



Best DLO: the direct labour organisation providing the most innovative maintenance service.

Signpost Services: Adapting to Change

Signpost Services maintains and repairs in excess of 35,000 homes responding to the needs of 100,000 social housing residents across the south of England each year. With a 10-year track record of continuous improvement the Company prides itself on working with many local authorities and social housing providers to provide a flexible, modern repairs service.

Signpost Services priorities are about giving clients value for money and keeping residents safe and secure. Our product range covers all household repair and improvement needs from fitting quality new kitchens, bathrooms, appliances, windows and doors right through to responding to emergency callouts.

This submission is focused specifically on the repairs and maintenance services provided to four of the companies within the Spectrum Housing Group namely:

- Western Challenge Housing Association
- Signpost Housing Association
- Signpost Care Partnerships
- Signpost Homes

NB – Referred to as sister companies in this submission.

Between them they own and manage around 14,000 homes.

The title of our submission is Adapting to Change. Chosen because this is exactly what Signpost Services has done to adapt to changes in the market and the Organisation, meet customer expectations and remain a viable and profitable business.

The Company was established around 20 years ago as a small DLO maintaining the housing stock for North Dorset District Council of circa 2,800 homes. In 1994 the Council undertook a Large Scale Voluntary Transfer of its stock to North Dorset Housing Association. The maintenance division transferred as part of this process. Several changes happened including a name change for the Housing Association and then the formation of a Group structure in 1999 which saw the birth of Signpost Services as a Company in its own right carrying out the repairs for its Signpost sister companies.

Due to the expertise that Signpost Services was building up in the repairs and maintenance sector the Company began to tender for works with other housing providers including local authorities

and other housing associations. These clients were particularly impressed with Signpost Services knowledge of the housing sector and the particular needs of tenants and regulatory authorities.

At the start of 2007 Signpost Services had grown its annual sales to £16million of which approximately one-half were generated from external customers.

In July 2007 Signpost Housing Group merged with Spinnaker Housing Group to form Spectrum Housing Group. This was yet another change for Signpost Services which saw an expansion of territory and number of properties to repair and maintain.

The business has grown substantially but it has not forgotten its roots. Over the last 10 years Signpost Services has contributed £275,000 as gift-aid back into the Group for the provision of social housing and related services. Efficiency gains through partnering arrangements have realized over £1million of additional capacity.

Throughout this period of change Signpost Services has continued to yield high customer satisfaction rates, invest in new and innovative IT systems, respond to customers needs and expand its staff and premises becoming a significant employer in the South West region.

1.0 What is Innovative about the service provided?

Signpost Services believes that to deliver a 21st Century repairs and maintenance service to our clients and residents perfecting and delivering a specialised appointments and workload planning system is one of the key drivers to achieve excellent service delivery.

To facilitate this Signpost Services has invested over a £250,000 in the procurement of a revolutionary appointment and works planning IT system with Web based interfacing ability. The system is called Opti-time and is distributed through Xmbrace UK.

Opti-time is the market leader for appointment systems within the housing sector with over 110 live sites nationwide. Signpost Services are however the first organisation to be able to offer Opti-time via a Web based system (for external clients) and with this advanced technology we can offer clients the ability to appoint the majority of works at the point at which the repair is reported to the repairs/customer service team with simplicity and speed.

The technology has helped the company to adapt to change alongside improvements in health and safety training, commitment to employing young people for work experience and apprenticeships, employing multi-skilled operatives, establishing a management information systems that puts quality at its core and improving communication through regular 'toolbox talks'.

Above all else though our ability to adapt to change is to listen and react to our clients and their customer's needs.

1.1 In what way is it innovative?

The Opti-time system is innovative for the following reasons:

Appointment Confirmation - The customer receives an automated confirmation letter to back up the verbal appointment through the Opti-time system.

Active Messaging Service - Opti-time's messaging service is an added innovative process that further assists in the delivery of the appointment service. This service is fully automated by Opti-time and will send an appointment confirmation to the resident immediately following a repair being reported. To complete the service a reminder text

message will be sent the day prior to the repair appointment. With a contact number should the resident no longer be able to keep their appointment. Text messaging can be sent to mobile phones or BT land lines.

Further development of this service has brought the following text abilities;

- Operative on route
- Customer Satisfaction Question (asking if the resident is happy with the repair - yes or no reply)

Appointment Slots - The appointment slots that Signpost Services currently offer are mornings, late mornings, afternoons, avoiding school runs (9.30am to 2.30pm) and all day. Further fixed appointments that can be available are first call, which is an 8am appointment and post work 5.30pm – 8.00 pm. These slots are flexible and can be tailored to clients' requirements. Where requested by clients, Saturday appointments (with the additional option of week-day evenings) have been offered.

Mobile Working (PDA's) - We have introduced a mobile communication system (PDA) which has further enhanced the service by offering 'Real Time Working' with the Opti-time system. This means that Opti-time and our back office system will be up-dated within seconds of the operative completing the work. This enables emergency works to be planned and issued along with the normal functions of the system. All of these real-time updates can also be interfaced through to clients' Housing Management Systems.

Delivering early toolbox talks has proved extremely effective to impart company news and important Health and Safety information whilst providing training to operatives on the use of new technologies.

1.2 Why was this innovation necessary?

Signpost Services works closely with resident groups and encourages feedback on every repair that it does. It was very clear from the feedback from residents that they needed a system that could offer appointments. Quite often residents were frustrated at having to potentially wait in all day for an operative to turn up to carry out a repair especially for those that worked and or had child-care responsibilities. People would pop out for half an hour only to find that they had missed the operative – frustrating for the resident and costly to the Company.

Signpost Services is constantly looking to improve the manner in which we deliver services to our clients in order to offer better value for money and meet the ever evolving aspirations and lifestyles of today's tenants – this appointment system has certainly helped with missed appointments falling from 10% in 2005 to now only standing at 0.2%.

Communication is also important and whilst technology has helped significantly in our ability to adapt to change on issues such as Health and Safety, quality and customer service we needed to find an effective way of communicating with our front-line staff.

1.3 How did the innovation evolve?

The appointment system has become more sophisticated over time starting out with residents being able to ask for a morning or afternoon appointment slots. Now Residents can specify if they would like appointments outside of the school run period. We're hoping to improve this still further with exact times.

Not only this we now have tracker devices on our fleet of vans so if an emergency repair comes in we can quickly identify the nearest operative who can see to that emergency

within a matter of minutes.

With regard to improving Health and Safety we realised very early on that newsletters were only effective to a point and that our operatives preferred face to face communication. To that end we introduced at least monthly toolbox talks which take place before operatives go to their first appointment. They last for about half an hour. Topics include Health and Safety, training, Group-wide news and updates to policies and procedures.

1.4 How do you expect it to grow?

Signpost Services has recently implemented a system called TOTAL which gives the company the ability to work in real time with procurement of supplies, management of key performance indicators, finances and job allocation. Opti-time will integrate with this system to provide a complete process from reporting a repair, allocating the job, re-ordering supplies and invoicing. Once the trial with our sister companies is complete this will be extended to external clients.

1.5 How do you monitor how effective it is?

The functionality of Opti-time provides an intensive but expedient system of reporting calling on vast sources of data, which were previously time consuming and resource intensive. The reports are automatically generated from Opti-time using real data from the activities that have taken place over any date parameter. Types of reports are:

- Appointments made and kept
- Appointments made after target date
- Job count by period
- Jobs completed by operative
- Jobs completed on time
- Jobs completed first visit
- Jobs completed per day
- Job count
- Job count per operative
- Jobs completed within target
- Unavailability of operative
- Work in progress

We regularly receive feedback on the service and we ensure that this is passed back to the staff involved.

2.0 What are the benefits to:

2.1 The client

- Improved customer satisfaction levels from residents
- 99% achievement regarding appointments made and kept (includes all priorities)
- 98% - 99% of all jobs completed within target
- 90% access on first visit
- 91% jobs completed on first visit
- Large reduction in calls to customer service chasing works already reported

Enhanced service delivery in the following areas:-

- True 'Real Time' Job dispatch / Up-dates and Reporting – with the use of our works

scheduling IT software it enables us to send the most cost efficient operative to the works with all transactions and up-dates in real time along with all processes being date and time stamped.

- Active Messaging Service / E-mail Up-dates – This function allows for our Clients to receive up-dates by either Text Message or E-mail. The nature of these include confirmation of an order being logged, confirmation of appointment date and time, reminder 24hrs prior to our operative / staff member attending, operative en-route to inform the user that our arrival is imminent and, finally, a customer satisfaction questionnaire. All of these are automatically generated without manual intervention.

We have found that this not only improves communication to the end user but improves operating costs of lost time and calls chasing when the engineer will attend.

- Electronic ID – PDA devices will prompt the engineer to show his ID upon arrival at the property. The electronic ID will be held on the PDA and will include the operative's name, photo, and our company logo along with a telephone number that can be called to verify the operative.
- Password or code – Our IT system has the ability to issue a unique password or code to each job. This can be passed to the end user to again verify that the operative is a Signpost Services employee. The password would be sent with the job to the PDA which upon arrival our employee would confirm to the property manager / resident. This will improve security of entry and we could see a benefit to properties that have children, elderly and vulnerable people attending or living in them.
- User Defined Circumstances (UDC's) – This facility allows our IT system to hold information regarding any property to be visited. This information is passed with the order to the operative to allow for the works to be administered quickly and efficiently. The types of information that we currently send for this type of works is access information, approach with care, asbestos information etc.
- Fully optimised appointment System – This facility allows for Signpost Services to offer an appointment for works. With the use of Web based technology it allows our client to offer the appointment when the works are reported by the tenant (at point of call).
- Multi-disciplined operatives

Signpost Services clients have the confidence that we offer an established track record, common goals and a mutual desire to provide the best service delivery for their tenants with proven value for money provision.

Partnering gains:

- Established working relationship enables Signpost Services to drive for further efficiencies.
- Whilst a contractor working in a commercial environment Signpost Services uniquely shares a common background, ethos and culture with its sister companies.
- Signpost Services understand the constraints (e.g. Schedule I) within which Registered Social Landlords operate. We understand the social housing market from both client and contractor perspectives and work exclusively within this market area.
- We have a proven track record in and are committed to partnering.
- Signpost Services has an excellent knowledge of its sister company standards and stock profile.

- We offer a well trained, stable workforce and are committed to local employment and training programmes.
- We have a fully committed supply chain partner offering maximum value for money on material purchasing.
- Long-term, stable relationship.
- Further commitment to joint training and community focused sponsorship
- Continuity of Signpost Services staff/operatives for residents

Our sister company contracts are fully partnered with open book principles. We offer a complete facilities management service, which incorporates day-to-day repairs, cyclical decorations, planned and cyclical maintenance of all mechanical and electrical components, adaptation and small building works, external door renewals, window renewals and asbestos surveys and removals. Joint working practices have included:

- Creation of joint planned and responsive appointment and administration teams
- Rationalisation of sub-contractor tender process
- Joint ITC teams working together to affect IT interfaces
- Joint staff secondment
- Joint staff training
- Monthly strategic meetings
- Monthly contract performance meetings
- Duplication of paperwork eradicated
- Maintaining budgets within target
- Improvement in customer satisfaction

Collaborative working has resulted in quality service improvements such as:

- All service KPI's are in the upper quartile
- Resident satisfaction for the repairs service is at 95%
- Saturday morning appointments and have also trialed week-day evenings
- The responsive, void and planned work programmes benefit from shared information
- A Value For Money strategy in conjunction with the client and their Board
- Multi-trade deployment is optimised to cover follow-on work that improves efficiency and satisfaction
- An Audit Commission action plan with the client
- Regular review sessions with asset management and housing staff
- Safety, health and environmental enhancements via our internationally accredited systems (ISO 9001/14001/OHSAS 18001) and excellent Considerate Constructors Report (an example is shown at the end of this submission)
- Waste management processes with over 85% recycling (Over 90% in some areas) and seeking to improve
- Flexible work allocation to overcome fluctuations in service demand levels

2.2 The contractor

Fully Interfaced IT Technology

This process is critical to delivering an efficient repairs service with the key value areas for both organisations along with communication processes being improved.

We have listed below the key improvements that we have found regarding interfacing IT systems with clients.

- Reduced duplication of administration process with cost savings for both organisations
- Reduced communication costs – less time spent calling client / contractor, faxes
- Improved communication of job status
- Reduction with incorrect information being relayed
- Quicker job completion due to less administration processes
- Reduction in paper transactions between both organisations hence cost reduction in stationery and improvement to our carbon footprint.

2.3 The residents

- 99% of repairs appointments are attended – and most are completed at that first visit thus reducing time spent by residents “waiting in”.
- Residents have input through resident forum meetings to affect improvements to the service we provide and to set and measure key performance targets.
- Signpost Services employ several multi-skilled operatives this means that if a job requires extra work only one visit and one operative is needed at the property. This cuts down disruption to the resident.
- Signpost Services now recycles over 85% (over 90% in some areas) of its waste – although this may not appear a direct benefit to residents it does show the company’s commitment to safeguarding the environment. In the future we are hoping to be in a position whereby we can purchase back recycled products that can be fitted into homes.

2.4 The neighbourhood

Signpost Services has sponsored various resident group initiatives, e.g. one partner client resident group was offered the use of a disused estate based hall for their social functions and meetings with the proviso that the residents carried out the renovations required themselves at no cost to the Council. After an approach for help from Signpost Services our electricians upgraded the electrical system and the gas engineers made safe the gas connections to the appliances at no cost to the resident group.

Signpost Services also attend and assist at resident-initiated events e.g. summer fetes, conference, workshops, and sponsor resident led events. In July 2008 we attended Poole Housing Partnership and Borough of Poole’s RespectFest where over 250 residents gave us their opinion on issues that affect them and their neighbourhood. PHP’s marketing manager said “Thank you to everyone from Signpost who gave up their Sunday to come along to the event – your presence and support on the day shows Signpost to be a true partner”.

Our association with local support groups and agencies has enabled us to recycle suitable furniture from void clearances to be passed on to low income and vulnerable persons.

We work closely with clients to meet workforce diversity targets that mirror the make-up of local communities and carry out any outreach / advertising in newsletters of BME communities to assist in bringing forward candidates who will help to meet those targets.

Signpost Services is committed to the provision of training and development of staff in general and has put a significant number of young people from local communities through apprenticeships. These have included trade apprenticeships and those based on acquiring office skills through reaching NVQ competencies. Signpost Services has also delivered Train and Build and other employment initiatives such as taking on work experience candidates from schools in the local area (10 in 2008) and a person from Doncaster College for the Deaf on a six week work placement scheme.

Signpost Services has a long record of working with the employment service. In the past we have trialed a preference for employing tenants or those who are currently out of work (while upholding our equality and diversity policy).

3.0 What were the financial costs and cashable benefits?

3.1 What were the costs in developing and implementing the best practice services?

£250,000

3.2 What are the additional costs or financial savings in running the services, and from what do they arise?

Software upgrades, system maintenance- £25,000 per annum.

3.3 How do you measure the financial benefits?

- Operative daily job through-put
- Overall operative productive time
- Overheads as proportion of sales activity
- Volume of van miles
- Ratio of operatives to sales
- Average job costs
- Right first time
- Appointments made and kept
- Direct labour to sub-contractor usage to maximize VAT benefits
- Materials costs per job

3.4 Is there any independent audit of these benefits?

- Housemark VFM benchmarking
- Internal Audit review
- Audit Commission inspection
- Primary Business Support Ltd review

3.5 How are these benefits shared between the parties?

- Savings accrue to the client through an open-book billing arrangement
- Client budget underspends shared 50:50

3.6 How do you expect these to change in the future?

- Move away from repair priorities to all repairs completed within x days.
- Use of Opti-time for planned and void property works
- Reduced admin through more PDA front end functionality

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

4.1 What kinds of organisation might benefit from a similar approach and how might they identify themselves?

- All DLOs
- Social Housing Contractors
- Care / Housing providers using mobile

4.2 How much does its success depend on your own unique circumstances?

External client contracts- main need for web interface.

4.3 What expertise is needed to make it a success?

IT / Contracting knowledge.

4.4 What training would be needed by managers and operational staff?

Opti-time system / mobile / back office system

4.5 How might you do it differently if you started over again at another organisation?

- Retain project manager longer post implementation.
- Provide staff training closer to system go-live

4.6 Where can they go for assistance or more information?

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