

## **E-mail Service Standards**

In our recent survey of customer service in social housing we reported a relatively and surprisingly low use of e-mail as a channel of communication. However, this is increasing and with it are customers expectations of the service that they receive. A study by Numero was featured in Customer Strategy magazine (4<sup>th</sup> April 2008) which identified that 69% of internet users expect a same day response to e-mails and the remaining expect a response within 48 hours.

In the social housing sector we see a reluctance to take e-mail communication or the opportunities that it provides seriously. To meet the future challenges in terms of increased volumes and faster responses, organisations should be taking resourcing and quality more seriously. Too many organisations do not provide adequate training for staff in writing e-mails that meet the corporate standards (if they have corporate standards) and the needs of the customer. In many cases e-mails will be shared out across the team or maybe given to the most junior member of staff. Our anecdotal evidence is that e-mails contain poor grammar, spelling mistakes, terminology and are generally of a poor quality. Quality reviews, where they exist, usually consist of sampling outgoing e-mails but this is not as consistently adhered to as telephone call recording! It is worth remembering that an e-mail is different to a telephone call in that it is a permanent record rather than an experience.

Many opportunities exist to use e-mail as a preferred method of communication. Imagine being able to e-mail rent statements (similar to utility bills), newsletters or other communications. Not only is this meeting the green agenda that is becoming more and more prominent, it will also reduce costs of printing and postage. Four mailings a year to 10,000 customers costs £12,800 and is time consuming to deal with. An e-mail campaign is substantially lower and much faster. It is also the case that whilst expectations are increasing, e-mail is still not as demanding on resources as the telephone, i.e. the telephone must be answered when it rings, e-mails can be dealt with within the next few hours when convenient to do so. Again this has implications of cost and it is generally accepted that the cost of dealing with e-mails is less than the telephone.

Our advice is that organisations consider how they are going to deal with e-mails more professionally and seize the opportunities available. All staff who are dealing with e-mails must be trained and plain English adopted as a minimum. Quality checks should be increased to ensure that a formal communication presents the organisation in the right style.