

# NATIONAL HOUSING MAINTENANCE FORUM AWARDS 2011

## Gas Maintenance – Right First Time!



### Best DLO



Wolverhampton Homes

“Providing people focused excellent services and good quality housing according to individual needs and choices wherever possible ”



## Background

Wolverhampton Homes is the largest social landlord in Wolverhampton and manages 23,500 council properties.

Our mission is 'providing people focused excellent services and good quality housing according to individual needs and choices wherever possible.' Providing a high quality customer service is the cornerstone of this mission and everything that we do.

Our repairs service is a critical division within the organisation. On average, we receive anywhere between 4,500 to 7,500 repair enquiries per month. We have two response repair teams to deal with these, one in the South of the City and one in North. Collectively, these teams incorporate 135 staff who undertake all responsive repairs and zoned repairs including gas and electrical work. Our ethos is to get the repair done 'right first time'.

Gas maintenance takes up 16% of our repair work, a large majority of which takes place during the increasingly cold winter season. We employ 22 gas maintenance operatives and work closely with Worcester Bosch who have been our main boiler supplier for 8 years.

Worcester Bosch is the market leader in domestic heating and hot water systems. It is a name that stands for reliability, quality and efficiency and its advanced boiler systems carry five year standard factory warranty. As with many leading manufacturers, only Worcester Bosch accredited installers are permitted to conduct maintenance work within the product warranty period.

Inherently, this can make gas maintenance a difficult area to manage for housing providers because our in-house engineers would make the initial repair visit but, if the boiler was under warranty, would need to refer the work back to the manufacturer to complete. The result would be repeat visits for the tenant and a lead-time of up to 48 hours for job completion.

We know that gas maintenance work, which is usually of an urgent nature, can be very disruptive and burdensome for our tenants. Firstly, there is the obvious hassle of having to plan time around waiting for a repair visit. Plus, of course, loss or partial loss of central or water heating for an ongoing period can cause a home to be inhabitable.

This is particularly pertinent given our customer profile. Wolverhampton has an



ageing population with a growing number of elderly people over 85, an increasing number diagnosed with dementia and a significant percentage of tenants have a long term condition including physical or sensory disability. One in four of our tenants are vulnerable and one in five has a disability.

Added to this, last year Britain suffered its coldest winter in three decades with temperatures as low as -18 °C. The elderly are at their most vulnerable in the cold weather, with official figures showing that 25,400 elderly people died in England and Wales last winter as a result of cold-related illnesses. As we brace ourselves for another abnormally cold winter, it is expected there may be more deaths.

## **A Partnership Solution**

We wanted to develop a way of working that meant less disruption for our customers who report gas repairs, while continuing to guarantee the quality of the repair. Our aim was not to just alleviate hassle but minimise the amount of time any of our tenants, particularly those that are vulnerable or elderly, go without heat. We wanted to make changes to route out inefficiencies to make for a much leaner process which would deliver

improved customer service and achieve increased value for money.

Working closely with Worcester Bosch, we devised a targeted training programme whereby their expert engineering team held a number of training sessions for our in-house operatives. These in-depth, comprehensive sessions covered all aspects of their extensive product portfolio, as well as new learning on improved diagnostic techniques, future trends and upcoming models.

We have now become an Approved Service Provider for Worcester Bosch. This has given our in-house team the ability to undertake repairs to boilers covered by warranty and means all gas maintenance repairs can now be completed in a single visit, right first time. Our average lead times for repair work are now just 24 hours for an emergency and 2 hours for a vulnerable tenant.

## **What is innovative about the service provided?**

Wolverhampton Homes is one of the first housing providers in the country to offer a gas maintenance solution in this way. It is a completely new way of working between contractor and boiler manufacturer, and



demonstrates how taking a partnership approach and sharing expertise can bring about exceptional results.

Richard Keen, Area Service Manager at Worcester Bosch comments: “We are massively focused on providing world-class customer service so when Wolverhampton Homes approached us with the idea it was an obvious yes. We knew that the organisation has a very good structural set-up, in terms of their expertise and the way engineering work is allocated, so we were confident that they could handle our specialised type of work. All in all, it just makes sense in order to improve the service to customers.”

It also shows Wolverhampton Homes to be ahead of the times in pioneering innovative housing solutions by challenging standard protocol and going the extra mile in order to deliver exceptional customer service. Going forward, the project is already proving such a success that designs are currently underway to extend the training to a wider pool of operational staff in 2011.

## **What are the benefits to the client?**

For the supplier, the partnership adds value for money. On a basic level, there is reduced demand on their engineering team for our repair work. Looking more strategically, shared information will drive product development. Our approach allows for easier statistical monitoring whereby our operatives are able to quickly identify any trends early on, for example if there is a particular part which continually fails, and report back to the Worcester Bosch product team.

Also, when Worcester Bosch sends us a new warranty pack we subsequently send back the old parts for analysis so they can determine why parts have failed and spot any further trends. In this way, it is much easier to identify any room for improvement and utilise this information for new product development.

This activity is followed by regular review meetings every two months, where we come together to establish any issues to resolve, new requirements and generally share expertise. Again, the aim is to remove inefficiency to ensure our operation is a lean as possible.





## **What are the benefits to the contractor?**

This new way of working with manufacturers has revolutionised our gas maintenance service. Primarily, it has enabled us to achieve our core objective of getting the job done right first time, so that we deliver an excellent service to our tenants.

The partnership has also enabled for a greater personal development of our in-house teams. The level and quality of training provided by Worcester Bosch has been world-class. Our operatives have gained exclusive, in-depth knowledge from the market leader, learning new skills which will stay with them throughout their careers. Plus, further, ongoing training ensures our operatives are fully up to date on newest models and techniques first, so that they remain at the forefront of new and emerging industry changes.

Added to this, increased knowledge means our operatives are able to quickly identify faults and trends which can be fed back to our stock investment team. This ensures we can use the information to develop new preventative maintenance programmes of work and minimise waste.

The exercise has also further strengthened our working relationship with Worcester Bosch. Our in-house team have built up a solid rapport with their engineers, whereby they can call them for advice and share expertise as needed, so that any problems can be rectified much quicker.

Conversely, greater control of our own customer satisfaction means we are able to consistently monitor our own employees and any trends.

## **What are the benefits to the resident?**

Ensuring the well-being of our tenants is key to Wolverhampton Homes. This new way of working means repairs are completed right first time so that customers' inconvenience is kept to a minimum and the heating system is operational as soon as possible.

There are also the safety benefits. By sending our own engineers who are area based and easily recognised with corporate uniform and liveried vans, we can offer tenants peace of mind and added security against bogus callers.



Another consideration is consistency. All of our trade colleagues are driven by our company mission, vision and values. They also receive training in the internationally acclaimed Mary Gober customer service culture development.

Through ownership of our gas repair service we are able to guarantee a seamless approach, maintaining the high standard which is embedded throughout the organisation.

### **What are the benefits to the neighbourhood?**

At Wolverhampton Homes, we seek to build communities not just buildings. The partnership fulfils our objective of supporting local people with a local service and local knowledge.

It also brings wider community benefits in terms of supporting sustainability. Where previously, both an in-house operative and engineer from Worcester Bosch would need to attend a repair job on two separate occasions, this is now done in one visit by our team.

Given that Worcester Bosch engineers would travel from Worcester, averaging 15 visits a month, this has significantly reduced the overall carbon footprint of repairing gas boilers.

### **What were the financial costs and benefits?**

In these times of diminishing funds and increased demand, we are acutely aware of the pressure to deliver more services with less money. As free training was provided, this new way of working has carried no direct cost yet the financial benefits are significant. Time is money and the improved process means increased efficiency for both teams, as well as reduced mileage and minimal product waste.

We estimate that we will save just under £10,000 per year through the reduced need to outsource our repair work back to the manufacturer.

This process complements our overall efficiency drive, making for a smarter, leaner way of worker so that we achieve increased value for money.



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

Our approach to dealing with our gas maintenance can quite easily be applied to all other housing providers. The key to the success of this project has been in establishing a good, solid partnership and working closely together from the initial planning through to execution.

As testament to the success of the project, Worcester Bosch is currently in talks with another local housing provider about working together in this way.

The partnership demonstrates how 'thinking outside the box' and taking a paired-up approach between contractor and supplier can not only ensure best practice but procure major benefits for both parties, the end-user and even the wider community.

For more details please contact Shaun Mulloy on 01902 556 800.

