resident volunteer is out of pocket as a result of taking part in any event arranged by us.

We will pay any reasonable expenses incurred in getting involved.

This could include:

1. Travel costs, either by public transport (bus, train or taxi) or mileage costs of travelling by private car,
2. Care costs of paying someone to care for a dependent so you can attend,
3. Childcare costs so that your children are safe and looked after while you get involved.

An application form for any expenses incurred is available from the Customer Involvement Team. If you have any questions about the support we can offer please contact us.

Reviewing and Improving

Our aim is to have an excellent Customer Involvement Strategy. To achieve this we propose to:

- review this Strategy annually using all the mechanisms this strategy describes.
- measure customer satisfaction against national performance indicators
- carry out an annual Equality Impact Assessment to identify if the strategy is actually or potentially discriminating against any specific customer group.
- be open and receptive to learning from others, especially three star ALMOs and high rated housing associations.
- be open and receptive to learn from staff teams as well as customers, sharing ideas and ownership of the resulting actions.
- update quarterly the customer involvement team action plan.

Value for Money

Delivering the current Connected Customers Strategy costs £222k per year. This includes salary costs, newsletters, funding to residents groups, a community participation fund, as well as costs such as organising our roadshows and holding focus groups.

These costs amount to an average of £14 per property or 1.14% of the total Management Fee we have from Leeds City Council to be able to deliver all our services. During 2008/9 we aim to compare these costs with others to check whether the service we provide gives good value for money. To add value to the work we do we try wherever possible to work with to share work and good practise, avoiding duplication and maximising opportunities to 'spread' resources.

Contact Details

Customer Involvement Team

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Email: avhleeds.cit@avhleeds.org.uk

Our team is available during 8.30am and 4.40pm Monday to Friday. Answer machine outside these times.