



Planning Services

Customer focus strategy 2011



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Introduction

The work of Planning Services covers five principal areas of council responsibility:

- [Building Standards](#)
- [Development Management](#)
- [Development Planning](#)
- [Environment](#)
- [Education Planning](#)

Within each of these areas there are a number of specialist services and activities. Almost all of these involve the provision of services to, and interaction with, a very wide range of customers. For example, in 2009, we processed over 930 planning applications, and 1,700 building warrant applications. The *West Lothian Local Plan*, involved consultation with over 200 different individuals and stakeholder groups.

The customer, ranging from members of the general public to private sector organisations and their agents, is central to everything we do and how we respond to clients and stakeholders is crucial to the service they received and how we are perceived. It is important, therefore, that all those who work in Planning Services have the values and understanding appropriate to a customer focused culture and that all operations and procedures meet customer needs and expectations. To that end we have developed this [Customer Focus Strategy](#) which, in this revised version published in May 2011, brings together the spectrum of our customer-centred initiatives and actions into a comprehensive and systematic approach. This builds upon and harmonises customer care policies and procedures that have operated across the four service areas for some time.

The strategy does not exist in isolation. It is founded upon corporate policy and is complemented by a number of other policies, provisions and initiatives including our [Customer Insight and Consultation Strategy](#) by which we engage and involve customers, or more specific [Compendium of Service Standards](#), our [Complaints Procedure](#) and our [Communications Strategy](#), amongst others.

In May 2010, the council produced a [Service Improvement Plan](#) for the first time. Although learning from customer and staff feedback and experience has always been fundamental to the way the service operates, the action resulting from various initiatives have never been set out in a single document.

Customer Care

All staff in Planning Services are committed to treating its customers in a polite, friendly and fair manner. In doing so we are committed to the council's corporate values:

- Focus on our customer needs;
- Being open and accountable;
- Providing equality of opportunities;
- Developing employees;
- Making best use of resources; and
- Working in partnership.

Built on these, is the council's *Customer Services Strategy*. In 2002, guiding principles were established to help the council focus on the delivery and development of services. Still relevant today these see the authority aspiring to be:

- A corporate council - focused on priorities;
- A connected council - at the heart of a network of partners;
- A customer focused council - organised around the needs of our citizens;
- A best value council - delivering high quality integrated services; and
- A e-council - enabled by technology.

The council wide *Customer Services Strategy* has six key objectives:

- To put customers at the heart of our service provision, and to listen and respond to them when planning changes;
- To work towards improving access to public services in West Lothian for all our customers - whatever their ability, age, preferences or where they live;
- To transform service delivery where change is needed, to deliver services that are more responsive to customer requirements and to give better value;
- To make and keep commitments to customers when we provide services - and inform them about the progress of the service they have requested.;
- To continue to develop the culture of customer service throughout the council and to help staff improve customer service skills; and
- To ensure all services operate at the *Customer Service Excellent Standard* for customer service.

In response to these challenges we have developed a range of service standards and performance measures which set out the service customers can expect and how well we are doing in achieving them.

Anyone of us may be the only contact a customer has with the council and the council will be judged on our performance.

The key customer focused principles of Planning Services are:

- Be welcoming, attentive and courteous;
- Be honest and fair in dealing with customers;
- Respond quickly to requests for assistance;
- Provide services that are fair and accessible to all;
- Provide information in a form suited to customers' needs;
- Set and publish service standards and performance targets;
- Record, monitor and publish comments and complaints;
- Ensure complaints are dealt with efficiently and fairly;
- Actively seek the views of customers and staff;
- Explain services and keep the public informed of what is happening;
- Review our customers and staff commitment;
- Help our communities; and
- Share good practice.

Planning Services is committed to providing fair and equal access to services that focus on our customer needs, are honest, open and accountable, and are delivered in a reliable, courteous, and effective manner.

Planning Service Customer Care Standards

We aim to provide our customers with a high quality service that is continually improving. [To achieve this we must learn from our mistakes and from feedback we receive from all those who engage with the services we provide.](#) We must also set out what we have learned and the ways in which we have changed our service provision in response.

Through the following generic standards we will:

- Observe high standards of personal conduct, including politeness, fairness, and sensitivity, and demonstrate integrity, objectivity, competence and confidentiality in carrying out our work;
- Respond promptly to all telephone calls, emails, voicemail, messages, letters and other approaches by customers and acknowledge all communications within two working days;
- Answer all telephone calls promptly (within 20 seconds - approximately four or five rings) or direct all calls to an appropriate answering service;
- Accurately provide as much information and immediate advice as possible;
- Ensure that customers have received and understood the information we provide to them;
- Advise of the officer who will deal with any request or case and give contact details;
- Record and deal with complaints relevant to our service in accordance with our adopted complaints procedure;
- Make our [Complaints Procedure](#) readily available to all;
- If the customer complains in writing or by e-mail then ensure that the complaint is acknowledged within three working days following receipt. Respond in the same format as received, confirming that we have received the complaint and that the council is dealing with it;
- Ensure any complaint is registered in the [Frontline](#) system and a copy forwarded to the service manager;

- Respond to all complaints within 10 working days of receipt. This will involve either:
 - *Informing the customer of the action that we have taken or propose to take; or*
 - *Arranging to discuss the matter with the customer, in which case after the discussion confirm to the customer the outcome of the discussion.*
- When responding to complaints make sure that all points raised by the customer are answered and copy your manager in on the response;
- If in exceptional circumstances we cannot respond to the complaint within 10 working days, we will keep the customer fully informed of the progress until the complaint has been dealt with.;
- Keep customers up to date about what we are doing on their behalf;
- Listen to the concerns and views of the customers and consult regularly to ensure that their needs are being met and to continually improve the service.;
- Provide opportunities for customers to provide suggestions or comments on service provided;
- Publish regularly the results of customer surveys and feedback and any action or improvements that result;
- Revise these standards on a regular basis in the light of feedback from our customers; and
- Ensure that all staff are familiar with the *Planning Services Customer Care Guidelines*.

In addition to these generic standards, we have more specific service standards, practice notes, and protocols tailored to suit specific areas of our work and designed to ensure excellence of service. These are published together in the *Planning Services Compendium of Service Standards*.

All generic and specific service standards are reviewed in accordance with the table on page 11.

Equal opportunities

Planning Services recognises the diversity of its local community and the value this diversity brings to community life and participates in a formal corporate working group dedicated to equality issues. The service also regularly involves the council's Equal Opportunities Officer and routinely considers whether any new strategy, policy, plan or proposal requires an *Equal Opportunities Assessment*. The aim is to provide each member of the community with fair and equal treatment in all its activities.

We will make every effort to ensure that anyone who is entitled to a service from us does not receive less favourable treatment on grounds of any irrelevant consideration, including age, disability, gender, marital status, nationality, race, creed or sexual orientation.

From the start of 2010, all policies produced by the service and any new procedures introduced will be subject to an *Equality Impact Assessment*. In addition, all officers will be required to undertake diversity training.

Customer confidentiality

Where we handle sensitive personal or confidential information, we treat this with appropriate priority and care for the customer's rights and interests.

Procedures are in place for specific situations such as medical referrals and disclosure checks and all PC and key data management systems are password protected.

Complaints, comments and compliments

It is important that we listen to the views of our customers, including those that are unsolicited, and use this information to improve our service delivery. All complaints should be dealt with in accordance with the adopted *Complaints Procedure* and appropriate In addition, all officers will be required to undertake *Diversity Training Service Standards*. In such circumstances we must understand what is being said, apologise if we get things wrong and take action to ensure our services are improved because of this. We must also listen when our customers tell us things are going well or make suggestions about the way we deliver services and how we prioritise services. Monitoring this information can be invaluable in identifying problem areas and in highlighting areas of good practice.

Conducting surveys and encouraging customers to give us feedback will help customers feel that we are committed to listening to them.

Staff comments, suggestions and input

Staff, particularly those in customer facing situations, are ideally placed to gain insights into the effectiveness of our customer care strategy. Staff are therefore often in a position to offer suggestions on improving services. Managers will record such suggestions, which can be made in writing, at regular team meetings, through bi-annual Performance Review and Personal Development Plan process through regular staff surveys or at any other time.

Recruitment, induction and training

Planning Services staff all undergo service specific induction (in addition to that of a council level) and participate in programmes of continual development through performance review and personal development planning. Aspects of customer care are central to these initiatives. The concept of a customer focused culture, including participating in appropriate post-recruitment training and development, is included in the job specifications for all new posts and all staff are expected to be aware of the *Planning Services Customer Care Guidelines*, *Complaints Procedure* and content of this document in addition to the service standards to which they work.

Benchmarking

Planning Services recognises that it has much to gain from an understanding of the practices of other council services and external organisations in relation to customer focus. It is intended that, in future, there will be an initiative to benchmark our customer related behaviour and standards with a select range of such partners.

Setting and reviewing customer focus standards and targets, and monitoring performance

The customer focus standards and targets are reviewed regularly and new standards set for service improvement. In order to do this effectively, all staff are encouraged to contribute to this process. The following records the creation and review process for the key customer focus strategies and initiatives. Details of how we measure and report on the effectiveness of our customer service standards are included in the *Planning Services Customer Insight Strategy*. Performance in relation to the standards outlined in the *Planning Services Compendium of Service Standards* is reported separately.

Subject	Created	Reviewed	Last review	Responsibility	Consulted	Actions
PS Customer Focus Strategy	2009	Annually	May 2011	CSE Team	Staff, Managers, WLC Internal	Publish and consult externally
PS Customer Insight Strategy	2009	Annually	May 2011	CSE Team	Staff, Managers, WLC Internal	Review 2012
PS Communication Strategy	2009	Annually	May 2011	CSE Team	Staff, Managers, WLC Internal	Review 2012
PS Customer Care Guidelines for staff	2004	Annually	May 2011	Service Managers	Staff, Managers, WLC Internal	Review 2012
Compendium for service standards	2006	Annually	May 2011	Services	Staff, Managers, WLC Internal, key external partners	Publish and consult externally
PS Complaints Procedure	2006	Annually	May 2011	CSE Team	Staff, Managers, WLC Internal	Publish and consult externally
Benchmarking with other services	2010	Continuous	Continuous	Service Managers	Benchmarking partners	Continue to identify potential partners
Service Improvement Plan	2010	Continuous	Continuous	Service Managers	Scot Gov, Community Council, Focus Group participants	Publish and consult externally

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