

Aspire Housing's Maintenance Services Team – submission for Innovative DLO of the Year Award

Introduction

Aspire's Maintenance Services Team provides a comprehensive responsive and void repairs, gas servicing and major improvements to 8,500 homes. We also provide an out of hours emergency repair service. We have 142 operatives in our team, of which 16 are apprentices.

We believe that we provide a very innovative repairs service. Our submission is based around our approach to being innovative in all that we do, rather than simply citing one example of innovation. The details below give examples of our innovation around gas servicing, Equality and Diversity, value for money and providing training and employment opportunities for disadvantaged communities.

Question 1 What is innovative about the service provided?

As is stated above, our approach to service delivery is to be innovative in all that we do. Examples of innovations we have introduced in 2010 are given below:

Our gas servicing team occasionally struggles to gain access to properties. To address this issue we worked in partnership with customer representatives, Gas Safe, the Health and Safety Executive and the Staffordshire fire and rescue service to develop a gas safety DVD which explains the importance of gas servicing and the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning. This information is now provided in an interesting and accessible format which is embedded in our no access procedures.

The DVD was shortlisted for the Corgi gas safety award and recently won the National Home Improvement Councils Fuel Safety Award at its annual awards ceremony held in Whitehall.

Our commitment to Equality and Diversity flows through our operational practices. As our gas servicing team visit all our customer's homes, we use this opportunity to encourage customers to complete a customer profile form. This form captures demographic information covering all seven diversity strands. This information is used to help us provide person centred services to customers.

We know that not all our customers can understand written or spoken English. To overcome this we have developed a pictorial guide for operatives. This laminated sheet shows pictorially why the operative is at the property, e.g. for gas servicing, and the likely duration of the visit, shown by a clock. Although this innovation does not have to be used very often it is available when needed to ensure that all customers are able to have equal access to our services. This is particularly important in areas such as gas servicing.

Providing the wide range of maintenance services that we do, our operatives visit the majority of our customer's homes every year. We firmly believe that our front line colleagues are the 'eyes and ears' of the wider organisation and that they are often best placed to identify customers who need support or who would benefit from the other services Aspire provides.

We have therefore enhanced our PDA's and introduced a screen which enables colleagues to indicate that a home visit is required, using a drop down menu with a range of options, such as a vulnerable customer in need of support, financial advice, suffering from anti-social behaviour and so on. This then autogenerates an alert, with customers details, to our customer service centre so that they can ensure that the request is actioned by the relevant team. As we have incorporated this into our PDA's, operatives are able to highlight issues as an integral part of their work and to use the system in privacy if necessary to avoid embarrassment to customers.

We work closely with other Aspire colleagues on a pre-tenancy training programme which is aimed at increasing tenancy sustainment levels through providing young customers with advice on benefits, money management and support with literacy and numeracy skills.

Our role is to provide hand on training for customers in a dedicated flat. This training includes practical advice on essential skills such as how to erect shelves, operate heating systems and safety advice.

As the flat is not in use all the time we have also offered it to the fire and rescue service to use as location for fire rescue training.

Like most other housing organisations we continually seek to improve the value for money (VFM) our service provides and over the last 3 years we have delivered £900K of efficiencies. Our gas servicing team demonstrates our VFM approach at an operational level. Engineers now encourage customers to provide demographic information, install and service carbon monoxide detectors and test Thermostatic Mixer Valves. These services are therefore

provided more efficiently in one visit as well as minimizing inconvenience to customers.

One of Aspire's corporate aims is to regenerate disadvantaged communities. We aim to achieve this through the physical regeneration of communities through new build and environmental enhancements. We also focus on social and economic regeneration through providing training and job opportunities. We contribute to this agenda by working with the Group training company, PM Training, to provide apprenticeships for local residents. We currently support 16 apprentices which is 11.3% of our direct workforce. We also provide opportunities and tools for Future Jobs Fund colleagues to help long term unemployed people into work.

Our depot is in a very socio-economically deprived area within Newcastle. We are currently working with PM Training on alterations to our depot which will enable it to be used to provide training opportunities for residents from disadvantaged communities in the area. The facility will be open in the evenings to encourage all sections of the local community to take advantage of the opportunities which will be available to them.

The above are examples of the sort of innovation we strive to provide in our everyday work. This sort of innovation is necessary in order to support our Corporate Plan aim to provide excellent services. Our Services Strategy also focuses on providing first class maintenance services and more person centred approaches to front line service delivery.

In order to enable the maintenance service to deliver these Corporate Plan and Services Strategy aims we are developing a more customer focused culture in which teams and managers are encouraged and empowered to develop their services. Organisationally we support this through initiatives such as the Aspiring Leaders Programme, the Talent Academy, the Performance Management Review process and our Learning Plans. It is through these building blocks that our management team is developing and becoming more innovative.

All of these initiatives have been developed during 2010 and we fully expect managers and teams to identify and implement innovative service delivery improvements in future years as our culture of customer focus and innovation is further developed.

Some of the innovations outlined above are capable of being monitored and measured through their impact on quantitative measures. For instance, since the introduction of our gas safety DVD the percentage of properties with a valid CP12 has reached and sustained the best ever performance

levels. Similarly we measure on a monthly basis the numbers and percentage of apprentices we have within maintenance services.

The impact of some of the other initiatives is less straight forward to measure. For instance, although we measure new tenancy sustainment levels we cannot measure the impact of the maintenance services section of the pre-tenancy training programme.

Question 2 What are the benefits to

- a) the client,
- b) the contractor, and
- c) the residents
- d) the neighbourhood

The Maintenance Services team acts as a contractor to Aspires Asset Management Teams client role. In effect we work in partnership for the joint benefit of the organisation and, more importantly, our customers.

Working in this joined up 'intelligent client:contractor' relationship enables us to focus on delivering a more customer focussed and efficient service which benefits our customers. For example the joined up approach we take to cyclical gas servicing, incorporating CO detector installations and testing and TMV testing means that we can deliver these important services much more cost effectively.

This joint working also enables us to focus jointly on delivering the organisations' Corporate Plan and Services Strategy aims to provide excellent person centres services and to regenerate communities.

For example, customers and local communities benefit significantly from the economic and social regeneration effects of the employment opportunities we provide through apprenticeships. Through our contract to deliver Aspires improvements programme we have committed to provide 24 apprenticeships for local residents. This level of commitment is arguably even more significant given the high levels of youth unemployment and relatively low educational attainment in many of the local communities we deliver services in.

Other benefits are more evident for individual customers. For example our operative's ability to use the additional functionality of their PDA's to alert colleagues in other teams to the needs of our joint customers enables customers wider needs to be met by the organisation as a whole. We believe that this truly joined up approach is of immense benefit to the customers it touches and that this is even more important for those vulnerable customers whose needs have often in the past gone unnoticed.

Question 3 What were the financial costs and benefits?

Most of the innovations listed in this submission have been developed within existing budgets at little or no cost other than officers and customers time.

For example the customer profile form and pictorial guides were developed inhouse with the only additional cost being in printing the questionnaires. The costs for the other innovations have been higher but none have been significantly costly for Aspire. For example the cost of developing and producing the gas safety DVD were approximately £6K and the enhancements to our PDA's cost £5.2K to implement. The colleagues who participate in the pre-tenancy training programme do so outside of their normal working time and are paid £50 for doing so, with these costs being met by our group charity the Realise Foundation.

The costs associated with our support of apprenticeships are built into our business plan and are in effect at no extra cost as we would employ other operatives if we did not have the apprentices in our teams. The costs of the training facility being developed are significant in capital terms, however they are being covered by a grant from the European Social Fund.

Although the costs of most of our innovations have been minimal the value they bring to the organisation and individual customers can be very high. For example the value to customers, in terms of feeling safe, through having up to date CP12's can be high although it is difficult to put a financial measurement to this outcome.

Similarly, we know that it costs the Maintenance Services team are £50 for a colleague to provide the maintenance section of the pre-tenancy training programme. For every void that this training prevents we know that we will save between £1,300 -£1,700 in void repairs costs alone, although it is again difficult to put a financial value to our part of the service. However, instinctively the overall value of the service far outweighs the costs involved.

In the future we plan to measure the impact of our services and service developments through quantifying them using Social Return On Investment principles. We feel that this measurement tool will enable us to more effectively measure the wider value of the innovative services we provide rather than relying on the more traditional financial measures of costs and savings.

Question 4 How relevant is this as an example that might be followed by other organisations?

We feel that our culture of customer focus and innovation is relevant for all social landlords and any organisations which work to social enterprise

principles. We feel that success and innovation is a culture and mindset which can be replicated in any organisation which focuses on customers, VFM and regeneration.

We are not alone in believing that these things are important and in that sense our circumstances are not unique. Given the challenges that face the social housing sector in the future, as we adapt to a new financial and regulatory regime, we believe that organisations will have to be innovative to survive and thrive. We are therefore committed to investing in our colleagues and customers training to help build an environment in which ideas and innovation continue to flourish.

As is mentioned above, in order for a culture of innovation to grow managers and operational staff need to be encouraged and empowered to develop and implement their ideas. Clearly colleagues need a detailed knowledge of their particular service area and any legislative requirements, however the culture and values of the organisation are equally as important as these baseline knowledge requirements. We are on a journey of moving away from a culture of 'command and control' to one where all colleagues ideas are valued and in which managers are empowered to develop and implement their ideas.

The sort of training managers need in order to foster innovation of this nature centre around the management culture of the organisation. Aspire has invested a significant amount of time in developing frontline managers in the management skills and emotional intelligence competencies needed to develop a culture of innovation.

We believe that Aspire Maintenance Services team is now more customer focussed and innovative than ever before. We are also very self aware and know that we can learn from other organisations. We are also keen to ensure that our ideas can be shared with other like minded organisations so we are happy to share our ideas with other organisations by facilitating site visits or by telephone discussions.