



West Yorkshire
Fire & Rescue Service

Customer Care Policy

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1 The Concept of the Customer

This document refers to the manner in which West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service expects all employees to deal with its 'customers'. The principles involved relate to all employees, at all levels, at all locations and during all activities.

Customer Service and Customer Care are as important to the operational firefighter attending an incident, as it is to a Senior Officer dealing with an administrative complaint. Whilst some of the details contained within this document may seem basic, it identifies the **absolute minimum** that is expected from employees when they are dealing with the users of our service and the adoption and publication of the Policy will ensure an Authority wide standard. Employees must have an awareness of the [Customer Service Guide](#), the purpose of this guide is to explain the range of services provided by West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service, how the services are delivered, to what standard, and how they can be commented on.

Customers of West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service do not have a 'freedom of choice', which allows them to go elsewhere for their fire service. However, we must not take this for granted. 'Best Value' makes it an obligation of service providers within local government to both inform and consult with their customers about the quality of service they have a right to expect. This is consistent with the approach of West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service by way of surveys, publication of the Service Plan; public consultation/meetings etc. are legal duties in respect of equality and diversity.

Customer expectations are not just concerned with standards of fire cover, response times and cost efficiency; these are the minimum basic requirements. The following additional factors demonstrate a commitment to quality and customer satisfaction:

- The appearance of staff, vehicles and buildings.
- The methods used to deal with enquiries.
- Courtesy and helpfulness displayed by employees.
- The way in which complaints are dealt with.
- The attitude of our staff.

2 The External Customer

In recent times there have been strong moves towards customer care initiatives within the public sector and users of our services are to be identified as customers. However, it also relates to people who may not use our services but nevertheless pay for them through taxation. Clearly then, West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service's external customers are the resident people of West Yorkshire and the transient people passing through the county.

3 The Internal Customer

A quality organisation acknowledges not only the external customer but also the internal customer - the people within the organisation who provide and receive independent services from each other. Every department, area and station within the Service is both a supplier to and customer of another part of the organisation. West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service serves the people of West Yorkshire but the

quality of that service is affected by the internal workings of the organisation. The provision of a quality service to the public, therefore, is the responsibility of everyone within the organisation.

4 Dealing with Customers

Obtaining the facts

- Greet the customer politely.
- Identify yourself and wear your identity card.
- Ask the person's name and organisation.
- Empathise with their problem if there is one.
- Listen carefully without interruption to what is being said.
- Ask questions and don't jump to conclusions.
- Be tactful, helpful and courteous at all times.
- If you can't help say so and find someone who can.
- It is important to ask the customer if they are able to wait while you find someone to help them, if not take details of where they can be contacted and a suitable time.

Do

- Be positive - say what you can do and ensure you do it.
- Explain all possibilities.
- Make the customer feel valued.
- Try to help.
- Be polite and courteous at all times over the telephone.
- Remember that the way you act and sound can be as important as what you say.

Do not

- Be defensive.
- Assign blame to others within the organisation.
- Abandon the customer.

- Make promises you can't guarantee i.e. "*someone will get back to you in 10 minutes*".
- Say "no" without giving an explanation.
- Make excuses to the customer because it makes your job easier.
- Talk 'jargon' as this can cause misunderstanding – you may know what you are saying/ referring to, but they may come to a different conclusion.

5 Communication Skills

Body language is as important as what we say.

- Folding your arms whilst talking implies that you are defensive and don't want to speak with them.
- Slouching over a desk gives the impression that you can't be bothered.
- It is not always conducive to conversation to have the desk as a barrier between you and the customer, moving chairs can make for a more relaxed conversation.
- Maintain eye contact with the customer or you may give the impression of being disinterested, taking care to respect cultural differences.
- If you are going to take notes of the discussion mention this to the customer.

The customer will respond better to an attentive, well-mannered member of staff who deals with their query or complaint professionally. Remember you may only be one of many employees, but to the individual customer **you are** the Fire and Rescue Service; your **actions and attitude** can make the difference between a satisfied or dissatisfied customer.

6 Customer Behaviour

The following are examples of how someone making a complaint might approach the Fire and Rescue Service, together with some suggestions of how to deal with their requests. If you remain calm and assertive, you will keep in control of the situation.

Angry Customers

A few customers may be angry as they tell you of their complaint.

- Let them express their concerns. Someone who has been able to vent strong feelings may be more co-operative later on.
- Gently interrupt. In a calm, sympathetic manner tell the customer that you would like to solve the problem and that you are pleased it has been brought to your attention.
- Take notes - not just to get the facts but to help focus your thoughts on the issue and not just on the customer's emotions.

- Explain that you want to be sure you understand everything. This shows that you are taking the customer seriously.
- Ensure you follow the Compliments and Complaints Policy, if appropriate, and if necessary refer the person to a senior manager.

Abusive Customers

A few customers may be unreasonable or abusive, despite all efforts to assist them.

- Gently repeat that you wish to help them.
- Don't argue with the customer, it will make matters worse.
- Don't lose your temper.
- Do all you can to diffuse the situation. Inform the customer of the Complaints Policy and give them details. Refer to a higher level of authority if necessary.
- At the end of an interview it is helpful to summarise what has been said, this will assure the customer that everything discussed has been noted and you can reiterate to the customer what you intend to do. There should then be no misunderstanding by either party.

7 When the Service has to say "No"

Sometimes what the customer wants or requires may not be possible, as it is against policy or relates to the enforcement of legislation. If an alternative solution isn't possible then:

- Explain the reasons why we cannot oblige.
- Suggest ways the Service may be able to help in the future.

Personal callers at West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service premises

Any person visiting Service premises should be directed to Reception (if available). Visitors are to be greeted in a courteous manner and the employee receiving the visitor must identify themselves.

If you see a visitor walking around ask them if they need assistance and, if necessary, escort them to the correct location. At the very minimum find out who they are, why they are there and if they need any assistance. Even if a visitor is not directly seeking the services of the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service you may be able to help them.

8 Locating People

If an enquiry is received which can only be effectively dealt with by a specific officer/employee, then their whereabouts and expected time of return should be checked and the visitor informed. It is the responsibility of every member of staff to make it known that they are going out, where they are going and when they expect to return so that visitors/callers can be informed.

9 Correspondence

All correspondence with customers should be dealt with quickly and efficiently. All mail received must be stamped with the date of receipt. Correspondence both externally with customers and internally is monitored within the individual department concerned. To this end, it is essential that where correspondence refers to a letter or memorandum received or discussion held, specific reference must be made to the date of such correspondence or discussion. Reference to a "recent discussion/correspondence" is not acceptable. If no date is given on received correspondence, reference must be made to date of receipt.

Individual officers must ensure that external correspondence is replied to within seven working days, even if it is only an acknowledgement because a full reply cannot be given at the time.

Complaints are to be dealt with in line with the [Compliments and Complaints Policy](#) i.e. acknowledged within three days and a full investigation with results communicated within seven working days. Customers whose complaints cannot be dealt with within this timescale must be informed of the situation.

Administration for external and internal correspondence - the originator of the correspondence must give full details, including their name and telephone number.

10 Standard Telephone Answering

- Telephones to be answered within three rings.
- "Good morning/afternoon"
- "West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service" and department if external call.
- Name and location, if internal call.
- Ask the caller's name/organisation and pass this information on if transferring the call.
- Provide your name if asked for.
- Where it is necessary to put a caller on hold ask if it is convenient for them to wait and keep this time to a minimum.
- Tell customers the name of the person they are being transferred to. If possible provide the person who is about to receive the call with any information that has already been discussed in order that the caller does not have to repeat the conversation.

11 Taking Messages for Others

- Identify yourself.
- Check no one else is able to help the caller. Take the name and telephone number of the caller and advise them when the contact will be available.
- If a long absence is likely due to annual leave or sickness etc. attempt to resolve the matter by dealing with it yourself or referring it to a colleague who can help.

- Note when call was taken (time and date).
- Take brief details.
- Leave messages where they will be seen and won't be lost or preferably use the e-mail facility.
- Messages are to be responded to on the same day or upon the first day of return to work.
- If there is likely to be a delay in responding to a call, callers must be made aware of this and given the opportunity of speaking to someone else. Customers should not have to call again to obtain a response to their initial enquiry.
- Customer care is the responsibility of every employee. It must be remembered that customers are the reason for our employment. It is a requirement that at all times employees are to be polite, helpful, courteous, and display a positive attitude focussing on the needs of the public.

12 Switchboard/Reception Protocol

The purpose of Switchboard/Reception protocol is to ensure that an effective and consistent service is provided at all times to telephone callers and visitors to West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters, Oakroyd Hall and the Training Centre.

The protocol is a standard that should be adhered to at all times unless, on the rare occasion, circumstance dictates otherwise.

The protocol also includes a number of performance targets, which may be monitored by technical means (call logging).

Steps should be taken at all times to ensure that callers (telephone or in person) are dealt with in an efficient and friendly manner.

The receptionist **must** be constantly aware of the requirements of the Data Protection Act when dealing with anonymous calls/visits and, if in doubt, the caller/visitor will either be referred to Human Resources or a message will be taken and dealt with subsequently through the receptionist's Line Manager.

13 Telephone Callers

- Receptionist to answer call within a maximum of five rings, though preferably this should be within three rings if possible.
- Response to be given as follows:
 - **“Good morning/good afternoon – West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service”**
- Should the caller know the name or extension they require, they will then be connected with the response:
 - **“Thank you”**

- Should the caller return to the switchboard following connection to an unanswered extension, they are to be given the following response:
 - **“I’m sorry there is no-one available on that extension, is there anyone else who may be able to help?”**
- Should it become clear that the caller will not be able to be connected to someone directly in connection with their query; the receptionist will offer to take a message. This message must be subsequently e-mailed to the relevant individual at the earliest opportunity indicating the following:
 - **Date and time of original call.**
 - **Subject – if known.**
 - **Contact details for a return call to be made as soon as possible.**
- If the caller should ask for a name which is unknown to the receptionist or does not have a name or extension number, they are to be asked for more information as follows:
 - **Relevant department.**
 - **Nature / purpose of call.**

An offer will then be made to the caller for connection to be made to other personnel who may be able to assist.

14 Personal Callers/Visitors

- Visitors must be welcomed with an appropriate greeting:
 - **“Good morning / good afternoon. How can I help?”**
- If the visitor has a **pre-arranged appointment** with an officer/employee, they are to be requested to complete and then given the necessary temporary site identification card which they should be instructed to display at all times whilst on our premises. They should then be guided to a suitable waiting area whilst the relevant officer/employee is advised that their visitor has arrived.
- Should the visitor be **unexpected** they are to be asked to wait in the lobby area whilst contact is made with the appropriate officer/employee.
- Should the officer/employee wish to meet with the visitor, follow the procedure regarding identification card above.
- Should the officer/employee be unavailable, the caller should be advised and a message taken.
- If the caller is subject to a prolonged wait in the reception area, the receptionist should continue to make the visitor welcome and if needed take steps with regard to hospitality arrangements.

15 Incident Response and Casualty Handling

- Respond quickly but safely, don't surprise or intimidate other road users. Drive in accordance with your ERD training and Operational Policy Document - [Emergency Response Driving Standards](#)
- Be professional in your dress and appearance.
- Demonstrate professionalism and competence upon arrival at the scene.
- Approach in a calm and organised manner.
- Create a co-operative, professional working environment.
- Avoid stereotyping. Treat each person as an individual and with courtesy.
- Don't speak harshly or in a condescending tone.
- Try to reduce barriers to patient communication. Establish eye contact and eliminate controllable noises such as fire ground radios.
- Place yourself at the level of any casualty.
- Try to build up a rapport with the casualty.
- Being calm is very important in helping the patient.
- Explain what you are doing in language that is easy to understand.
- Respect people's homes and possessions.
- Be careful where you place equipment. Don't place it on the customer's furniture.
- Use good judgement in all situations. Don't get upset or emotional.
- Don't use unprofessional language, jargon, gestures or behaviour that could be considered insensitive or inappropriate.
- Always leave a copy of the 'After the Fire / After the Flood' leaflet.
- Be informative and give advice as appropriate i.e. how to complain if they consider that our services were unsatisfactory, how to contact the Fire Prevention department to receive advice.
- On the way back from a call be cautious, courteous and considerate to others.