

HOUSING OPTIONS WEST MIDLANDS LIMITED

CUSTOMER CARE CHARTER

1.0 Introduction

Housing Options West Midlands Limited (HOWM) believes in treating everyone with an equal amount of respect, whether they are customers, tenants, clients, stakeholders or even visitors to our premises. We wish to ensure that we provide the best possible service to those we interact with and as such, we have introduced a Customer Care Charter for all who receive services from HOWM.

The Charter applies to all HOWM customers and customers can use the Charter to find out what they can expect from HOWM, and check that they are receiving the service they should be getting from the company; it also advises customers on what they can do if they think HOWM is not honouring the Charter.

We have worked hard to achieve the quality accreditations we hold as we believe that the quality frameworks laid down by such accreditations can only help to improve the service we offer to our customers. When our regulators inspect us to determine how far we are complying with the quality standards achieved, they also review how we interact with our customers to ensure we have a 360 degree view of the services provided as a company; for example they review:

- how we let and maintain our properties
- how we involve our customers in improving the services we provide
- how we deal with complaints
- how we determine what our customers think of the services we provide

Our target for 1st January 2014 to 31st December 2014 is an overall 90% satisfaction rate across all business clients, stakeholders and contractors and by adhering to the service levels set out in our Charter, we would hope to evoke a positive response from both our customers and our regulators.

2.0 What can customers expect?

HOWM will comply with the law, performance standards, good practice and wherever possible best practice.

Our customers' rights are contained in their Tenancy Agreement issued for their property. They may also have additional rights that are set out in legislation. The Charter does not try to cover all these legal rights, but to highlight the most important issues that affect our customers' relationship with us. If anyone is unsure of their rights and responsibilities they should ask HOWM for help or consult a solicitor or an advice centre, such as The Citizens Advice Bureau.

The rights of our customers will vary depending on whether they are already a tenant or owner (Landlord) and, if so, what type of agreement they have. It is important that our Landlords and our client's tenants remember that they have responsibilities which, if they fail to meet, will affect their rights.

In addition to the information about rights and responsibilities contained in the Tenancy Agreement, the company has also written a Welcome Pack for its client's tenants which allows information about their local area to be input by our client's staff.

3.0 What is in The Charter?

The Charter is set out in six sections as follows:

- (i) **The way things are run** - This tells our tenants who is in charge and how things should be run.
- (ii) **Moving into HOWM accommodation** – This gives guidance for ex-asylum seekers wishing to become private tenants once they have been given a positive decision to remain in the UK, and what they can expect when moving into a HOWM house.

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- (iii) **The relationship with HOWM** - This explains our customers' rights in respect of living in their homes, the relationship with their neighbours, their responsibilities to pay for rent and services (if applicable) and what to expect with regard to repairs and maintenance.
- (iv) **Information** - This explains the quality of service customers can expect to receive from HOWM, what information should be made available and what information is held about them by HOWM.
- (v) **Consultation and involvement** - This tells our customers how they can have their say and get more involved in improving the services that HOWM provides.
- (vi) **Making a complaint** - This explains what our customers can do if they think HOWM is not doing things properly.

3.1 The ways things are run

Management Committee

HOWM is run by an executive management team which makes sure that HOWM abides by the law and acts according to its contractual requirements. It makes the key decisions about the policies that govern how HOWM works. It ensures that HOWM Limited remains financially sound.

Continuous Improvement

HOWM aims to deliver continuous improvement and value for money in the services we provide. As such, we will review our services on a regular basis in line with the monitoring programmes set out by our quality standards.

HOWM will listen to the needs and wishes of our customers and will publish the results of our Customer Satisfaction Surveys on our website and alternatively provide this information in hard copy format to any interested party upon request. Such information may also be provided in relevant community languages, large print, Braille or audiotape where requested.

Equality and Diversity

HOWM is committed to equal opportunities in all that we do and works to eliminate discrimination. We will seek to be fair in our dealings with people, communities and organisations and take a fair approach to the rights and responsibilities of individuals. We will promote good relations between people of different racial groups and take into account the diverse nature of their culture and backgrounds.

We have an equal opportunities policy that covers all aspects of equalities encompassing sex or marital status, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender re-assignment, language, or social origin, or other personal attributes, including beliefs or opinions such as religious beliefs or political opinions.

As a customer you can expect to be treated fairly and without discrimination, and services will be accessible to all. If you need certain care or support services, we shall direct you to the appropriate organisations that can assist you to obtain them.

3.2 Moving into HOWM Accommodation

This section applies to private tenants who enter into tenancies with HOWM as ex asylum seekers (CRD tenants) and therefore enter into tenancies for houses in which they are already situate once their positive decision to remain in the UK has been granted; HOWM houses no other private tenants apart from ex asylum seekers therefore all other accommodation provided to non-CRD Service Users is provided via a third party Compass Contract provider on a no choice basis in line with its private sector and public authority partners' contractual requirements; despite this HOWM will always endeavour to take a Service User's personal circumstances into consideration when procuring property.

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When applying to privately rent the house you are living in, you can apply directly to HOWM Estates Limited or seek assistance through one of HOWM's public authority partners, e.g. the local authority covering the area in which you live. You can ask to see the details of the type of services we provide and how we will consider your application.

If required, HOWM will explain its own documentation and associated information and will direct you to advisory bodies who can help you fill in any third party documentation relating to Housing Benefit.

If you have difficulty with HOWM's own forms and information and need help, or need them in another language, the company will provide a translation or interpreter and/or any other appropriate forms of assistance.

Your application may not be considered in certain circumstances, for example, if your previous behaviour is considered to be unacceptable and serious enough to make you unsuitable as a tenant. You will have been provided with the house rules when you signed your Occupancy Agreement upon originally moving to the property and these house rules will still apply if you convert to a private tenancy. To assist you in remembering the house rules, they will be re-issued upon commencement of your private tenancy. You will be given information about the rights and responsibilities that you will be signing up to in your tenancy agreement. You should consider these carefully and decide if you want to take on this commitment. If you are not sure, you should seek advice from a solicitor or a local advice centre.

You must give accurate information on your Housing Benefit Application Form and give accurate information to HOWM at all times. If you deliberately provide false information, HOWM can take action against you which could result in you losing your home.

3.3 HOWM's relationship with our customers

3.3.1 Applying to rent the home you are living in (CRD tenants only)

Prior to converting to a private tenancy all CRD tenants will be given a written copy of the tenancy agreement which they are invited to sign. Before you sign the agreement, however, what it means will be explained to you. The agreement, which is a legally binding contract between you and HOWM, clearly sets out:

- what you are responsible for and your rights
- the terms and conditions of your occupancy
- HOWM's rights and responsibilities
- the frequency in which our property inspections are carried out
- the rent, service charges and any other charges you may pay, including the way they will be reviewed

Should you need support to live in your new home, you should let us know and we will signpost you to organisations that could help you, and wherever reasonable, assist you obtain the services that you need. The services may be provided by HOWM or by other agencies or organisations.

If you share amenities with other people, such as closes/stairs and back gardens, your rights and responsibilities will be explained to you.

3.3.2 Living in your home

You have a right to live peacefully and quietly in your home and so do your neighbours. You have a right to stay in your home as long as you keep to the conditions set out in your tenancy agreement.

In the event of your death, it may be possible for your tenancy to be passed on to someone else who has been living with you as your partner or spouse. HOWM can provide you with information on succession and will consider joint tenancies.

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In certain circumstances, you may have to leave your home. Examples include, if you have broken any of the conditions in your agreement such as not paying the rent (or service charges if applicable), or have knowingly made false statements. You will normally be given written notice and HOWM will have to apply to the Courts to have you removed.

If you no longer occupy the property as your main home, you may lose any security provided (if applicable) and HOWM may apply to the Courts to evict you.

Your tenancy agreement sets out the circumstances by which your tenancy may come to an end. HOWM will only take action to evict you from your home as a last resort, when there is no reasonable alternative.

If HOWM takes action to evict you while you receive support and care, you will be offered advice and assistance - HOWM will inform the agencies and organisations that provide the care about the action that is being taken.

HOWM has strategies in place to tackle anti-social behaviour. Our tenancy agreements have conditions in them about noise and nuisance. These apply to you, and to people living with you and visiting you. You could be at risk of losing your home if your behaviour, the behaviour of a member of your family or a visitor to your home, causes serious nuisance to people living around you.

If you suffer from noise, nuisance or anti-social behaviour, we are here to help. You should contact your Housing Officer to seek advice and assistance.

3.3.3 Paying for your home

3.3.3.1 Rent

Your tenancy agreement indicates how often your rent can be changed and how much notice you will be given. Should you be unclear, your Housing Officer will be able to advise you.

You will be informed in writing, in advance, about any changes to your rent. Rent will not be increased more than once a year unless by mutual agreement. Where an annual rent review applies, this will be scheduled in order that you are given at least one month's notice, from the effective date of implementation, which will be the 1st April.

HOWM will consult tenants on any change to rent levels and provide the opportunity to comment on such proposals.

3.3.3.2 Service Charges

You may be asked to pay other charges as well as rent, such as for close cleaning or the upkeep of communal areas. These services may be provided by HOWM or by other agencies or organisations.

If applicable to your tenancy HOWM will provide you with details about the type of charges, what costs you pay for and how they are set. You will be given written notice of any changes and increases to your service charge.

If you are having difficulty paying for rent or service charges, you will be directed to agencies that may be able to give you information and assistance to find out about benefits that may be available to help you.

3.3.3.3 Rights of Appeal

HOWM will advise you of your right to appeal about your rent and to challenge service charges. This information will usually be given to you when you are told about the

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increase. Your rights will depend on the type of agreement you have signed. You should examine your agreement and ask HOWM for information about your rights. You can also ask your local advice centre or a solicitor.

If you want to appeal about your rent, you have the right to seek advice on how your rent is set, whether it has been set properly. You should be aware that, while this appeal process may result in your rent going down, it could also result in your rent being increased.

If you believe that HOWM is charging for a service it is not entitled to charge, or that the level of charge is unreasonable, or that the service has not been provided to a reasonable standard, you should, in the first instance, raise your concerns with HOWM and ask for a detailed explanation in response.

You are at risk of losing your home if you do not keep up payments of rent or other charges.

3.4 Repairs and improvements

HOWM will make sure your home is in a suitable condition, in good repair, that it is safe and fit to live in. We have policies for maintaining your home and making sure it meets set standards and these policies are available for you to examine upon request.

You have a responsibility for keeping your home in good condition. Your tenancy agreement and handbook explain your responsibilities and those of HOWM. For example, while HOWM will keep the structure of your home in good repair and make sure it is well maintained, you are responsible for making good any damage you cause and for the decoration of your home. If unsure, you should ask your Housing Officer.

HOWM has a system for dealing with repairs, aimed at meeting the needs of Service Users. Please inform your Housing Officer if you have a repair to report. Our deadlines for responding to emergency (severe health and safety) repairs is 24 hours, urgent repairs are 7 days and routine repairs 28 days; You will be able to see how well HOWM is meeting the targets set as the results will be published annually on its website.

You should report repairs as soon as they are needed and you must allow reasonable access for HOWM to inspect and carry out repairs. HOWM will provide details of any long-term plans for maintenance work such as external decoration, double glazing, re-roofing and will consult you as to how these proposals affect you.

You may be able to make certain improvements to your home yourself however in all cases HOWM's permission should be sought - this will not be withheld unreasonably. Your tenancy agreement and welcome pack will tell you what you can do.

Should you be required to leave your home temporarily while repairs or improvements are undertaken, you will be offered alternative accommodation.

HOWM will ensure:

- that your home is in a suitable condition, in good repair and fit to live in,
- that it responds within the set response times to repairs
- that tenants can check the results our performance in respect of target response times for repairs,
- that you are consulted on long-term plans for the maintenance of your home,
- that, where appropriate, you are provided with suitable alternative temporary accommodation

Landlords:

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Landlords' responsibilities for repairs and improvements are set out in their Tenancy Agreement. This document outlines the rights and responsibilities of Landlords in respect of their repairing obligations for their properties.

Landlords will be required to maintain the outside, the shared areas and the structure of the properties they let to us, and will be responsible for structural and utility repairs, furnishing and fixture deterioration inside their property.

Landlords will be informed about all works which they need to address during the term of their tenancy agreement via a HOWM issued work schedule. The work schedule will contain repair timescales and will be subject to a notice of set off should the repair timescale be breached.

It is compulsory for Landlord to provide HOWM with the valid and satisfactory safety certification, HMO licence (if applicable) and appropriate insurance certification as per the terms of their Tenancy Agreement.

Landlords will be consulted regarding long-term plans for major maintenance work such as re-roofing or external redecoration.

4.0 Information

HOWM is committed to providing good quality services for existing residents and those people applying for a house. In addition to offering high standards of customer care, we will be open, honest and transparent in the way that we operate.

We will issue information about the way we do things and the policies we apply. This will be provided by means of a tenancy agreement, newsletters, annual reports, landlord forums and leaflets etc. This material will be widely distributed and made available on request.

HOWM will be accountable to our customers and will thereby issue information not only about what we are doing but how well we are performing. Our annual reports and performance and inspection reports will be a source for this data.

The information issued will be in clear language, easy to read and will be available in different ways to make sure it is meaningful and can be understood by all parties. Should you want information about your rights and how to exercise them, you should initially consult your tenancy agreement or other material provided by HOWM. Your rights will depend on the type of agreement you have and the type of accommodation you live in. HOWM is happy to provide advice on its own policies and procedures and can signpost you to other organisations that may be able to help you concerning your rights.

The information held about you by HOWM will be kept safe and secure. It will be kept up to date and deleted when no longer required. HOWM can advise on the process by which you can see information held about your tenancy. Such information will be provided free of charge. HOWM may not give you access to certain information, for example, where the supplier of sensitive data does not provide authority to disclose its contents. If HOWM refuses to give the information asked for, you can contact the office of the Information Commissioner for advice. If you disagree with any of the information, you have the right to correct it or to record your disagreement.

HOWM will only pass on information about you to other people or organisations, if you have consented or where the law permits us to do so.

Your rights as contained within your tenancy agreement can only be changed after consultation and with your agreement.

HOWM is committed:

- to providing a high quality of customer service to all it comes into contact with,
- to operating in an open, honest and transparent fashion,
- to providing information in various forms about what we are doing and how we are performing,
- to ensuring the information held about you is accurate and available for your review,

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- to keeping your information secure and only releasing it to appropriate persons with your approval or where the law permits

5.0 Consultation and Involvement

HOWM is committed to ensuring that our services are shaped around our customers' needs. We will seek to obtain the views of our residents as widely as possible, utilising a number of methods and we will seek to respond to the views received. We will consult you if we are considering changes, particularly if these affect the arrangements for providing the housing management and maintenance service to your home.

We will consult with you:

- By asking business customers to participate in our annual Customer Satisfaction Survey
- By asking customers, stakeholders and contractors to participate in ad hoc themed surveys when we want to pinpoint how good or poor specified aspects of our service are
- By asking for customer input into improving the services we provide; where you have given us feedback on an area in which you think we could improve, we will ask for your suggestions and input in our newsletter
- By appointing a Community Development Officer to assist with your queries
- By holding regular meetings with all of our stakeholders, customers and tenants; this many mean monthly meetings with our business partners and monthly or quarterly visits to the properties that our tenants live in
- By providing a 'Contact Us' webpage on our website (once our website has been established in 2014) so that you can contact us on absolutely any aspect of our service

All residents will be given the opportunity to play a part in decision-making, how services are run and how standards are set by giving us regular feedback. We will provide details about the issue(s) under review in a way that is clear, easy to understand and accessible to all residents.

In our newsletter and on our website HOWM will give you information about what we do with the feedback, and will review whether our actions on your feedback have made a difference to you by asking for a testimonial from you if you are satisfied with the changes.

6.0 Making a complaint

If you are not satisfied with the way you have been treated or the service you have received, you should make a complaint to us. HOWM will seek to respond to complaints in a positive way, viewing an effective complaints procedure as an essential element of a quality management system.

HOWM's complaints procedure is both simple and effective, outlining how to complain, who to complain to and what is involved. Details on how to complain are available in Service User's Occupancy Agreements, or alternatively in a hard copy format complaints sheet available from HOWM's offices.

The policy and procedure is clear and easy to follow and should allow you to take your complaint to the people who manage HOWM at a senior level, including the executive management team. If, after having gone through the stages of HOWM's complaints procedure, you remain dissatisfied, you are advised to seek advice from the Citizens Advice Bureau.

If your complaint is about racial or sexual discrimination, you can also go to the Commission for Racial Equality or Equal Opportunities Commission for help.

HOWM is committed:

- to responding to complaints in a positive way,
- to ensuring our complaints procedures are both simple and effective,
- to ensuring our customers know how to complain,
- to ensuring that our service provision does not discriminate on the grounds of sex or marital status, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, language or social origin,

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or other personal attributes including beliefs or opinions, such as religious beliefs or political opinions.

7.0 Evaluation, Monitoring and Review

As indicated throughout this document HOWM wishes to introduce a Customer Care Charter, aimed at promoting the best possible standards of service for all, whether they be applicants for housing, tenants, Landlords, stakeholders or other customers.

We believe that the Charter will be important in that customers can use it to:

- identify what they can expect,
- check the quality of the service received to that which they were promised and:
- take the appropriate action if HOWM fails to honour the commitments made.

HOWM will, on an ongoing basis, and at least annually, seek feedback from our customers as to their assessment of HOWM's performance against the service level commitments made, within the Customer Care Charter.

Our comprehensive satisfaction survey will include questions relating to our customers' perceptions of the service levels identified in the Charter. A report will be prepared for the executive management team's consideration on an annual basis, to consider:

- resident satisfaction levels with customer care
- whether the target level of 75% satisfaction is being met
- whether it needs adjustment, or
- whether more effective measures require to be introduced

Details of the feedback received, in the area of delivering a quality service to our customers, will be incorporated into our performance indicators and presented to on HOWM's website.

The executive management team will receive annual feedback on HOWM's performance, in respect of the Customer Care Charter. Any revisions deemed necessary can be considered at that time otherwise the Charter will be reviewed more frequently to ensure that it responds to any important changing circumstances.

8.0 Treatment of Customers

HOWM is a customer-focused organisation. Aiming to provide a high standard of service to meet the needs and expectations of our customers, our staff are trained to ensure needs are identified promptly, clearly and sensitively and that a positive image to customers is presented at all times. While we expect our staff to be courteous and helpful, we hope in return, that staff are treated with dignity and respect.

Our commitment to our customers is illustrated in our expectation that HOWM staff:

- will be courteous, friendly, polite and efficient at all times. Visitors to our office will be greeted with a smile and referred to by name, as soon as possible, after it is known,
- will wear a name badge when visiting properties and introduce themselves by name and position within the organisation,
- will see a visitor within 5 minutes of any appointment time and apologise if a visitor is kept waiting. If there is a delay, a reason will be provided and advice given as to how long they may have to wait. An alternative appointment will be offered, if this is more convenient to the visitor,
- will ask questions in a fair and polite way,
- will cover telephones during office opening hours, answering calls promptly and explain the reasons for any delay. A telephone answer machine will be in use outside of office hours. Emergency numbers will be regularly updated and issued.
- will answer telephone calls politely, give their name, establish the reason for the call and take the appropriate action to deal with the contact,

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- will respond to enquiries as soon as possible, providing an explanation of any reasons causing delay in our response. An indication will be given as to when the appropriate information will be available and arrangements for contact agreed,
- will wear their identity badge when making home visits,
- will dress in a neat, tidy and business-like fashion at all times,
- will ensure that our notice boards display current and up to date information. Information leaflets on our service provision, welfare benefits, policies and procedures will be made available on request,
- will encourage customers to the office to complete suggestion/comment forms,
- will make it easy for customers to make a complaint if unhappy about any aspect of the service provided.
- We will respond within the prescribed times as contained within the complaints policy,
- will invite comments on the services provided. Suggestions as to improvements will be welcomed.

9.0 How customers can help HOWM

Just as HOWM has sought to establish a customer focus, by promoting our expectations as to how we expect our staff to treat our customers, we, in turn, expect that our staff will be treated with dignity and respect at all times.

Just as we have indicated how we propose to ensure the delivery of a high quality service, customers can help us by:

- providing complete and accurate information,
- responding to requests for information, as quickly as possible,
- providing access to their homes for maintenance work, safety checks etc.,
- keeping appointments and arriving on time,
- advising us in advance, if appointments cannot be kept,
- working with us to resolve issues. Recognising that while we are here to help, we may need to investigate matters or discuss issues with other parties, before we are in a position to provide comprehensive responses to enquiries.
- treat and talk to staff with civility.

THANK YOU FOR THE TIME YOU HAVE TAKEN TO READ OUR CUSTOMER CHARTER.