

Customer Experience Strategy

2022-24

**The Barnett
Group**



1. Introduction

This strategy outlines The Barnet Group's strategic direction and priorities for customer experience over the next two years. The goals of the strategy are to have:

1. **Easy to access, responsive services**
2. **Compassion for vulnerable customers**
3. **Customer excellence central to all we do.**

These goals support the priorities of the Group's strategic plan (2019-24) and the Group's vision, mission, and values. The table below describes how the strategy will do this.

Group priorities	How this strategy will support our priorities
<p>Our vision is for customers to be our biggest advocates</p> <p>Our mission is to make a real difference to every customer</p> <p>Our values are being person-centred through showing respect, finding solutions and making a difference</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Setting clear expectations about what good customer service looks like for our customers and giving teams the tools and training that they need to consistently demonstrate this.• Making it easier for our customers to get what they need from us by:<ul style="list-style-type: none">o improving initial access, including through online self-serveo further increasing resolution at first contacto improving our responsiveness and communications• Supporting teams to assist vulnerable customers in a compassionate, inclusive, and helpful way.• Equipping our teams to prevent issues that cause difficulties for customers and to manage these issues effectively to find solutions for customers when they do occur.• Making the consideration of our customers central to the way we work and the services that we provide to them.

2. Our context

Who are our customers?

The Group provides a range of housing, homelessness, care, and support services for a variety of customers:

- **Barnet Homes** manages the borough's council homes on behalf of the London Borough of Barnet, delivering services for: tenants, non-secure tenants, and leaseholders; customers with a housing problem being assisted by Housing Options including rough sleepers; customers living in short-term and settled forms of temporary accommodation
- **Opendoor Homes** - a subsidiary of Barnet Homes, delivering services for: tenants living in newbuild homes; tenants living homes that have been acquired on the open market, the majority of which are located outside of Barnet
- **Your Choice Barnet** – an adult social care company providing services to adults with learning or physical disabilities and autism including people using the following services: Extra Care; Day services for adults with learning disabilities; Respite services; Independent Living Services; Supporting Living

Services; Autism Services; Floating Support; Personal Assistants (PA) Choices

- **Bumblebee Property** – an online estate agent that provides bespoke services to private sector landlords and tenants.
- **BOOST** – an employment and financial inclusion service which provides a range of advice and programmes to support Barnet’s residents into employment, training and volunteering, alongside income maximisation, budgeting and other finance advice and initiatives. Digital inclusion initiatives are provided as well as targeted programmes for young adults living in Barnet. The team work with a wide range of partners and can support clients with wellbeing help including those affected by poor mental health.

As the services offered by the Group has diversified, so have the needs of the customers we assist and people we support. The nature of our homelessness and support services means that we assist a growing number of people who are vulnerable. Furthermore, the impacts of the pandemic, global political issues, and policy decisions from central government make this a very challenging time for our customers: the significant increase in the cost of living and Welfare Reform means that many residents and people we support are facing financial hardship. Those living in the private rented sector are also experiencing these difficulties and with the end of furlough and resumption of evictions from the private rented sector, face an increased risk of homelessness where they may need our help.

Sector context

The impacts of the pandemic, global political issues, government legislation and policy decisions also affect the care and housing sectors. There is a shortage of care workers and a shortage of affordable homes in Barnet and London for those in need. There has also been a cross-sector decrease in tenant satisfaction, largely caused by providers’ limited ability to deliver repairs during the pandemic lockdowns and because of post-Brexit nationwide trade and materials shortages. Increased regulation will see the introduction of new ‘Tenant Satisfaction Measures’ - focussed on tenants’ priorities - that we will be held to account on, alongside our existing obligations which include the Regulator for Social Housing’s Consumer Standards and the Care Quality Commission’s Care Standards.



3. Summary of analysis

Alongside our customer and sector context, a range of insight has been considered to develop this strategy, including insight from customer and colleague engagement exercises, complaints and surveys, customer experience performance and best practise. Opportunities have also been considered.

Insight analysis shows that it is important that we focus on:

- **Improving access and responsiveness** by easing identified access difficulties such as wait times and improving how we help customers facing issues; supporting teams to be as responsive as possible to minimise delays for customers.
- **Increasing online self-serve for tenants and leaseholders.** The volume of enquiries about accessing balances online, repair requests made using the website pictorial tool and leaseholder feedback shows there is customer appetite for online services and technically viable options are now available for key areas such as repairs.
- **Improving customer experience when repairs are not fixed in one visit** and when repairs are completed by subcontractors, to prevent the need for customers to chase.
- **Improving how we keep customers informed** with progress updates for ongoing enquiries where these will be helpful, and through proactively providing customers with information about things that will affect them as clearly and early as possible.
- **Preventing issues** by identifying and addressing recurring issues that adversely affect customers such as appointments being changed at short notice.
- **Improving consistency.** Lots of positive feedback has been received about our people and services. Improved guidance and training, including role/service specific training, as well as routinely addressing identified issues, will help ensure all customers have a positive experience no matter what they need.

Exercises completed during the development of this strategy - and within the Homelessness Prevention Insight Project completed in May 2022 - have improved our understanding of the experiences of vulnerable customers engaging with our housing services. Experiences are varied – some are positive, including where teams have worked together effectively to resolve a complex issue - whilst some vulnerable customers experience barriers which prevent them from accessing and engaging with our services. Access barriers include digital barriers (not being able to use the internet), affordability issues (such as lacking mobile phone credit), and language barriers. Engagement barriers include needing additional support to navigate complex systems such as the housing application process or when completing written applications and providing documents. Some customers need regular updates that teams don't robustly have the capacity to provide. Those customers who have gone through traumatic experiences may find it difficult to initiate contact with our services to progress their cases.

Providing self-serve in key areas for residents and addressing recurring issues which cause customers to chase, will help create capacity for proactive, helpful updates for customers. It will also mean increased capacity to provide tailored, compassionate support for vulnerable customers to help overcome the barriers described above.

A new approach to surveying means we have improved insight about customer experience from a wider range of customers. Those attending the customer focus groups held to inform this strategy felt that providing such forums allowed customers to be heard and those attending the colleague focus groups were interested in having ongoing forums to work collaboratively to improve customer experience. Both customers and colleagues felt that having greater customer involvement when changes that affect customers are planned and communicated would help ensure that customers are routinely and fully

considered at these times. Existing good practise will be utilised when shaping our improved approach to planning and communication.



4. Our strategic goals and priorities

The Customer Experience Strategy has three strategic goals. The goals are described below along with supporting priority focus areas.

Goal 1: Easy to access, responsive services.

We will do this by improving access and assistance at first contact through:

1.1 Designing and implementing mechanisms which better manage enquiries and requests during busy periods to minimise wait times and other access difficulties for customers.

1.2 Introducing easy to use online self-serve options focussed on the priority services and information that customers need most including: repairs; rent and service balance checks; future planned works for tenants and leaseholders; common enquiries that customers could 'self-serve' with improved website information and navigation.

1.3 Further equipping Customer Contact and Housing Options to assist customers with more enquiries at first contact, including equipping them to:

- Help with incidents, issues, and escalated/non-simple enquiries including chases.
- Proactively provide advice to customers experiencing difficult circumstances such as those affected

by increased cost of living.

1.4 Introducing additional tools to assess the quality of enquiry handling, including call recording, and mechanisms to use these to continually improve the service provided by our contact teams.

We will do this by improving responsiveness to requests and issues through:

1.5 Developing enhanced customer service standards focussed on areas important to customers including introducing:

- Quicker target response times for some queries including chases.
- Clear protocol and timeframes for customer call backs, returning voicemails, returning missed calls to direct lines and responding to emails received directly from customers.
- Clear service standards for contractors including how quickly they will call customers to arrange repair appointments.

1.6 Providing teams with tools and support to:

- Action customer requests and call backs within advised timeframes.
- Provide helpful updates for customers when they most need this.
- Manage direct contact with customers effectively.
- Identify and address capacity issues.
- Help customers effectively when they have an enquiry outside their remit.

1.7 Improving how complex enquiries, issues and incidents are owned and managed for customers including those that involve multiple teams and ongoing local/area-based issues, so that customers are kept updated and have a timely resolution.

Goal 2: Compassion for vulnerable customers.

We will do this by:

2.1 Developing a trauma informed approach¹ to improve engagement with vulnerable customers, by:

- Rolling out a service-specific training programme to help colleagues work with customers in vulnerable circumstances and to improve communication and assistance for these customers.
- Reviewing and improving our core communications with subject specialists (including customers) to ensure they have clear, consistent messaging and a respectful tone and are helpful for vulnerable customers.
- Ensuring systems support teams to identify and assist vulnerable customers effectively.
- Improving the awareness of vulnerable customers with contractors to ensure interactions or communication with these customers follow the required approach.

2.2 Reducing barriers to accessing support and engaging with our services, by:

- Scoping opportunities to increase one-to-one support through improved partnership working and/or through bids for government funding - to help specific customer groups to complete applications and to engage with services.
- Helping 'hard to reach' groups to engage with services, by improving the information of available services and assistance.

¹ A trauma-informed approach will involve supporting staff-members through training and guidance to better understand the effects of trauma and advising staff-members how to improve their assistance for customers who have experienced trauma.

Goal 3: Customer excellence central to all we do.

We will do this by:

3.1 Developing and embedding improved customer care guidance, including:

- Introducing customer care principles that everyone works to, focussed on customer priorities.
- Relaunching a central customer care training programme, with tools to embed learning including determining an approach for refresher training.
- Ensuring inductions adequately guide and support new colleagues on customer care.
- Ensuring we adequately guide contractors who work on our behalf of our customer care expectations.
- Developing and delivering service and role-specific training and guidance to meet the specific needs of customers and people we support engaging with those services.

3.2 Ensuring that we have engagement and involvement mechanisms which:

- Enable the voice of customers and the people we support to be heard and their experiences understood.
- Inform and support decision-making, service planning and customer communications.

3.3 Developing and embedding a robust customer experience insight and learning framework which supports proactive continuous improvement for customers. To include:

- Improving visibility and monitoring of issues that cause customers difficulties, cascading this to managers and teams.
- Supporting senior manager and colleague forums to develop solutions to cross-cutting and service specific issues.
- Rolling service improvement plans focussed on implementing solutions to recurring issues that most adversely affect customers.

3.4 Reviewing and improving core practices to ensure they support a customer-focussed culture including:

- Recruitment and people/performance management.





- Processes for planning, making, and communicating changes or issues that will affect customers.
- Contractor procurement and management.

5. Making it happen and progress measures

A supporting action plan will be developed to deliver this strategy. The action plan will be owned by the Customer Experience Programme Board whose members include the Group Chief Executive, the Group Director of Operations, and the Group Director of Customer Experience. The Customer Experience Programme Board and Resident Board will regularly review the progress of delivery of priority activities and expected customer and business benefits.

Our priority customer experience target is to improve overall satisfaction with services provided to all customers of the Group and utilise qualitative feedback to continuously improve services.





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