

**First Draft Housing Service Standards**

**Item 5**

**EXECUTIVE MEMBER:** Councillor Clements  
**LEAD OFFICER:** Fergus McMorrow  
**REPORT AUTHOR:** Laurie Priebe, Alan Davis & Debbie Cochrane

Summary and Recommendation:

The absence of published housing service standards was criticised by the Audit Commission Housing Inspectorate in their report of 2008. The first draft of comprehensive housing service standards is therefore attached as Appendix 1.

Members comments are invited and they are requested to approve the document as the basis for consultation with service users and other stakeholders.

**1. Introduction**

Service standards refer not to the technical specification of housing works and services that users receive but to the way they are treated when they are in contact with the Council about any of the housing services we provide.

**2. Background**

In their report published in April 2008 the Inspectors wrote:  
“In housing, where vulnerable customers may be threatened with homelessness, unable to function effectively in their homes because of disability, or living in poor conditions, they do not know how long processes will take or what quality of response to expect and are unable to gauge whether it is appropriate to make a complaint.”

**3. Work in Progress**

In late November 2008 all Housing Services staff attended a team building day facilitated by a trainer with a professional housing background and used by the Chartered Institute of Housing. One of the group tasks on the day was to list acceptable and unacceptable examples of customer service that participants had experienced.

The resultant list formed the basis of the standards in Appendix 1. A second team building day was held in late February 2009, when partner agencies were invited and participated in a discussion of how to work more effectively together to improve housing and related outcomes

The Audit Commission inspectorate returned as a consultancy in January 2009 and their subsequent feedback referred to only partial progress on this issue. They wrote:

“Service standards still under-developed – awayday as a housing team using a consultant but further work needed to agree, and no plans to consult customers.”

The purpose of this report is to gain members support for our plans to put this right.

#### **4. Next steps**

Members comments on Appendix 1 are invited at this stage because the document is important and will be published when approved. Subject to the Panel’s agreement, it will be circulated for consultation to current and recent service users and their comments invited.

Comments will also be invited from other appropriate agencies in the public, private and voluntary sector with whom we work, particularly those who have demonstrated their commitment by attending and contributing to our recent forums.

No specific deadline has been set for the consultation, which will begin as soon as this Panel agrees. Officers expect to bring a final draft back to the Panel in May 2009 following an equality impact assessment, when hopefully it will be recommended to the subsequent Executive meeting for approval.

For housing inspection purposes it will be important to demonstrate whether, and by how much, the standards were changed as a result of the consultation.

#### **5. Financial & Human Resource Implications**

The cost of producing and publishing the service standards will be contained within existing staffing and budgetary resources.



# **SERVICE STANDARDS**

## **Housing Services**

**Contact us: Housing Services Team  
Copeland Borough Council  
The Copeland Centre  
Catherine Street  
Whitehaven  
Cumbria  
CA28 7SJ**

**Telephone: to be added  
Fax:  
Email:**

**Draft: March 2009**

## **Our beliefs**

**In the Housing Services Team we believe passionately in providing excellent customer service and we will:**

- Treat you with courtesy and respect at all times.
- Be polite and approachable in all our dealings with you.
- Take you seriously, treat you as an individual and with dignity and respect.
- At all times be completely confidential about your case unless we must share information with another agency to prevent or reduce crime and increase community safety or unless you consent to sharing information with another agency who may be able to help you.
- Treat all customers fairly whatever their age, nationality, ethnicity, gender, disability, appearance, religious belief, sexual orientation or marital status.
- Be a good listener, ask our customers what they want and not make assumptions about their queries.
- Keep our promises to you.
- Accept responsibility for a customer's problem and won't try to pass it off as someone else's issue.
- Give you a straightforward answer to any questions you have and whether face to face, over the telephone, by email or in writing, will talk to you in plain language.
- Provide you with clear, accurate and truthful information that allows you to make informed choices – we will advise you of all possible outcomes, but will let you decide.
- Offer to provide letters and documents in large print, Braille, another language or on audiotape if you need this.
- Offer translation or interpretation services if you need them.
- Be prepared to apologise when we make a mistake and clearly tell you what we propose to do to put a problem right.

**In all of our contact we will:**

- Ask our customers what they want and clearly tell them which member of the team will deal with their query and give them the person's contact details for future reference.
- Give you the name and contact details of the member of staff dealing with your query.
- Provide official identification for members of staff to show you when we visit you in your home or elsewhere.

- Explain fully what steps we propose to take in order to deal with your case and agree those with you.
- Clearly answer questions within the time limits set out in the Council's overall service standards, or if we are unable to do this tell you why and agree a timescale with you for us to get back to you with a reply.
- Be on time for an appointment with you, or if we are going to be late let you know.
- If we can't help you with your problem then we will direct you to another agency who can.
- Give you a record of the interview with you written in plain language and avoiding the use of "jargon" or legal terms so that you can remember and understand what we discussed, what options you were given to help solve your query and any other information we might have asked you for in order to help us find a solution to your query.
- Offer you an interview room for you to talk to us and which is accessible by anyone with mobility difficulties, a wheelchair or push chair.
- If you are unable to get in to our offices we will offer you a home visit or a visit elsewhere that is most suitable for you.
- Give you a thorough assessment of your housing options if you are threatened with homelessness or have problems with your current housing.
- Operate an out of hours emergency service.
- Advertise Copeland Borough Council's Housing Service so that people with different needs can access the information we have available and will make sure that our information is kept up to date and readily available either through our website ([www.copeland.gov.uk](http://www.copeland.gov.uk)) at our customer services reception, through other agencies or by asking us to post them to you.

## **Housing Options & Advice service standards**

### **The service**

The Council has a statutory duty to provide free housing advice and assistance to its customers. This service includes housing advice on options to attempt to prevent homelessness and assist those who are already roofless. The aim of the service is to provide information and advice about housing options to help our customers resolve their housing issues themselves.

We will provide this service in a friendly, courteous and efficient way and treat our customers with respect and sensitivity.

Customers are able to access the service at the Council's offices on Catherine Street, Whitehaven, or a home visit can be arranged if customers are unable to attend our offices. An out of hours emergency service is also provided.

**Homeless applications are assessed in accordance with the Housing Act 1996 as amended by the Homeless Act 2002 and taking in to account the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities.**

**You can expect the following from the Housing Options service: -**

The Housing Options Team can advise you with any queries that you may have in either staying in your current home, in helping to find a new home, or if you fear that there is a chance of you becoming homeless.

**We will:**

- Provide information and advice about housing options to help our customers resolve their housing issues themselves.
- Arrange for you to see a Housing Options Advisor within 2 working days of your initial contact, or on the same day if you are roofless.
- Give you a thorough assessment of your housing needs. We will discuss your housing options, working with you to prevent you from becoming homeless wherever possible.
- Give you relevant information about your housing options
- Refer or signpost you to other relevant or specialist agencies; e.g. for support, debt advice, legal advice, benefits advice where appropriate.
- Provide you with advice and assistance to provide your own accommodation.
- Make a decision and notify you within 33 days of your homelessness application, dependant on the relevant information being available to us.
- Make enquiries in to your circumstances, contacting other agencies with your permission where this will help us to sort out your query.

**We may:**

- Offer you temporary accommodation if we need to make further enquiries into your case. This may be bed and breakfast, which we will try to make sure is for as short a time as possible and within the district.
- Need to check your previous addresses over the last 5 years.

**You can expect the following from the Housing Renewal service: -**

The Housing Renewal Team deal with housing issues affecting properties in the private sector. This includes enforcement action on behalf of private sector tenants and renovation grants for owner occupiers. The Renewal team also provide Disabled Facilities Grants for tenants and owner occupiers.

**We will:**

- Send out grant application forms within three working days of your request.
- Provide Completion Certificates on grant works within one week of the final grant being made.
- Carry out visits to properties which are or may be unfit within ten working days.
- Visit properties which are thought to present a danger to their tenants within 24 hours.
- Explain very clearly what information we need from you to process your grant application speedily.
- Once we have all the information we need from you we will decide your grant application within 5 working days and notify you of the decision within 3 further working days.

**You can expect the following from the Housing Strategy service: -****We will:**

- Adopt a comprehensive Housing Strategy in consultation with customers and stakeholders (other agencies) and we will regularly review this through our Strategic Housing Panel and in consultation with our customers.
- Make all of our leaflets and other publications available either from our website at [www.copeland.gov.uk](http://www.copeland.gov.uk) or upon request from the Housing Strategy team on 0845 054 8600.
- Enter into a range of partnerships to be able to effectively deliver the Housing Strategy priorities.
- Work with customers and stakeholders in order to develop and maintain an understanding of local housing need and housing markets.
- Follow Government guidance on assessing housing need and will work with the Cumbria Research and Information Group to develop Strategic Housing Market Assessments and other research and analysis as agreed by the group. This research will be published by the Council and available through the contact details above.
- Publish an Affordable Housing Policy in consultation with customers and stakeholders and will review the strategy regularly.
- Make reports on our service and information on our performance available to our service users and other stakeholders

**Please see Copeland Borough Council's main Customer Service Commitments on the last page of this document.**

## **Whatever your query you can help Housing Services by:**

- Making an appointment wherever possible.
- Attending appointments on time and notify us as soon as possible if you are unable to keep an appointment.
- Providing us with all the relevant information as soon as possible to help speed up the process.
- Being patient when we are busy. We will try our best to keep waiting times to a minimum.
- Telling us about any changes in your circumstances.
- Applying the same standards of behaviour towards our staff and other customers that you would expect from us.

### **Your right to equal treatment**

Copeland Borough Council's Housing Services Team is committed to giving a fair service to all. This means that customers will be treated equally in accordance with their needs whatever their gender, race, colour, age, disability, sexual orientation or religion.

### **Your right to complain**

Things can go wrong and we can make mistakes. If you are dissatisfied with something the Council has done or not done you should let us know and we will try to put things right to your satisfaction.

You can complain directly to a member of the Housing Services Team or:

- Complete a comments, compliments and complaints form available either online at [www.copeland.gov.uk](http://www.copeland.gov.uk)
- Contact our Customer Services team by telephoning 0845 054 8600
- Write to Copeland Borough Council Customer Services Team, Copeland Centre, Catherine Street, Whitehaven, CA28 7SJ

**Contact us: Housing Services Team  
Copeland Borough Council  
The Copeland Centre  
Catherine Street  
Whitehaven  
Cumbria  
CA28 7SJ**

**Tel nos: to be added  
Fax: to be added  
Email: to be added**